THE BLUEPRINT FOR BUILDING BRANDED SOCIAL COMMUNITIES

Building Branded Social Communities

The conversation economy is thriving, and in the crush to build a social presence, many companies are using social media as a new outbound marketing channel. As another outlet, social media can be a substitute for traditional media and other methods of pushing marketing messages to audiences. But this approach may fall short when it comes to building brand value and improved engagement.



When building two way communications on public networks like Facebook, the balance of power is in the hands of the user not the marketer. Many public social networking sites may be well established, familiar and appealing to consumers, but they seldom offer a marketer the control or flexibility required to meet their objectives.

Some companies are becoming more involved by developing branded communities, purpose-built social networks with focus (direct or indirect) on a brand. Branded communities tend to give more specific value to the brand owner and the members, allowing for greater communication and collaboration around the brand.

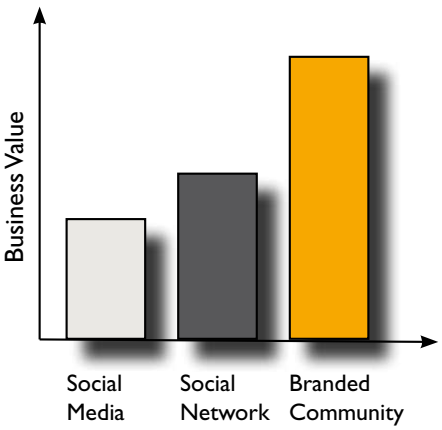
Here, the benefit is not only for the marketer who can control the content and give an integrated experience to their audiences, but the community members can become involved in product feedback and innovation cycles.

So, how do you build a successful branded community?

Taking the best practices from our customer's development of engaging branded communities, we have identified a four stage process, which when deployed over a 3 to 6 month timeframe can lead to successful community projects.

Build a Plan: 1-4 weeks

To develop a holistic experience for customers you need to start with a plan that keeps focus on them. Don't rush your strategy, work out your business objectives and ask yourself what value does the community provide for the brand? And, why would a member want to join and contribute?



You need to discover how your customers use social technologies in the context of your product. You should look to develop, plan and test the concept (test marketing or focus groups may help), and research the technology options - look at how your branded network would integrate with other systems such as your Web Content Management system and your CRM and what analytics, moderation control and metrics will it deliver?

You'll need to consider the longer term too, how will you stimulate new members to participate, how will you keep members active and what will be the measure of the community's

success? For example, if your business objective is to shift calls away from your customer service center and into a community, look at why a member would contribute? For them it's to get answers and perhaps earn discounts on future purchases.

Prepare to Launch: 2-16 weeks

As your community site is built, plan for the introduction to reach most likely contributors, as you will want to foster many-to-many relationships. An early sign of success is to get regular contribution to the site and avoid vendor contributed content. The 90-9-1 principle may apply, where some people actively participate more than others. This participation inequality means that 1% of users are creators, the most active contributors, driving large amounts of a community's activity; 9% are editors who sometimes modify content or add to an existing thread but rarely create content from scratch; and the other 90% are the audience (also known as lurkers) who will read or observe but don't actively contribute.

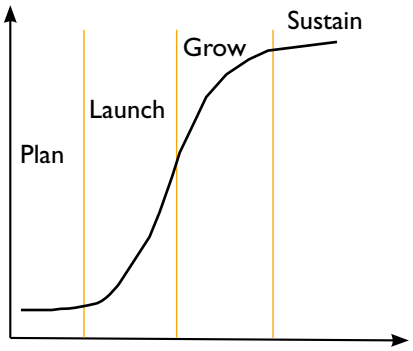


A best practice is to reward or offer incentives to your early 'creator' contributors. You can incentivize that user generated content to draw others to the site using 'share this functionality' or having an open ID login to make it easy for new members to join. Create the need for collaboration among your customers; make them feel part of the brand 'family', sharing experiences via video, photos or written content. Reviews are a good starting point, but you can tailor incentives to draw out different conversations.

Grow the Community: 2-6 months

This is about growth - it's time for you to seriously analyze the metrics and measure progress towards your goals. Are members connecting, contributing, and responding in the ways you expected? What have you discovered about how they connect with the brand that you didn't already know? What do you need to change or adapt in your plan?

It's time too, to begin segmenting the community. This can happen naturally but you may need to stimulate it. Segmentation happens when members have a specialized interest, maybe involving your product or service directly, or maybe tangential to it. For example, an apparel company may have members that like to talk about the latest fashion trends which could involve your product and potential competitors, or they may engage in certain activities when wearing your apparel such as mountain climbing in outdoor gear. Segmentation may be facilitated by establishing sub-groups and incenting members to join those sub-groups. Can your site handle all that is needed such as rich media, shared files, links, and ratings to make these communities as engaging as possible?



Sustain the Members: ongoing work without time frames

How does the community evolve over time to stay relevant? At this point, branded communities are still new, so there is not a lot of data here. What we do know is learned from public social networks, there has to be a reason to go back – based on content, you should strive for this reason to be about more than just the next brand interaction, such as the next purchase, so the brand value stays fresh. Segmentation and specialized interests are a great way to keep that forward momentum.

Cross link with other sites, so it is easier for member to contribute in one place, Twitter for example, and have that content populate the branded community. So make sure your site can handle this functionality. Remember to make contributing easy for everyone, so why not create templates and examples that people can follow? Once they make that first move, you've removed the fear factor, and they'll be drawn in and contribute more.

Value for Members and Value for the Brand

It is evident that social media tools can extend your reach, improve sales and support product development but branded communities can be challenging to build and sustain. The best proof point of this is the explosion in number of consultants and experts. More than half of the companies that have built communities on the EPiServer platform have used a specialized community consultant to plan and launch their site.

As with any marketing activity, a basic method of establishing and testing your hypothesis is the best way to reduce the risk of starting a community, which is why measurement is so important. Best practices are still emerging, but armed with this lifecycle view, you can plan for benefits to both the brand and the community members.

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