

How online brand communities work

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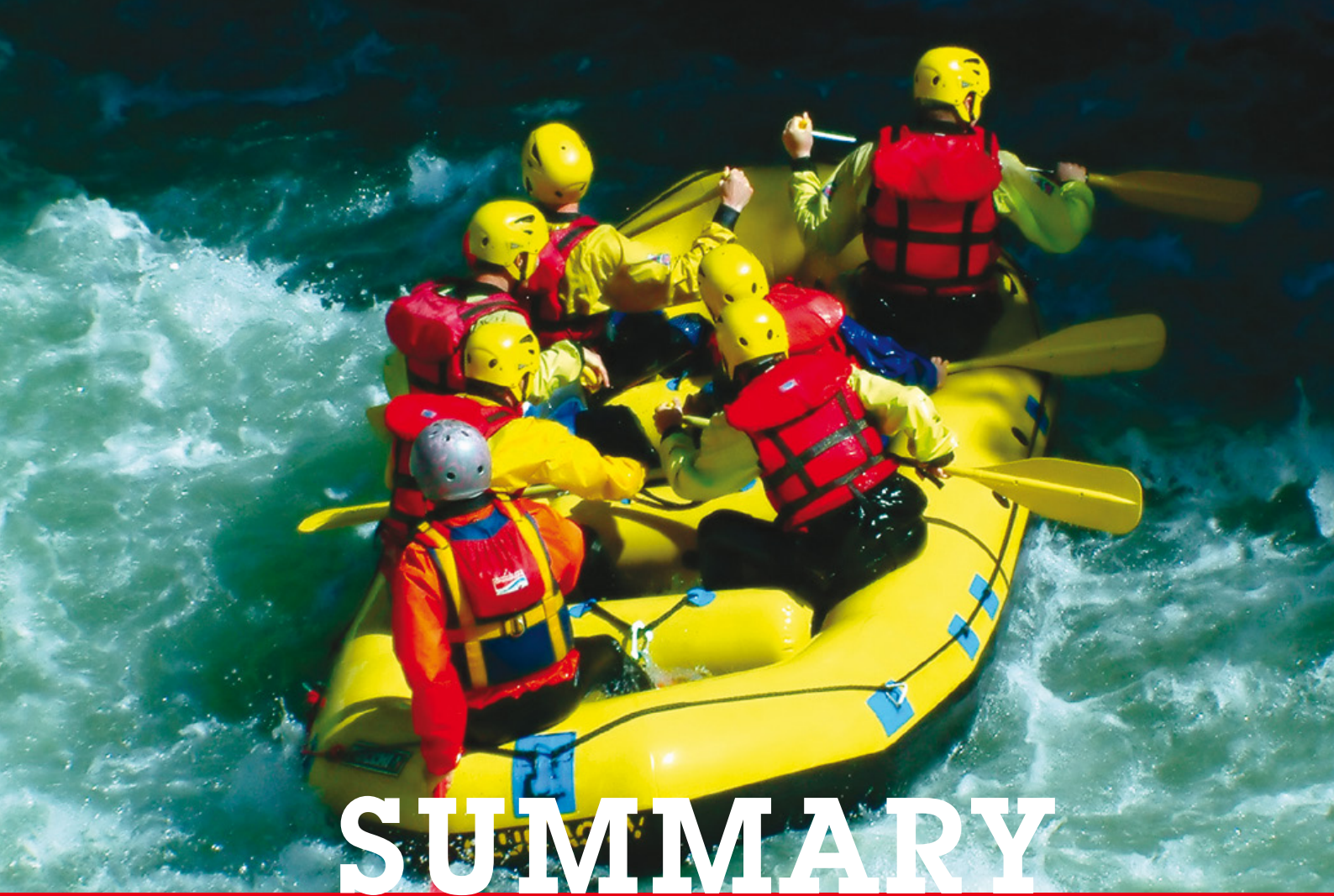
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SUMMARY

WHAT AN ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITY IS

Online brand communities are a new medium for business. Any new medium represents a significant opportunity, but what makes this medium particularly valuable is that it provides for so many different aspects and functions of a business: online brand communities are a medium for research, a medium for communications and marketing, a medium for production in terms of product innovation and development, a medium for sales, a medium for customer support, a medium for HR and management.

DEFINITIONS

What exactly is an online brand community? We can define it as a dedicated group of members who are users of a particular brand or market, continuously in touch with the brand and each other, not only responding to company initiatives but also initiating and continuing conversations of their own about any aspect of the brand or business.

The purpose of communities is to build stronger relationships between businesses and community members by involving the members more closely in the goings-on of the company. It's like having a group of your customers in a room next door – they can talk to each other while you're not there, but you can pop in at any time and consult them or join in. It helps your business by enabling you to make better decisions, and more of them, more quickly.

Like any medium, communities carry content – generated both by the company's business functions and by members – through different channels. Online brand communities currently have two channels:

- Private channel: The custom-built managed community, set up by or on behalf of a business, brand or organisation – usually closed communities
- Public channel: Existing social or business-forum communities, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, accessed by businesses for brand- or topic-specific projects – usually open communities

PRINCIPLES GOVERNING HOW A COMMUNITY WORKS

We have established six key principles about how communities work and their implications for setting up and running a successful online brand community:

1

Mutual self-interest is the motivation

Key implication: Online brand communities need to recognise that the self-interest of the organisation is greater than that of the members in most instances, which makes it imperative to redress the balance by making the topics discussed wider than just the brand.

2

Communities don't need permission to start

Key implication: The difference for online brand communities from social communities is that you do need to start a community. So it's important that the business treats it as a shared entity not an owned entity, which will give you the added marketing benefit of being much more in sync with people's needs, desires, language and problems.

3

Information is the glue

Key implication: Information is what binds a community together and keeps it participating. Content is king. So companies need to plan content and make senior level contributions.

4

Appreciation and contribution provide the outer and inner reward

Key implication: In a strong community, there is not only a mutuality of interest but also a mutuality of reward for the members and the organisation. If people are listened to, they feel valued and contribute more.

5

Organisation and regulation should be self-determined

Key implication: Setting up forums for information exchange and discussion, or structured channels of interactive conversation, should be the extent of the company's organisational and regulatory involvement – avoid heavy-handed attempts to control the behaviour of the community or the content of its conversations.

6

Participation is the oxygen of the community

Key implication: If few or no members participate, it will die; if the organisation fails to participate, the benefits to both parties will be fewer. It is important for the continual health of the community to combine participation and interaction, which is the role of the community management agency, such as Verve, and there are many creative devices and solutions to achieve this.

A REVISED BUSINESS MODEL

Online brand communities following these principles represent a potentially radical evolutionary mutation of the conventional model of doing business, whose key characteristics are that the business controls the stimulus and the user, willingly and engaged or no, responds.

Communities move company communications with their customers from a stimulus: response model towards a stimulus: stimulus model. Because community members can initiate ideas and conversations, they provide an independent stimulus for a business, which both accelerates business development and increases its productivity. We move from a process of feedback to one of feeding forwards.

Using communities for market research

For research, the community works as a fieldwork medium, offering an alternative to face-to-face, telephone and online samples and panels. Surveys may be quantitative or qualitative and cover the full range of topics and objectives: usage and attitude studies; brand health monitors; concept, product and ad testing; customer satisfaction etc. Communities simply allow people, in addition to completing your surveys, to give additional answers they want to give, not only the specific questions you want them to answer. And they are a perfect medium for getting close to brand users *in their own language*.

Communities are an additional medium, not a replacement for all conventional fieldwork media, but where they are appropriate they provide response in hours or days rather than weeks; up to 50% savings on research costs, because you do not need to pay for new samples every survey; and greater flexibility, because you can start, pause and restart with changes at any time. They also enable you to cover more objectives because they are a permanent resource. It is perfectly possible to incorporate non-customers and not difficult to

develop techniques for new demands, such as how to listen to and analyse conversations.

Using communities for marketing

From a marketing perspective you can launch all the campaigns and initiatives into online brand communities that you can in other media. In terms of advertising communications, obviously it is easy to launch online ads, but it is equally straightforward to send TV and radio commercials or print ads, as long as you take into account two practical issues: reach (for mass consumer brands it needs to be treated as a test market prior to rolling out in other media) and exposure pattern (which needs to be more 'drip' than 'burst', and use greater copy rotation).

Innovation and co-creation programmes are ideally suited to online brand communities where the stimulus: stimulus model is exactly what a company is looking for. It works especially well using 'elite' groups of creative loyalists and again you can roll out ideas within the whole community before a full market launch.

One of the great things about how an online brand community works is that you can not only stimulate word of mouth - through launching a viral or simply starting a conversation - but also see what it consists of and track how it develops and to what end, particularly in the creation of company advocates.

Using the same community for different purposes

It's important to remember that you can use the same community for different things: marketing can involve the production and research departments in new product development, integrated with offline activity; and it can go as far as direct marketing and sales activity. People are perfectly able to distinguish between conversation and commercial activity and don't object to either in their right place. It's all a matter of good communication and integrated thinking so that the waters don't get muddied.

Other applications, such as customer support, CSR activity and employee relations (obviously with a different community of

employees) are also valuable, and need further exploration by their respective experts. But overall we foresee an important role for the research department. Research is the 'fusion element' of a community, since it interprets and manages the conversations that run like a current through the community, whatever it is being used for.

The control issue

The big issue for all company members is control (or rather the relinquishing of it). It's a key part of the reward the business executive gets from their job in the old stimulus: response model, since they are used to controlling objectives, strategy, budget, content, timing and so on. This mind-set has to change. Our mantra is this: *participation is the new control*. Working with a community means allowing members to take activity in a different direction, but by participating in conversations and in the currents of activity of an online brand community, business people not only regain a sense of control but also add a greater creative impact to the initiative they have launched.

AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

Research is a sensible place to begin. Experimenting with a marketing launch of a beta-site or viral is another, with potentially even greater rewards. Ultimately however, online brand communities are not a research strategy, nor a marketing strategy, but a business strategy. An evolutionary approach is best. A gradual climb up a gentle slope, changing things and adapting to conditions as you go, is the way that evolution works. And step by step, the change that online brand communities will effect upon a business will come to be seen as transformational.



1. WHAT ONLINE COMMUNITIES ARE

1.1 DEFINITIONS

Ever since the explosion of social network communities like Facebook, businesses have been trying to work out how communities can be harnessed to help them grow and perform better. As with anything new, experimental activity is essential, but their varied uses, the inconclusivity of results and practitioners' focus on the mechanism rather than the purpose mean that we are faced more with doubt and confusion than with a clear and coherent view of what their business role can be and how they work. This paper sets out to establish such basic principles and to provide a comprehensive model as a discipline for their future use.

One of the reasons communities have become such a hot topic is that they relate to, and can affect, many if not all aspects of a company's business, although their primary benefits are likely to lie in market research and marketing, which is what this paper concentrates on. Any attempt at a model of how they work must reflect this, and it is one of the more confusing aspects of what has been written about online brand communities that they are often referred to as 'research communities' or 'marketing communities' by those whose practice is restricted to a particular business discipline, but this is an inaccurate and misleading

practice. If you set up a community around a brand, you can engage with that community on any aspect of a company's business – you may choose to engage it only on matters of market research, but that is not all that members are interested in or prepared to engage with. This is why we have settled upon the term 'online brand communities' as the definitive descriptor of what they are.

Such is the vogueishness of the word community, it is used to describe all kinds of groups of people. So it's worth stating what an online brand community is and

how it differs from other business tools like panels and user-forums. An online brand community is a dedicated group of members who are users of a particular brand or market, continuously in touch with the brand and each other, not only responding to company initiatives but also initiating and continuing conversations of their own about any aspect of the brand or business.



Definition of an online brand community:

a dedicated group of members who are users of a particular brand or market, constantly in touch with the brand and each other, not only responding to company initiatives but also initiating and continuing conversations of their own about any aspect of the brand or business.

With most user-groups set up or bought into by businesses, such as customer databases, research panels or customer advisory panels, the company alone decides what to send it (a questionnaire, a mailing, a viral etc) and provides a framework for people to respond. In a community, the company can still decide to do any or all of these things, but in addition members are free to talk amongst themselves about any aspect of the business they like, in whatever terms they like, and when they like. These are essentially conversations which become a new channel for information about and interaction between the company's business and its users and potential users.

This is validated by what happens in existing communities that have not been custom-built by businesses. Forums have been set up by like-minded enthusiasts (even though these are not infrequently enthusiastic complainants rather than celebrants or champions of the business or brand), and nobody determines what the conversations are about or what direction they take.

In this developmental stage of online brand communities the two primary users have been marketers and market researchers, both of whom have been commendably quick to spot an opportunity for lower cost activity with consumers. But in the rush for cost-efficiency – and sometimes for sheer novelty – there has been little consideration of any principles of how communities work and what things they're good for.



The purpose of online brand communities is to build or improve relationships between a business and the people who use it."

It is easier to answer the question of what online brand communities are for from first principles than from current practice. When I developed the model of how advertising works for Hall & Partners', I concluded that the ultimate objective of advertising (and all marketing activity) was building brand relationships, and this realisation was drawn from establishing, through interviews with advertising practitioners, assumptions about what would make any given advertising campaign effective. Although we followed the same approach of interviewing clients and agencies to establish how online brand communities work, it naturally enough proved more difficult to identify businesses' assumptions, because of the limited experience of what online brand communities achieve.ⁱⁱ

What was clear, however, was that businesses aren't changing their goals and objectives, nor



It is like having a group of your customers in a room next door."

specifically are research and marketing departments or their respective agencies. So it's no great leap to return to first principles: the purpose of online brand communities is to build or improve relationships between a business and the people who use it – primarily

customers and potential customers, but also employees, commentators and other stakeholders¹.

Communities build relationships between businesses and community members by involving the members more closely in the goings-on of the company. We describe it as like having a group of your customers in a room next door – they can talk to each other while you're not there, but you can pop in at any time and consult them or join in. The way it helps your business is by enabling you to make better decisions, and more of them, more quickly.

But the community of itself does not build the relationship. It's the business disciplines that drive the business: user relationship. If you create a custom-built community of, say, mothers or bikers or consultant



Case Study: Power to the people – user-generated brand communities

Customers do take matters into their own hands and set up brand-focused online communities to complain about (or praise) brands without the "permission" or direction of brand owners. Nobody within the company can determine what the conversations are about or what direction they take. Online examples include:

- www.orangeproblems.co.uk
- Fitness First Suck! An online Facebook Community
- www.plebble.com: "The people powered customer service comparison site"

¹Online communities can also be used by non-profit organisations rather than businesses. Government organisations, quangos and charities almost always serve and engage with communities, and for them the whole concept of 'brand' communities and 'customer' relationships strikes the wrong note. For simplicity's sake this paper will take businesses and brands as its focus and the reader will have to draw analogous conclusions about NPOs.

surgeons, you have not de facto created a better business relationship with them. It's only when you use it, like J&J with babycare.com for marketingⁱⁱⁱ, like Harley-Davidson for sales^{iv} or like Which? for research^v, that the relationship between the business and its users or potential users is grown.

The important point to understand therefore is this:

➤ Online brand communities are a medium

Any new medium for a business is a significant opportunity, but what makes this medium particularly valuable is that it provides for so many different aspects and functions of a business: online brand communities are a medium for research, a medium for communications and marketing, a medium for production in terms of product innovation and development, a medium for sales, a medium for customer support, a medium for HR and management.

Online brand communities are a medium for research, a medium for communications and marketing, a medium for production in terms of product innovation and development, a medium for sales, a medium for customer support, a medium for HR and management."



Case Study: Harley Davidson – using the community concept to galvanise brand loyalty and promote sales

Susan Fournier and Lara Lee's excellent case study on Getting Online Brand Communities Right,^{vi} examines how the iconic brand, Harley Davidson, has focused their organisation around the natural community of bikers that purchase its products. This has had a profound influence not just on their marketing strategy, but also on the company culture, operating procedures and governance structure, all of which were formed around the community and its needs. Community activities range from outreach events staffed by Harley Davidson employees to executives spending time in-field with customers. In addition, all new employees are taught the importance of customer closeness in company inductions. A stand-alone organisation (the Harley Owners Group – or HOG) was also created for customers to have more direct input. This reports directly to the president and has the remit to formalise and nurture company-community relations. Executives from the company also join HOG and vice-versa. HOG has become an important part of the brand identity and contributed to keeping the brand relevant (and saleable) in an ever-changing market.

"In 1983, Harley Davidson faced extinction. 25 years later, it was a top 50 global brand valued at \$7.8 billion"

– Susan Fournier and Lara Lee, Getting Online Brand Communities Right, Harvard Business review, (April 2009)

1.2 THE NATURE OF ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES AS A MEDIUM

The key characteristics of all media are these:

- They are carriers of content
- They have different channels
- Their commercial value is calculated in terms of delivery cost, both financial and effort, relative to delivery returns

So, for example, TV is a medium, Sky Sports 1 is a channel and its commercial value to advertisers is in reach and cost-per-thousand; it also has commercial value to sponsors and PR users, including for non-commercial channels.

But this is treating TV just as an advertising or marketing communications medium; it is also a news medium and an entertainment medium. The difference about the latter two is that they have no commercial value per se (that is, if we discount the value of the size and type of audience their programming creates). Rather, they have a cultural or social value. Indeed, TV's social, cultural and political value – at least as reflected in the proportion of consumers' time spent vs the proportion of consumer financial expenditure – is much greater than its economic value.

If there is a sense that life gets more complicated when it comes to matters online, then this is largely due to terminology. If you are advertising on the web, are you doing interactive advertising or online advertising? If you are using SMS texts, are you using new media, digital media or the phone medium? Labels are stuck on early, but events overtake them. The 'new media'

agencies of the end of the last century swiftly became 'digital' agencies, but whilst this includes both the web and mobile telephony, why does it exclude digital TV and radio?

1.2.1 CONTENT-CARRIER

To simplify and clarify matters, online is a medium, which carries content via the web. Online is one of the most significant media in the world, subsuming many aspects of three previous owners of that title, which are, in reverse chronology, television, radio and print. It earns this status for two reasons: first, because of its universal simultaneity; second, because it is a medium for all other media. Online can be a medium for TV, radio, books, newspapers, movies, telephony and a host of other media. In short it is a super-medium – a medium for its own content and for the content of other media.

“Online is one of the most significant media in the world...because it is a medium for all other media...it is a super-medium.”

I can watch TV on BBC i-Player, read my Guardian newspaper through its website or a Jane Austen novel through eBooks, download music through i-Tunes and so on. No other medium can do this. I can listen to a concert on my TV set or my mobile phone, but these are delivery mechanisms, the hardware of media, not the media themselves.

An online brand community is therefore a medium within the super-medium of online. It has the potential to convey a variety of commercial content: research, advertising, PR, product development, sales, customer support, employee relations amongst others.

Analogous with TV as a medium, communities do not exist purely for commercial purposes and likewise have a social and cultural value, which, as with TV (at least in the UK and some other countries, though arguably not in the USA), pre-dates their commercial use. Indeed the whole phenomenon of networking sites was of course given the descriptor 'social media'.

1.2.2 CHANNELS

Then there is the matter of channels. Currently there are two channels for online brand communities and though it is difficult to foresee a third, it is not unlikely given the inventiveness of web users worldwide:

- The custom-built managed community is a private channel, set up by or on behalf of a business, brand or organisation – usually closed communities
- Existing social or business-forum communities, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, represent a public channel, accessed by businesses for brand- or topic-specific projects – invariably, by their nature, open communities

Either of these can be permanent (perhaps open-ended would be more accurate) or temporary, although existing social or business forum communities often represent a short-term or temporary use of an open-

ended community. (To complete our analogy with TV, an individual community such as Facebook or Harley-Davidson is the media channel's equivalent of a programme. The difference is that whereas the content of a TV programme is controlled by the channel and programme owners, so that Match of the Day does not suddenly switch its focus to cookery, say, the content of a brand community programme is partly determined by its 'cast' of members and in principle can take any direction they choose).

1.2.3 VALUE

The third key characteristic of online brand communities as a medium that we need to consider is their commercial value in terms of delivery cost (both financial and effort) relative to delivery returns.

It seems one is regarded as unprofessional in business if one does not address the issue of ROI (return on investment). This is utter nonsense when faced with most new things and certainly when considering a new medium. Nobody, but nobody, knows the value of returns without the benefit of experimental usage and careful study of case histories. All other claims represent nothing but extravagant blustering. What we can do is to set up hypotheses to be tested. We can calculate with reasonable accuracy the delivery



As a medium, online brand communities have two channels, the one private, the other public:

Custom-built managed communities – private

Examples include^{vii}:

- Which's Which? Connect
- Orange's Better Together
- The Easyjet Community

Existing social or business forum communities

Examples include:

- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Bebo

cost and are learning more about the effort cost, and can compare these with rival media for comparable programmes of activity. We can look at the average returns of usage of alternative media and set an objective – of outperforming other media. But since the perceived benefit of this new medium is that it will add commercial value, it will realistically take five years to identify what that value will be.

We will address how online brand communities work in comparison with other media, and therefore their perceived and potential value, when we consider their

“ Realistically, it will take five years to identify fully the commercial value of online brand communities.”

specific applications for different business disciplines, primarily for marketing and market research. Before that, there are a couple of other important things to establish and explore: the nature of communities and the emergence of a new or evolved business model.

“ As social animals, we like to share our interests with like-minded and like-behaving others, and social interaction is itself a form of pleasure and entertainment.”

1.3 THE NATURE OF COMMUNITIES

We have already observed that the purpose of online brand communities for businesses is better decision making and that this is achieved by bringing its users into closer involvement. The important questions in considering how online brand communities work are how this involvement is achieved, what is necessary to get and keep community members involved, and how to address issues of control.

In doing this we can learn from how real life communities work, as well as from online social communities and online brand communities. Expert academic social anthropologists and behavioural scientists will have more to offer here, but we can briefly establish some basic principles.

1.3.1 MUTUAL SELF-INTEREST IS THE MOTIVATION

We can learn from how real life communities work to make sure that brand communities thrive: communities form around subjects of deep and abiding interest and people choose what to get involved in. This could be a community formed around a school, church, theatre, biking or other hobby activity. And in the first instance people get involved out of self-interest. This has two aspects, since they are motivated both by a desire for achievement – they feel that by participating they will achieve something for themselves that will make

them better at whatever activity it is (these might be economic benefits or intrinsic rewards or simply a feeling of self-validation) – and by a desire for pleasure, because as social animals we like to share our interests

“ Online brand communities need to recognise that the self-interest of the organisation is greater than that of the members in most instances initially at least, which makes it imperative to redress the balance by making the topics discussed wider than the brands.”

with like-minded and like-behaving others, and social interaction is itself a form of pleasure and entertainment. (It is worth noting that some involvement in real life communities can be entirely altruistic, whereas member involvement in an online brand community is unlikely to be strongly altruistic in most cases).

Online brand communities need to recognise that the self-interest of the organisation is greater than that of the members in most instances initially at least, which makes it imperative to redress the balance by making the topics discussed wider than the brands. People will not appreciate the value of taking part in conversations just about a hair care brand, for example, but will satisfy their desire for achievement if the community is built around beauty, because they will get better at it and enjoy finding out what other women do as well as what a company is thinking about. Procter & Gamble's Being Girl Community (www.beinggirl.co.uk) is a good example of this^{viii}.

1.3.2 COMMUNITIES DON'T NEED PERMISSION TO START

Most offline communities don't really 'start' – they exist de facto, because there is a group of people with a common interest who want to further the interests of

both themselves and the organisation around which their interest is focused. And it can exist without any permission or action on the part of the organisation around which it is built.

The difference for online brand communities is that you do need to start a community. In doing so therefore, it's important that the business treats it as a shared entity not an owned entity. It's also important not to ignore the opportunity – if a business doesn't start one, it may still start itself and the company can easily find itself excluded, and then, when it wants to get involved, be treated like a gatecrasher at a party it should be hosting (like Dell with the Dell Hell community)^x. Better by far to create the interest for your users, which will give you the added marketing benefit of being much more in sync with their needs, desires, language and problems.



Case Study: My Dell Hell: “Now consumers don't just consume. We spit back. We have our own printing presses”

– Jeff Jarvis, BuzzMachine, Dell blog post author

Thus commented blogger, Jeff Jarvis, when reflecting on how his 2005 blog post about issues he'd had with Dell's customer services ignited online comment and the consumer imagination. Jeff's comments were publicized by The New York Times within two days of the blog post, and to-date, there are over 1.5 million search results returned by Google for "Dell Hell". Dell took up the challenge to respond in a more collaborative way with the launch of the Dell blog and Dell IdeaStorm, a forum for the company to listen to customer input and ideas. Crafting IdeaStorm as a place where customer ideas "reign", the company successfully joined in the conversation on a more equal footing.



1.3.3 INFORMATION IS THE GLUE

So what keeps people involved and what do they get out of it? The key practical concrete benefit the community delivers is information.

This is why communities are much more than a new and better process. People do not necessarily feel more engaged because of the process, but rather because of the content. Information is the glue that binds a community together and keeps it participating. Content is king. It is because of the content they receive that people feel they are getting something valuable out of their involvement in the community; and it is because of the content they give, and the vitally important fact that this content is listened to and responded to, that people feel valued, which not only ensures their continued participation but greatly strengthens their relationship with the organisation or brand that has set up the community. On a practical point, it also means that a financial incentive is rarely necessary, and could devalue an experience where rewards are intrinsic.

Information is the glue that binds a community together and keeps it participating. Content is king."

"A financial incentive is rarely necessary and could devalue the experience."



Case study: What community members get out of online brand communities

Community members often comment that one of the reasons they enjoy taking part in branded communities is the opportunity to have their say:

"I think your website is great, and knowing that a survey is just not another survey and you receive feedback on how everybody that partakes feel is great. Keep up the great work."

"Feedback is always important or improvements and necessary changes won't be made so easily and customers are important people! Without feedback you won't be able to improve your services."*



1.3.4 APPRECIATION AND CONTRIBUTION PROVIDE THE OUTER AND INNER REWARD

One effect of this regular behaviour of interaction and discussion is that community members feel engaged, both with each other and the host company, and this engagement brings a sense of reward: that they are doing their best to help themselves, their fellow members and the brand; inner satisfaction to complement the outer satisfaction of influencing and

“ It is generally inadvisable to set up a temporary community and end it without people expecting it.”

improving products and services.

The community members also realise that what they achieve by engaging with the rest of the community is greater than if they worked alone, so another reason why people stay involved is a sense of duty – they need to give as well as take, because what people take is what others give. A sense of duty allied to a sense of achievement and a sense of purpose helps over time to create a sense

“ In a strong community, there is not only a mutuality of interest but also a mutuality of reward for the members and the organisation.”

of belonging, and these four appear to be the major components of what is generally and broadly described as a sense of community. It is so strong that when in some instances a company has ended its involvement in a short-term community (as for a mobile phone business we know of that ran a six-week community for marketing purposes) the community members carried on their conversations without them.

This emphasises the general inadvisability of setting up a temporary community and ending it without people expecting it. Channels must be used sensitively and with clear upfront communication if a temporary community is felt to be the answer.

Generally, if it does get involved in a community, a business too must develop a sense of duty – its returns in terms of more confident and successful innovation will more than repay such commitment, for, in a strong community there is not only a mutuality of interest, but also a mutuality of reward for the members and the organisation.



Case Study: Valuing people and their opinions – appreciating contributions for inner and outer reward

Research Now builds online access panels for market research. The company has built and manages 37 proprietary, research-only online panels in Asia-Pacific, EMEA, and the Americas. The panels are branded as “Valued Opinions” (e.g. www.valuedopinions.co.uk) – words that put the concept of listening at the heart of the panel experience. By taking part in the panel, consumers have the opportunity to influence the development of new products and services. Indeed, when panellists were asked why they took part in the survey panel, 68% said that they took part because they valued the opportunity to have their say.²¹

1.3.5 ORGANISATION AND REGULATION SHOULD BE SELF-DETERMINED

Whilst conversations represent the vitality of the community, they can be destructive as well as constructive, as with carriers in any living organism. We can easily picture an explosion of conversations into a shapeless mass of anarchy, confusion and discontent. It happens in all communities, but in the great majority of real-life communities there exists a large degree of self-regulation and self-organisation amongst members, so that both the members and the organisation are content with the way things are going.

This is one instance where the way a community runs is slightly different for members and the organisation. Because a community can exist with or without the permission or involvement of the organisation, it would usually reject any undue attempt by the organisation to tell it how to organise itself or to set rules for its behaviour. Organisation and regulation must therefore be self-determined or at least willingly agreed, and natural, organic and fluid – cultural, in fact. As anthropologists have observed, behaviours often follow unwritten rules, and this is certainly the case in most real-life communities where there is no charter of behaviour. But if the community is to be inclusive rather than exclusive

of the company, which is vital to its purpose, then the company must follow a different organisational method. It achieves this by setting up forums for information exchange and discussion, or structured channels of interactive conversation. This is the extent of the company's organisational and regulatory involvement – it is a means of ensuring its own involvement in the community, not a heavy-handed attempt to control the behaviour of the community or the content of its conversations, beyond that which is offensive.

1.3.6 PARTICIPATION IS THE OXYGEN OF THE COMMUNITY

This brings us to one of the key principles of how a community runs, as opposed to how a company runs, and how a company must adapt if it is to embrace and benefit from its community of users: participation, not control. This applies equally to the community itself: any attempt by a member group or clique or 'elite' to take control of the community will probably lead to the fraction and destruction of that community – which will often spontaneously reform as a genuine community, again without the permission of the controlling clique. Control is an important practical issue for company members who are used to exerting control over what happens, and this is addressed in more detail in section 3.4.



Six governing principles for online brand communities:

1. Mutual self-interest is the motivation
2. Communities do not need permission to start
3. Information is the glue
4. Appreciation and contribution provide the outer and inner reward
5. Organisation and regulation should be self-determined
6. Participation is the oxygen of the community

Participation is the oxygen of the community. If few or no members participate, it will die; if the organisation fails to participate, the benefits to both parties will be fewer, and the nature of the community may change to that of a pressure group, with narrower and partial interests and certainly not for the common good. Participation varies by degree: every community has super-active and more enthusiastic members and more occasional, cooler participants in the community discussions and activities; members with just one focus of interest and those with many, with proportionately few engaging in all topics of discussion; specialists and generalists who will engage more or less strongly dependent upon whether this community is their single or primary abiding passion or a peripheral interest among many in their life. With such a disparate body, it is important for the continual health of the community to combine participation and interaction, which is the role of the community management agency, and there are many creative devices and solutions to achieve this.

1.3.7 ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES AS A MODEL OF BUSINESS

From this understanding of the principles of what makes a community thrive, we can conclude that online brand communities represent a potentially radical evolutionary mutation of the conventional model of doing business.



Because communities can initiate ideas and conversations, they move the conventional stimulus: response model of doing business to a revised model of stimulus: stimulus.”

The current conventional model of business is a stimulus: response model. The business is the inventor, initiator, producer and provider and its users respond to its ideas, products, methods, activities and communications. However refined and sensitive this model has become over the last quarter century (and it has), the fundamental current model of how companies do business has not changed for at least a hundred years. It's basically a one-way street, despite improvements in terms of involvement of users, dialogue with them and claims of 'co-creation'. The fundamentals have not changed for most companies: in any department they set objectives (what they want to get) and strategies (how they want to get it) and execute them, modifying them – in terms of user response – until they get what they set out to get, and setting the next year's objectives and strategies accordingly. The key characteristics are that the business controls the stimulus and the user, willingly and engaged or no, responds. Businesses work on people not with them. They follow a mechanistic model.

Communities move the stimulus: response model towards a stimulus: stimulus model. The key difference is that community members can initiate ideas and conversations on topics that are important to them. This works to provide a stimulus for the business, which not only accelerates business development but increases its productivity. We move from a process of feedback to one of feeding forwards.



2. HOW COMMUNITIES WORK FOR MARKET RESEARCH

We can look first at how the stimulus: stimulus model works for market research and consumer insight, because research plays a central role in any online brand community whichever purposes it is used for. (Fig. 1)

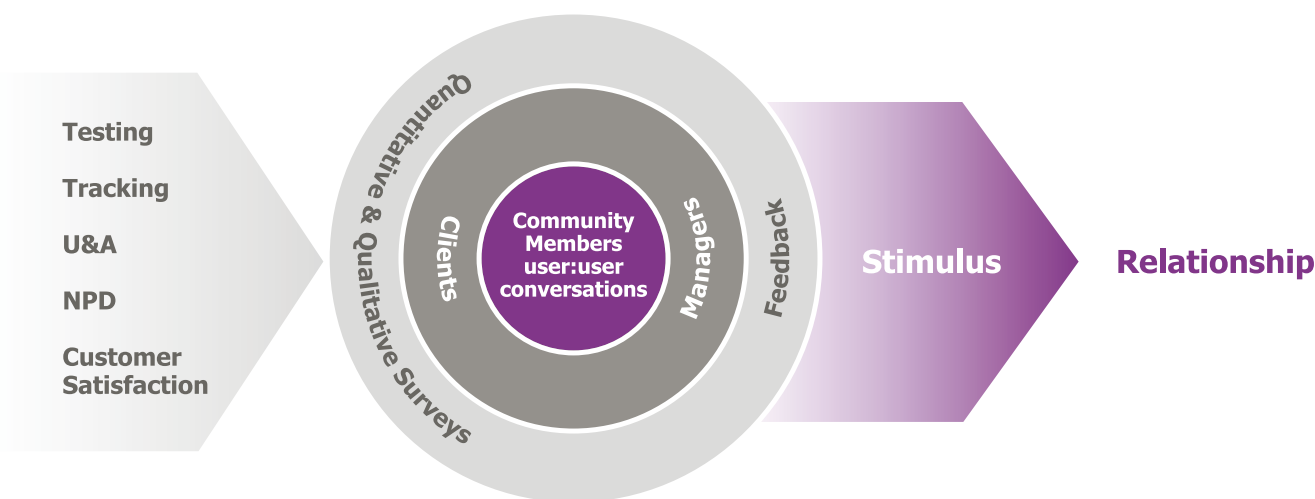


Fig. 1: The model for market research

The model illustrates that the stimulus provided by the research function to a community consists of surveys. These may be quantitative or qualitative and may cover the conventional range of topics and objectives: usage and attitude studies; brand health monitors; concept, product and ad testing; customer experience and satisfaction etc. For research, the community works as a fieldwork medium, offering an alternative to face-to-face, telephone and online samples and panels. In the old stimulus: response model, the business not only controls the questions but the answers, especially in quantitative research. You ask only what you want to ask and essentially you are looking for the answers you want them to give, in relation to business objectives (hence the predominance of targets, norms and KPIs). The new stimulus: stimulus model does not preclude your running surveys with community members. It simply allows them in addition to give the answers they want to give, not only the answers you want them to give. They do this through interaction and conversation, either about your stimulus – that is, carrying on conversations about the topic not only after completing your questions or the online focus group, but also in relation to issues raised by other surveys (the interaction element), or about their own stimulus – that is, by starting a conversation about some aspect of your brand or business that is important to them even though you are not currently conducting a survey about it.

2.1 DEALING WITH CONVERSATIONS

These conversations are what is new for market research. Pioneer users tell horror tales of these conversations getting 'out of control', generating an unmanageable amount of data. This need not be the case but it does mean that companies and their research departments must be geared up (attitudinally as well as in terms of resource) to deal with conversations. We can learn much about how to do this from our analysis and understanding of how real-life communities work. First, companies have to embrace the concept of a different form of 'control' – they must participate in the conversations, listening, engaging and responding: *participation is the new control*. If you participate you can help shape the conversations and, by your showing that you are engaged and responsive, community members will allow a conversation to ebb naturally as well as flow, since they too can see it reaching a productive conclusion.

Second, we must remember that community members 'control' conversations through self-regulation and self-organisation. Online brand communities can use super-active members to play exactly this role, working with the community 'owner' to set up discussion forums, pointing people to where particular topics are being discussed, or prior occasions



The practitioners' view: The value of unsolicited customer feedback

"Having contact with customers in the online space allows us to be much more responsive e.g we can use sentiment analysis to get immediate feedback rather than 6 weeks later. This flags up potential issues a lot earlier."^{xii}

"Right now, with the speed that things are changing, a community is a way of keeping close to those changes. It is like constant, live news feed. It would be good to use it to look over the horizon to see if you face icebergs or oilfields."^{xiii}

on which the subject has been dealt with, and encouraging self-moderation when occasional bursts of bad behaviour manifest themselves.

Third, the research function must dedicate itself to listening to conversations. Although this is largely new as a research methodology, it is hardly difficult: it is only an extension of what qualitative moderators do a

“ Participation is the new control.”

lot of the time and is exactly the same as what we all, as people, do all of the time. You have conversations amongst work colleagues, friends and family and have no discernible problems in understanding, decoding, responding to or acting upon them!

If someone is getting upset and creating a bit of a rumpus, either in a work conversation or school parents community, you instinctively

“ Communities are a particularly valuable medium for existing customer research.”

prioritise this, engage other points of view and act swiftly upon it. The same is true in an online brand community.

2.2 THE VALUE OF THE NEW MEDIUM FOR RESEARCH

If this is how an online brand community works for research, we must also consider its value as a supplementary medium, compared to other media on offer.

Clearly it offers financial value in that it is possible and practical to set up one large community which is used for all surveys (although not all members need to be sent all surveys) rather than buying fresh samples every time you conduct a survey.

It is a particularly valuable medium for existing customer



Case Study: iVillage.co.uk – the role of member: member moderation

iVillage.co.uk is an information network for women. It is based on a community of common interest and focuses on the issues that matter most to women, with interactive services, expert advice, information and a vital support network across content channels including Diet & Fitness, Relationships, Parenting, Pregnancy & Baby, Health, Beauty, Food & Drink, Home & Garden Travel, Money, News & Entertainment, Work & Career and Astrology.^{xv}

With a monthly audience of over 3 million, the ethos is very much around creating valuable content for members and involving them in this process. Embedded at the heart of the mission statement is a principle that this “is a place where women don’t just read about how to get the most out of life, they help each other do it”.

iVillage network general manager, Rebecca Miskin, recently explained how members themselves are very active in the community, working alongside employed editors, marketers and product staff as volunteer community managers, “some of whom end up as employees”. “We believe it’s up to our users and members to select the type of content. We leave the choice to our members”.^{xv}

research, because most organisations own some kind of customer database, so there is no cost in acquiring the community, just in setting it up slightly differently from currently. It is a perfect vehicle for customer satisfaction and employee research (a community of different members obviously). But it is erroneous to describe online brand communities purely as customer communities,

“ To incorporate current non-customers...you can access existing communities; add non-brand users; set up market communities for multi-brand research.”

because every business wants to appeal to potential new users too. Most NPD research, U&As, brand health tracking and concept testing would include *market users* (users of all the brands in a market) not just existing *customers*, which is why we've called this medium online *brand* communities. So how do we use this medium to incorporate current non-customers?

In any of three ways: first, we must remember that this medium has two channels, and you can access existing communities to find market users who use other brands; second you can add non-brand users to your purpose-built community as long as you do not assume they are all deeply interested in all aspects of the brand or business and incentivise them rather differently; third, and I believe this will be a major development in the future although some do already exist, research agencies can set up market communities for multi-brand research. Here the costs and risks are higher for the research agency, so they will need to be sure that clients have embraced the new medium fully before investing, which is why it will take time. But the time will surely come.

Whichever way is chosen, for almost all surveys existing customers represent the great majority of any business target, so online brand communities are a valuable medium compared to other fieldwork media, when viewed simply in terms of financial efficiency. As a medium they also outperform competitors in terms of speed – same week answers to questions big and small is now a reality

“ **The speed benefit: same week answers to questions big and small is now a reality, and same day response is feasible.**”

and same day response is also feasible, if not necessarily for definitive answers then at least for solid guidance.

What adds to the attraction of online brand communities as a medium for research, though, is what they can do in addition, that other media can't. As one client in our survey of practitioners explained, they are a perfect medium for getting close to brand users *in their own language*, and indeed language is a key factor in how close or distant you feel towards someone. In particular different age-groups use different language, as do specialists and enthusiasts relative to casual users. Yet research surveys have

a language of their own, a marketing-speak that people have picked up on, so that in focus groups people talk of brands, strategies and launches in a way that they would not in normal conversations. A deep understanding of what people want and like comes from being close to them in conversation, which means participating with them in their own language. Only communities can achieve this and the stimulus it provides to a business is hugely rich. As to its value, only time will tell, as it depends on how engaged and responsive the whole business is, but in principle it should deliver greater confidence in innovation and communication.

“ **The effectiveness benefit: make better decisions, and more of them, more quickly.**”



The practitioner's view: Online brand communities as a valuable research medium

“It allows us to involve customers in research where they have not been involved before. It's cheaper, quick and easy. We can use it to gain insight, to go back to the same people over time, for PR and for customers trying new products.”^{xvi}



The practitioner's view: Getting close to brand users in their own language

“Online brand communities are places for really honest conversations and for understanding a particular group's term of reference e.g the language they use. Brand x has to be really careful about the official language we use for formal corporate communications, but we can be more vernacular and less corporate in a community environment....

...Playing a vox-pop (e.g Sarah aged 18 talking about the brand) has much more power than someone from the insight team saying...teenagers say xx about our brand. The insight team do not look, sound or express themselves like teenagers, so it has more resonance internally when feedback comes directly from online brand community members”^{xvii}



3. THE COMMUNITY MODEL FOR MARKETING

Closeness to the community is what it is all about, then; and with this benefit in mind we can shift our attention to online brand communities as a medium for marketing, which is potentially where far greater rewards lie. (Fig. 2)

What the model illustrates is that marketing is more complex than research in that its inputs are on the face of it more varied, but in the same way that we can broadly categorise research inputs as surveys, we can call all marketing inputs launches. And just as research inputs advertising surveys, new product surveys, web usability surveys and so on, marketing launches ad campaigns, PR stories, new products, beta websites, distribution drives and many other kinds of initiative.

There is no reason in principle why such launches can't take place within a community, as long as in practice it has not been labelled a research community and that members have been made aware in advance that this is what the business will be using the community for. A launch can then take place in the same community where you are carrying out research (or sales or customer support or any other aspect of your business).

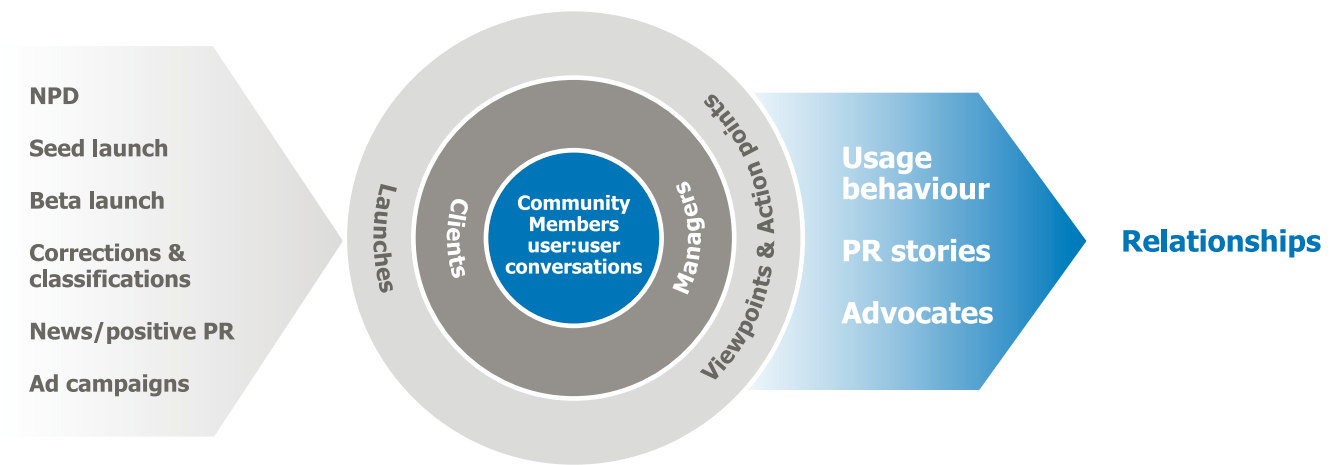


Fig 2: The model for marketing



Case Study: MyBlogSpark and Psst – how General Mills are using online networks for word of mouth marketing

MyBlogSpark^{xviii} was developed by General Mills and PR Agency Coyne Public Relations as a network bringing together thousands of bloggers who opt in to receive information from the company on an array of topics and products (covering categories as diverse as food and beverage, beauty, home, electronics, health and automotive care.) The network provides product news hot off the press, placing members “in-the-know” with the latest product innovations. Bloggers are provided with the tools to share this news with their readers in a fun and engaging way. Over time, the network has grown virally, and has been used by the company to promote a series of campaigns, including Cheerios’ “Spoonfuls of Stories” campaign and the launch of the Fibre One Bar.

Psst^{xix} was also developed by General Mills for consumers interested in trying out new products, take part in surveys, and get exclusive “behind-the-scene” looks at the company. Members can get coupons for General Mills brands, and are encouraged to try out new products. In addition, they can also apply to host a “MyGetTogether” with friends where they sample new products and share them with their wider network of friends and family. This promotes word of mouth beyond the core network. General Mills has used the network for a series of product launches and PR activities and advocacy activity has boosted product SEO rankings, invaluable for new product launches and line extensions.^{xx}

3.1 AD CAMPAIGNS

Obviously it is easy to launch online ads, but it is equally straightforward to send TV and radio commercials or print ads.

There are two practical issues to consider: reach and exposure pattern.

For consumer advertising, the community is likely to represent only a small part of the total target audience, unless it is a niche brand. For B2B marketing this is much less of an issue and online brand communities are especially valuable for B2B brands and businesses.

Using a community for mass marketing broadcast campaigns needs therefore to be viewed as a test or launchpad. One can gauge effects and get valuable feedback before rolling a campaign out both into the wider open web and into offline media.

This staged approach also needs to be reflected in the exposure pattern. In the old conventional stimulus: response business model, campaigns tend to have a defined short-term duration for a burst of advertising, often upweighted at the beginning to achieve more 'impact'. This is a poor approach to advertising in online brand communities. Members are engaged because they feel listened to and are making a contribution.

We should treat communities as a permanent medium and run campaigns on a 'drip' rather than 'burst' pattern, with greater copy rotation."

To suddenly bombard them repeatedly with ads and not seek any contribution in return other than to be 'affected' by the campaign is likely to meet with resistance rather than deeper engagement. Even more so if the community has been set up for just a short period and then, when the company wishes to 'end' the campaign it also closes down the community.

This is why we should treat communities as a permanent medium and run campaigns on a 'drip' rather than

'burst' pattern, with greater copy rotation. In between exposures, and when the campaign has finished (i.e. after the final exposure) the community needs to be engaged in conversation about the campaign and in other company stimulus such as research.

3.2 NEW PRODUCT LAUNCHES

The practice of beta launches of websites provides perhaps the most compelling set of case histories for marketing to communities. A good example is Google – the stimulus first launched by the business, returned in spades by enthusiastic users, who formed the community themselves at the company's open invitation

New Product Development is an area of marketing for which communities are immediately well-suited...especially if you use elite groups of creative loyalists."

to do so. The shift from feedback to feeding forwards could hardly be better demonstrated, as alpha sites followed not just at an accelerated pace but with vastly more appropriate and richer content.

There is nothing in principle to stop the same beta launch approach being adapted for other new products. In practice, NPD is carried out in an atmosphere of closely guarded secrecy, so again a mindset shift may be needed, although it is more a matter of selecting the right channel (a closed custom-built community) than of deliberating over whether communities are an appropriate medium.

New Product Development is one area of marketing for which communities are immediately well suited, in that it maximizes the use of interaction and conversation. Innovation and co-creation programmes are ideally suited to online brand communities where the stimulus: stimulus model is exactly what a company is looking for. It works especially well if you use 'elite' groups of



Case study: V-Jam - How Virgin Atlantic co-creates with consumers for new product and service development

Virgin Atlantic is working alongside NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) to develop the concept of collaborating with consumers to produce innovative new product and services for travellers. The programme, known as V-Jam, launched with a day-long workshop involving Virgin Atlantic staff and customers, web developers and social media experts to share insights and brainstorm new ideas for improving the travel experience.²³⁴ Participants ("Vjammers") were encouraged to send in proposals for innovation, which were then reviewed and shortlisted. Emerging from the discussions, eight social media projects were finalised and funded. Virgin Atlantic is working with the Vjammers to produce prototypes to develop the ideas further. With these projects, the Vjammers will be allowed to keep the intellectual property of their ideas, with Virgin Atlantic having first refusal on licensing the products, allowing both sponsoring company and end-users to generate financial returns by working together in a collaborative way.

Commenting on the project, Dr Fergus Boyd of Virgin Atlantic outlined that: "longer term, I see V-Jam becoming a franchise and a generic term for ongoing Virgin Atlantic / customer co-innovation".

Whilst initial V-Jam activity was offline, in our opinion, this type of iterative activity could lend itself well to an online community environment. An online community approach could provide an efficient tool for hosting ongoing dialogue that has been initiated in an offline environment, particularly for projects developing social media and web 2.0 applications.

creative loyalists, not the full membership, and again you can roll out the ideas within the community before a full market launch. And it's important to remember that online brand communities are not a replacement but a supplementary medium. New product development can take place offline as well as online in one integrated exercise.

By bringing together the research, production and marketing functions of the company, the community also accelerates the rate of business development. The reduction of failure rate of new products should be a key target for the use and eventually quantifiable value of the medium, since community members will be providing the stimulus for the company to deliver what people really want. This does not mean handing over 'control' of the creative inventiveness to communities, risking design by committee that may tick boxes but lack individual inspiration. It simply brings the business and community close together through shared participation. And participation is again vital, from really senior people within the company.

3.3 PERFECT VEHICLE FOR WORD-OF-MOUTH

What community conversations do in the marketing sphere is to initiate word-of-mouth – something that all marketing campaigns wish to achieve – which requires participation of the marketing team and management and analysis from the research/insight department. You can choose whether to start a word-of-mouth campaign with something like a viral or simply to join in a conversation and allow it to develop organically. One of the great things about how an online brand community works is that you can not only stimulate word of mouth, but see what it consists of and track how it develops and to what end, particularly in the creation of company advocates not just company advisors. Such transparency, of both the members and the company is invaluable in creating trust, which is an essential ingredient in a user becoming an advocate.

By creating a larger core of loyalists you can regard them as the launch pad to be rolled out first into the wider online community and also into the offline community – the same people remember – so that you effectively amplify the impact of any marketing activity you choose to undertake.

It's also clearly possible to use a community for direct marketing and sales activity as well as word of mouth. These are different in that the company has behavioural objectives in the first instance and



The practitioner's view: Using an online brand community for marketing

"You could use an online brand community to seed discussion about the brand, generate brand advocacy and referrals and to create buzz...particularly for areas or countries where the brand is less well-established".^{xxii}

attitudinal objectives in the second. But in principle a community can generate both purchasers and advocates,

because by engaging not only with what the business is doing but with what they want the company to be doing, members develop the sense of duty and belonging that is a reward in itself, and leads to both behavioural and attitudinal expressions of commitment.

Online brand communities have the potential to be a more effective as well as more efficient medium than rival media in that regard, because the community engenders a continuous rather than sporadic involvement, which is what ad hoc campaigns achieve, and are immediately available for use at any point, delivering once again speed and cost savings.

3.4 THE CONTROL ISSUE

In the old stimulus: response model, what is launched is under the control of the marketing department. Importantly, because they tend to work with campaigns, they also control timing in order to concentrate rather than dissipate impact. They are trying to get people to respond in a particular way: all campaigns work on the basis of 'desired response', albeit that this response may be primarily either attitudinal or behavioural.

The big issue for all company members is therefore control. Or rather the relinquishing of it. It's a key part of the reward the marketing executive gets from their job, so the business owner's mindset will have to change.



The big issue for business people is control... Repeat the mantra: Participation is the new control."

It's worth repeating our mantra: participation is the new control. Marketing to a community means allowing members to take activity in a different direction, even reject it, and the timing is dictated by their involvement as much as by when the company chooses to input its stimulus. But by participating in conversations, by becoming part of the current of activity that is an online brand community campaign, marketers not only regain a sense of control but also add a greater creative impact to the initiative they have launched.

In our survey of practitioners control emerged consistently as a theme – not only the unwillingness of marketers to let go, which undermines agencies' attempts to use the new medium effectively, but also the occasional success, which was often seen to be because the company's marketing execs had consciously agreed to forgo control, not only to the community members in terms of when things took off and in what direction, but also to the research department in terms of management of the medium.



The practitioner's view: On control

"The question is, are we capable of learning from what we do? If we have direction provided by an online brand community, will we be brave enough to act on it?"^{xxiii}



4. CONCLUSION: THE OVERALL MODEL OF HOW ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES WORK

We are still at an early stage of exploring all the ramifications of online brand communities for a business, and non-marketing applications are currently less well-developed, so we should perhaps leave the detail of, say, HR applications to the HR experts. But it's important to mention them both because if we leave them out the model is invalid on the grounds that it's not comprehensive (which is where we started on the error of calling them research communities) and because of the central role of research, whatever the business function that is making use of the community.

If HR is concerned with employee satisfaction or levels of staff service, research will be involved; if the sales department is launching a new product to the community rather than in a store, research will be involved in determining how people's demand is being

met and what they think of and want to say about the offer. This is why we call research the 'fusion element' of a community, since it interprets and manages the conversations that run like a current through the community, whatever it is being used for.

“ We call research the ‘fusion element’ of a community, since it interprets and manages the conversations that run like a current through the community, whatever it is being used for.”

Our overall business-model would take in all remaining business functions and look like this:

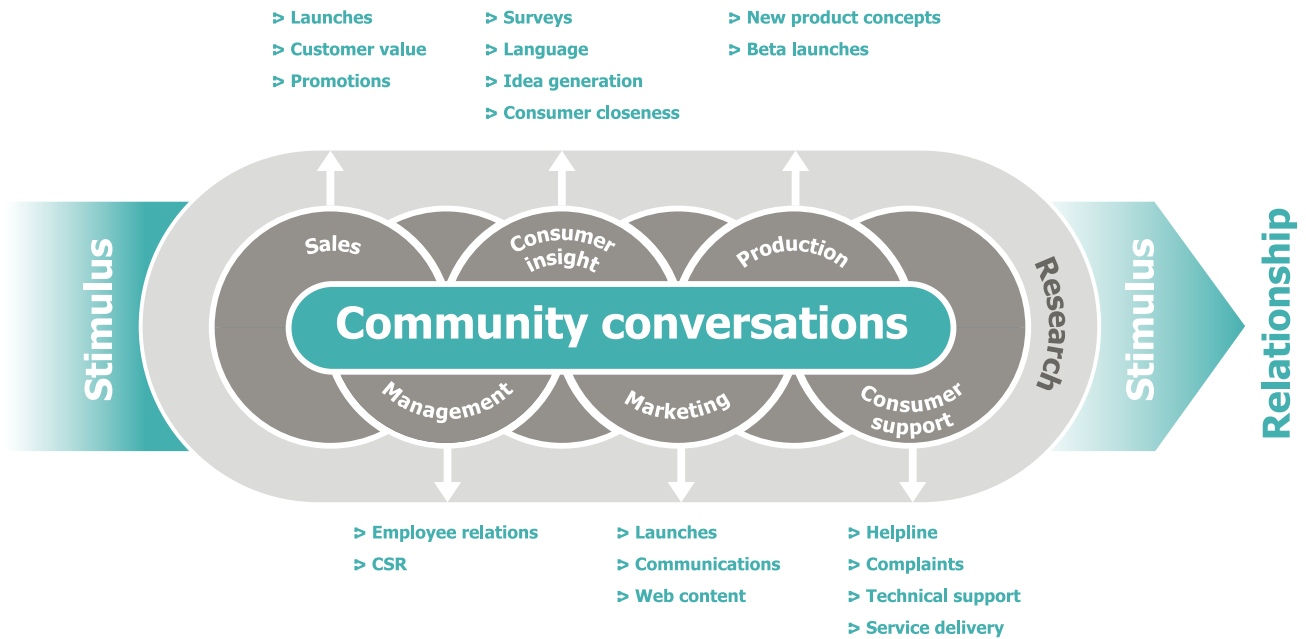


Fig. 3: Overall business-model

4.1 DEMANDS ON RESOURCES

It's therefore worth considering what the demands of research are in terms of resource management. Because it is central to the running of a community, the research function needs extra resource. One company which ran a successful (short-term) community worked out that it required half the time of two senior researchers to manage both the community itself and the company's involvement in it, particularly that of marketing, and another is preparing for the research manager to dedicate most of his time to it, so certainly it will require an additional research person's salary as the internal cost of running it. However, as a community becomes a permanent fixture in a business strategy, this resource should be paid for

Because it is central to the running of the community, the research function needs extra resource."

out of the resource currently allocated to other functions (primarily marketing, which will be handing over some of its organisational work). And since research-based agencies are ideally set up to run and deliver the medium, they will take on much of the organisational load as companies become more familiar and confident with their use of the medium, so expanded use of it should not lead to increased resource needs at the client end. This will also benefit digital communications agencies, who want to be planning media usage,

and delivering campaign content, not administering the process, which I believe they will gladly leave to community management agency specialists.

4.2 PREVENTING MUDDYING OF THE WATERS

The final important issue to consider is that whilst a community can be used for any function, it will become muddy if you use the same members for too many different things all of the time. The problem is not about the volume of activity – members generally become more committed, the more they contribute – but about the range of different business issues the member is engaged upon. Whilst the interaction

“ Whilst a community can be used for any business function, it will become muddy if you use the same members for a lot of different things all of the time.”

element demands that for greatest effect and value you don't just use a community for one thing – members are quite capable of giving opinions and acting as users and enthusiasts at the same time – someone who is busy helping develop a new product will have their brand commitment affected. This is great as a way of helping build advocacy, less so if you are doing ad and brand tracking. And if you then include them in a bit of sales-orientated direct marketing, you need to be careful that they don't end up feeling they've been taken for a ride. But it's not impossible, as we can see from almost any real-life community. A member of a school, biker or theatre community, for example, is still sold to, as well as engaged in discussion and getting reward from conversations amongst members, and they're perfectly able to distinguish between the two and don't object to either in their right place. It's all a matter of good communication, integrated thinking, transparency and respect. It's no surprise that poor communication is the most frequent cause of dissatisfaction in any community.

4.3 THE EVOLUTIONARY PATH TO COMMUNITIES

In its ultimate form, the online business community can be a radical development in the way a business works. The early classic case history of a business that has done this is Harley Davidson (if there's another they are keeping very quiet about it!). To paraphrase what the authors of a case study in Harvard Business Review say, ^{xxiv} brand communities are not a research strategy, nor a marketing strategy, but a business strategy. This may not yet be fully developed, but we should remain open to the full breadth of its possible applications.

It may be a Brave New World, but there is no need to feel anxious about it. It's tempting to say that it's easy and appropriate for Harley, but not for my financial, household goods, global drinks etc business, but this would be wrong – the defensive reaction of a frightened business person seeking to snuggle down into their comfort zone. The comfort zone is no place for a contemporary business

person. We must all adapt to change and its ever-increasing pace. This was the common reaction of many whom we interviewed, not necessarily rejecting communities, but wary of them because, they openly admitted, they did not know how it might relate to their business and what implications it might have. We are all anxious in the face of the unknown. Hopefully this paper, in explaining how online brand communities work, will reduce not only the lack of knowledge but also the anxiety about embracing them. But we can go further in this regard by looking at its evolutionary path.



Brand communities are not a research strategy, nor a marketing strategy, but a business strategy.”

Richard Dawkins, in his wonderful book on evolution, *Climbing Mount Improbable*^{xxv}, likened evolution to a mountain with a sheer drop on one face and a long gentle gradient on the other. Those who reject the possibility of evolution tend to do so partly because they don't understand (or wish to face up to) the science

of how things work, and partly because they make the assumption that the only way to the top is by taking a single impossible leap from the base to the summit. That is indeed impossible, but it's not the way it's done. A gradual climb up the gentle slope, changing little bits and adapting to conditions as you go, is the way that evolution works. As for the fly's eye or the butterfly's wing, so for the modern business. It's not impossible for a food giant or a global bank; you just have to go one

out to him that it wasn't his choice – consumers were turning his drugs into brands without any permission or decision from him! The same is true of communities. Your choice is only whether or not to participate, and when we remember that participation is the new control, non-participation becomes distinctively less attractive. Evolution is not optional but literally essential, to a business as to any other organism, and business 'fundamentalists' face a bleak, but certain, future?

Building communities should follow an evolutionary path."

step at a time. There are indeed few businesses with as strong an existing community, which engage all their users and potential users, as Harley Davidson. That's why they evolved first (that and immense foresight and commercial bravery, for which they should be lauded).

Non-evolution, however, is not an option because communities are organic: whilst you can choose whether or not to set up a business, run a survey or launch a campaign, you may not eventually have a choice as to whether or not to have a community, because, as we have seen, it is set up without any permission from the organisation. Companies in denial face a more difficult and self-defeating life ahead. It reminds me of 10 years ago when the ethical pharmaceutical industry was facing up to the world of prescription drugs as brands rather than products. One old-school marketer told me his company had decided not to do brands. I pointed

One of our clients has promised his board to fund a community on the basis that it will replace his ad tracking and market segmentation studies, and can be funded by the same budget. But he said, "I'm not interested in that, I'm interested in all the other things a community can do for the business – I just don't know what they are". He's taken his first step up business's Mt Improbable and now hopefully he'll know enough to choose what he wants his next step to be. Start with research, by all means. As the fusion element of a community it's a sensible place to begin, if not the only one. Experimenting with a marketing launch of a beta-site or viral, perhaps, is another, and would potentially offer even greater rewards.

It's a process of business mutation, and some evolutionary steps will die out. But others will make the business stronger and then the next step can be taken, perhaps a slightly bolder one. Gradually, the change that online brand communities will effect upon a business will come to be seen as transformational.



The practitioner's view: The evolutionary approach to online brand communities

"I am interested in all the other things a community can do for a business – I just don't know what they are".^{xxvi}

"It might be more practical in reality to take a series of small steps over time – this helps decision makers have confidence in the idea".^{xxvii}

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CASE STUDY LIST

The following is a list of networks and communities that we looked at during the course of our research:

Company	Brand	Community Name	Community Name / URL
Associated Metro	Metro	Urban Life	www.myurbanlife.com
A&N Media	Daily Mail	This is My Life	http://www.thisismylifepanel.co.uk
Arla	Lactofree	Lactofree	www.lactofree.co.uk/community
BBC	BBC	BBC Global Minds	www.bbcglobalminds.com
Boots	Boots	Boots Viewpoint	www.bootsviewpoint.co.uk
British Airways	British Airways	Metrotwin	www.metrotwin.com
BT Tradespace	BT	BT Tradespace	www.bttradespace.com
Cadburys	Cadbury	Cadbury Community	www.cadbury.com.au
Cancer Research	Cancer Research	My Projects	http://myprojects.cancerresearchuk.org
Cisco	Cisco	Cisco Community Central	www.myciscocommunity.com/index.jspa
CNN	CNN	iReport	www.ireport.com
Coke	Coca Cola	Cokezone	www.cokezone.co.uk
Consortium	Consortium	UK Villages	www.ukvillages.co.uk
Daimler Mercedes Benz	Smart Car	Smart Car of America	www.smartcarofamerica.com/forums
DFS	DFS (sofas)	Mums Power	www.mumspower.com
Easyjet	Easyjet	Easyjet Community	www.easyjetcommunity.com
Elsevier	Elsevier	Innovation Explorers	https://elsevier.communispace.com
First Direct	First Direct	Little Black Book	www.littleblackbook.firstdirect.com
General Mills	Various	Myblogspark	www.myblogspark.com
General Mills	Various	Pssst	http://pssst.generalmills.com
GMTV	GMTV	GMTV Viewback	www.gmtviewback.com
Harlequin Mills & Boon Ltd	Mills & Boon	Mills & Boon Community	http://community.millsandboon.co.uk
Harper Collins	Harper Collins	Authonomy	www.authonomy.com
iVillage	iVillage	iVillage	www.ivillage.co.uk
Johnsons	Johnsons	Baby.com	www.baby.com
Jones Soda	Jones Soda	Jones Community	www.jonessoda.com/files_4/community.php
Kraft	Kraft (internal employees)	Big Talk	Undisclosed
Lloyds Banking Group	Lloyds, Halifax, Bank of Scotland	Me and my money	www.meandmymoney.co.uk
Mercedes Benz	Mercedes	GenBenz	www.generationbenz.com
MomsLikeMe (Gannett Co.)	NA	Moms Like Me	www.momslikeme.com
Mothercare	Mothercare	Gurgle	www.gurgle.com
New Look	New Look	My Look	http://www.mylookfashion.co.uk
Nickelodeon	Nickelodeon	TeenNick	http://www.teennick.com/community

CASE STUDY LIST

Company	Brand	Community Name	Community Name / URL
Nicotinell	Nicotinell	Lose the Smoke, Keep the Fire	http://nicotinell.co.uk/uk
Nike	Nike	Nike Plus	http://nikerunning.nike.com/nikeplus
Nokia	Nokia	Forum Nokia (Developers' Forum)	http://www.forum.nokia.com
Orange	Orange	Better Together	www.orangebettertogether.co.uk
P&G	P&G	P&G Connect and Develop	www.pgconnectdevelop.com
P&G	P&G	Being Girl	www.beinggirl.co.uk
PetsSmart	Pets.com	The Pets.com Community	www.pets.com/community
Phones4U	Phones 4U	The U Bar	www.theubar.co.uk
Screwfix	Screwfix	Talk Screwfix	www.screwfix.com
Sky	Sky	Sky Community	http://community.sky.com/home
Sky News	SkyNews	Sky News Panel	www.skynewspanel.com
Starbucks	Starbucks	My Starbucks Idea	http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/ideaHome
Tesco	Tesco	Tesco Online Diet Community	www.pagerank10.co.uk/health/diet_plan
Tesco	Tesco	Shopper thoughts	www.shopperthoughts.com
The Clorox Company	The Clorox Open Innovation Community	Clorox - The Open Innovation Virtual Network	http://clorox.hivelive.com
The Purbeck Chocolate Company	The Purbeck Chocolate Company	Chococo	http://community.chococo.co.uk
Unilever	Unilever	Making Life Better	www.makinglifebetter.com
United Biscuits	United Biscuits	Snackrs	http://snackrs.com
Virgin Atlantic	Virgin Atlantic	vtravelled	www.vtravelled.com
Vodafone	Vodafone	Betavine	www.betavine.net/bvportal/home.html
Vue Cinemas	Vue	Vue Point	www.vuepoint.co.uk
Which? Connect	Which?	Which? Connect	www.whichconnect.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Hall, Partner, Development, Verve

Mike was the founder, Creative Director and Chairman of Hall and Partners. The company was founded in 1992. Mike developed and ran the company to a \$100m business until it was sold to Omnicom in 2005. Hall & Partners created a new philosophy about the different way advertising works to build brand relationships and was instrumental in changing the way in which advertising research is done.

Mike has published a number of works, including:

- ▶ "How advertisers think advertising works – a new approach to advertising research"
- ▶ "Shared beliefs: agency thinking about what makes good and great advertising" (IPA 2002)
- ▶ "That's brand entertainment!" (Mike Hall and Neil Dawson, Admap, Feb 2005)
- ▶ "Broadcast Sponsorship: how does it work?" (Mike Hall, Admap, April 2004)
- ▶ "The nature of brands in the new era" (Mike Hall, Admap, April 2000)
- ▶ "Testing to oblivion or testing to win?" (Mike Hall, Admap, April 1997)
- ▶ "Using advertising frameworks – different research models for different campaigns" (Mike Hall, Admap, March 1992)

At Verve, Mike works with clients to understand how to leverage the best out of their custom panels and online brand communities.

ABOUT VERVE



Verve is the specialist in building, managing and maintaining customer advisory panels and online brand communities.

Verve brings together a multi-disciplinary team of professionals with a proven track record in the marketing services industry to put the voice of the customer at the heart of business. This delivers faster, better, more cost-effective and more professional research through a unique combination of expertise in online panels, research, analytics, social media, communities, technology, marketing and graphic design. Verve is powered by **VERVE Engine**, the best-in-class technology and services platform for efficient, flexible, scalable customer advisory panels and online brand communities.

Verve is online at www.addverve.com

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