

Community marketing:

Why community is the future of engaging B2B customers





Contents

Introduction by David Rowlands	3
Comment by Charles Thiede	4
Section 1 Why the time is rife for a new form of marketing	6
Section 2 A new generation of empowered decision-maker	7
Section 3 Retention marketing is more important than ever	8
Section 4 Community marketing: Fast fad, or must-have marketing?	9
Section 5 Great content creates strong trust	10
Section 6 For the community, by the community	11
Section 7 Four ROI myths on community marketing that need busting	12
Section 8 How Covid-19 has changed the face of community marketing	14
Section 9 Virtual events are here to stay	15
Section 10 Humanisation	16
Section 11 Community marketing: Here to stay	17

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Introduction



David Rowlands,
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Community is nothing new, but it's something that's finding a new-found place in today's B2B world. With a multitude of devices and channels all competing for our attention, people are understandably more difficult to engage with. Their time, attention and trust are precious – what makes you so special?

Enter, community marketing. By bringing an audience together, and allowing them to share ideas, help one another grow and succeed, and overcome challenges, B2B organisations can achieve that vital cut-through and trust that is so hard to achieve in today's world.

With this in mind, we wanted to delve deeper into the topic of community marketing, explaining how it works, the challenge it helps solve and the results it can deliver.

In order to create this report, we spoke to several senior B2B marketers with a lot of insight to share on the matter. By reading this report, you'll be better prepared to implement community marketing.

Community might not be a new concept, but it's time to look at it seriously as a marketing strategy.



Comment



Charles Thiede,
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Social media has reached saturation point. Connecting with customers and building brand loyalty is no longer viable in this sea of noise. Brands that spent years building their communities on these channels have realised they are at the mercy of an algorithm, with no ownership of the relationships or rich data being created. Reaching even your own followers is increasingly a paid privilege.

The pendulum is swinging away from these broad social networks and towards niche, engaged communities owned by trusted brands. Marketing channels have multiplied over the last decade, and this fragmentation has led to disjointed, inconsistent customer experiences. Blogs, webinars, whitepapers, events and social media channels are just not enough to capture the hearts and minds of customers and prospects. It is time to move from the traditional funnel to a cycle of customer engagement and growth.

Community marketing is about creating a 'home' – a hub for content and community, where customers and prospects can learn, participate and be heard. Space to showcase all

the things that make a brand unique – articles, videos, research, case studies and interviews – all the assets that live in disparate locations across CMSs, webinar tools, event tech, learning and social media channels.

Community marketing also gives a platform to the people within a brand. Buyers today crave a more human experience from their online environments. Delivering this means putting your people front and centre, and leading with empathy, to create an emotional connection with an audience.

Marketing has always been about influencing how people feel about a brand, with 95% of purchasing decisions driven by unconscious factors. Buyers want to feel heard, understood and valued, and it ultimately comes down to trust. Done well, community marketing means a participatory experience for customers that creates this trust. Rather than talking 'at' prospects or customers, they create a dialogue.

Events were always a crucial touchpoint to create an emotional connection. As they disappeared

overnight, marketers struggled to create the same impact with virtual events. They were often treated as siloed, individual experiences. With community marketing, these virtual events take place in the same content and media-rich hub as everyday community engagement, allowing the conversations and interest to continue and grow beyond the one or two days of the event.

Community marketing takes a holistic view of the customer, from awareness right through to advocacy. Growth is not simply about acquisition – a leaky bucket is no use to anybody. Sustainable growth is about retaining existing customers, delighting and over-serving them. A community gives your most influential experts and customers a voice to market your products and services beyond just the internal teams. With community marketing, your most successful clients become your greatest sales asset.

Finally, two words to end with: data ownership. There's a reason that social platforms keep data to themselves – they are able to understand what is driving your customers' behaviour, what makes them come back, what resonates with which groups, and where the overlaps are. Reclaiming this data is crucial for understanding customers and embedding this into decision making.

Community marketing is far from a fad or a phase. It represents the art and science of marketing, before social media made us think that 'engagement' was a like or a share and 'followers' were customers. Communities create real conversations and genuine relationships in one unified hub. It's not a quick fix, but the returns on the investment are demonstrated with efficiencies in spend and an increase in lifetime value and revenue.





Section 1

Why the time is ripe for a new form of marketing

We live in an unapologetically noisy and busy world. It's fast-paced, increasingly digital-first, and led by those who embrace change, are willing to innovate, and are progressive in their approaches and attitudes. But it's also a world clogged by content that often looks and sounds the same, by poorly-disguised sales pitches, and by marketing that's irrelevant, badly-personalised and poorly-targeted.

In the B2B world, marketers are seemingly on a never-ending quest for the next tactic, strategy, or channel that will enable them to better engage their customers, build longer-lasting relationships, and elevate them above competitors in this increasingly competitive and busy market. This fragmentation of digital footprint can even be harmful to customer experience if it is disjointed or inconsistent.

And, while the days of social media marketing and other traditional forms of advertising are certainly not at an end, their incumbent noise and generic content are beginning to saturate said market, frustrating and alienating decision-makers who are craving someone who truly understands their actual needs and concerns.

"B2B marketers are working harder and smarter to cut through the noise and saturation of these spaces," observes Zoe Merchant, founder and MD at Bright. "This means really understanding and catering to your audience pains, their own personal career ambitions, and their wider organisational goals."

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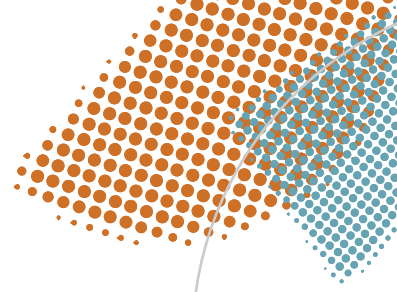
Section 2

A new generation of empowered decision-makers

Further adding to the challenge is that, increasingly, the new generation of B2B buyers feel more empowered to carry out their own research into products and services, rather than being bombarded with direct marketing that may or may not be relevant to them. Word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer networks have never been more important in this regard, as Carolyn Morgan, managing consultant at Speciall Media, explains. “The upcoming generation of business buyers are tired of old-fashioned, poorly designed or overly salesy marketing messages. They prefer to do their own research on purchasing options, relying on networks, trusted sources of reviews or their own reviews of online content.”

In fact, word of mouth remains one of the most effective ways to sway B2B buyers, with people more likely to purchase after reading a trusted review. Lisa Pantelli, head of content and community at Simply Communicate, echoes Carolyn’s point: “People are savvier and smarter in terms of making purchasing power decisions. It’s our job to ensure they’re empowered to make those decisions, not because it suits our purpose, but because it suits theirs.”

“People are savvier and smarter in terms of making purchasing power decisions. It’s our job to ensure they’re empowered to make those decisions”



Section 3

Retention marketing is more important than ever

Customer acquisition costs (CACs) are rising. “As B2B marketers, we’re seeing signs that commonplace marketing strategies are becoming more expensive and less effective at reaching time-poor decision makers,” says Zoe. “Combine this with nurturing longer buying cycles and it’s becoming more difficult and costly to acquire new clients.”

A higher CAC means that maximising lifetime value is imperative. Increasing customer retention by only a small amount can of course lead to significant increases in revenue. This is most urgent for subscription businesses, but stands for any business with repeat buyers. Ultimately, it is more expensive to acquire new customers than to keep the ones you already have.

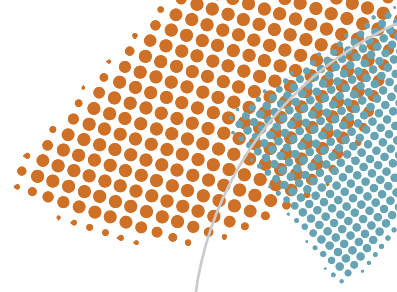
Marketers must now also look at everything that happens after a purchase (product utilisation, customer service and advocacy), as well as acquiring customers that will stick around for the long haul.

So, where can B2B marketers find an approach that satisfies all that criteria? An approach that can cut straight through to a customer’s painpoints, drive adoption, deliver customer services and harness advocacy? Enter, community marketing.

“As B2B marketers, we’re seeing signs that commonplace marketing strategies are becoming more expensive and less effective at reaching time-poor decision makers”

Zoe Merchant





Section 4

Community marketing: Fast fad, or must-have marketing?

By our very nature, humans are community-minded. For thousands of years, we've come together in groups, first as a means of survival, then for a sense of belonging, and now as a business setting – a way to connect with like-minded individuals, peers and fellow professionals.

In marketing terms, it provides a refreshing and honest approach – one built on mutual trust and understanding. "Community marketing turns the table on traditional marketing tactics," says Zoe. "Instead of driving the messaging to your clients, clients are coming to you and being drawn in with much higher intention and interest around communities that offer them value in terms of knowledge sharing, access to experts and peer-to-peer networking."

And buyers want to participate. As community platforms such as Propolis demonstrate, customer engagement is not a one-way street. Buyers want to engage with brands, share their own ideas and collaborate.

As Suki Thompson, founder/CEO, Let's Reset, and executive director, Xeim Centaur, explains: "Before anything else, be really clear who your community is actually for – who's in, who's out." This advice is critical. We've all been guilty of adopting a shiny new piece of technology or promising channel, only to dive in too quickly and lose sight of the bigger picture. As Shane warns: "There are many examples of organisations that attempted to create a community, but ultimately failed due to a poor understanding of their audience's needs and wants."





Section 5

Great content creates strong trust

Of course, the success B2B marketing activity, strategy or channel lives and dies by is the quality and strength of its content. In community marketing, this rings especially true.

“The idea is to provide useful, practical resources that help a buyer in their research process. These could be clips from webinars, case studies, or even decision trees to work out what is the right product or service,” says Carolyn. “Being a ‘good citizen’ in a professional community means sharing experiences, answering questions, and being transparent about past mistakes, all without the aggressive sales pitches. This is the best way to build up and retain trust.”

But, as Suki warns, B2B marketers must avoid the trap of creating content for content’s sake – a perennial issue that’s plagued the B2B scene for far too long now. “Too often, marketers jump on a trend or topic, without first questioning whether their content is actually relevant, or whether they’re talking to the right people.”

Creating the content, of course, is only one step. As marketers, we know how incredibly targeted across all activities we must be – and this is no different for community-based marketing. “Because there’s so much content out there, what people really crave is curated content,” Suki explains. “And communities represent the perfect host for curated content that can identify and solve specific challenges for its members.”

According to Suki, community marketers can also draw some important lessons from the influencer marketing world in this regard, which is often bogged down by both content overload and vanity metrics. “Influencers can boast hundreds of thousands of followers and churn out tonnes of content, but ultimately receive minimal interaction and engagement,” she explains. “The same rule applies to community marketing. You can build a large community, but unless you actually create meaningful content that inspires interaction and enables engagement, it’s all meaningless.”

“Communities represent the perfect host for curated content that can identify and solve specific challenges for its members”



Section 6

For the community, by the community

One way to craft more meaningful, engaging content is to involve community members in its creation. As Shane observes, the most successful communities encourage and empower members to contribute to its growth. Being part of something bigger is, after all, one of the biggest draws of belonging to a community.

This could come in the form of developer communities contributing feedback and testing for new product launches, or B2B publishers and media coming together to craft collaborative thought leadership content. “It creates a sense of ownership and investment in the product or content being launched, enabling authentic communication within the community, rather than push marketing,” says Shane. “It’s also a safe space. A prime example is Deloitte’s customer members’ club in London, which you can visit to use their resources.” Interestingly, unless specifically invited by a member, Deloitte employees aren’t allowed to enter, meaning customers can share, network and learn with the assurance they won’t be sold or marketed to.

Where brands like Deloitte, Adobe and Salesforce build a community around their brand, populated by their own customers, Lisa observes that communities built on a central theme or pillar also have a role to play in the growth of the industry. “The best communities, in my view, are those that are driven by a shared purpose rather than a brand,” she says.

Choosing the right platform

Finding the right platform to power your community is vital. It can be easy to fall into the feature comparison trap. A wiser approach is to focus on the behaviours you want from your community, and work backwards from there to find a partner who can support those outcomes.

Community marketing works when it is at the heart of your business. If a community is treated as an add-on, it is unlikely to succeed. Consider the integrations with your martech stack that it needs to speak to, and that need to speak to it.



Section 7

Four ROI myths on community marketing that need busting

1. It's too difficult to monetise

One of the biggest ROI challenges facing community-based marketing is striking the balance between creating a burgeoning, value-add community, while also pulling in the revenue to keep it going. Sway too far towards the former, and you'll ultimately run out of funds to maintain it, while focusing too much on the latter will compromise the authenticity of your community and its offering.

"If your community can demonstrate values around authority, honesty and transparency, then you're presenting yourself as a solid and worthwhile investment choice," says Lisa. This means setting clear objectives and KPIs from the outset, so you can measure performance and align to business goals.

For Lisa, the community represents the heartbeat that keeps all other of the areas running, and it would be short-sighted to jeopardise this by being too forceful with monetisation. "All of our content within the community is very practical, very supportive, but we don't do the sales pitch," she says. "It's about making yourself an indispensable resource, so when your members need help, they know exactly where you are."

"If your community can demonstrate values around authority, honesty and transparency, then you're presenting yourself as a solid and worthwhile investment choice"

2. There's no point if it doesn't provide immediate value

In community marketing, proving ROI isn't as simple as tracing a link to source or tracking the click of an ad. That's not to say ROI can't be proved though, but B2B marketers must accept that evidence of success won't appear suddenly from day one. "Building a strong B2B community is not something you can achieve overnight," says Lisa. "You can't expect to start raking in making money from the very beginning because, by the very nature of a community, it takes time to build and to nurture."

Once that community has been built and nurtured though, the benefits are not only clear, but long-lasting and varied. Shane explains: "Investment in community marketing programmes are for the long-term, but can have a dramatically positive effect on not only reducing acquisition costs through influencers in the community helping onboard new prospects, but also in terms of increased lifetime value from increased engagement and consumption of products."

3. It won't benefit other parts of the business

It's not only marketers who benefit from a strong community. Salespeople can also use the community to establish and build stronger relationships with customers, or use it to 'super-serve' key accounts. "Communities help salespeople to rapidly identify a customer need, and build a business case for your product or services within key target accounts," explains Zoe. "It also provides a rich depth of insight to help your sales team identify cross and upsell opportunities to pursue."

Savvy marketers also use the community to trial new products and services, collecting feedback on UX and CX. In fact, as B2B Marketing's 2021 Trend Tracker demonstrates, both customer success and customer experience ranked in the top five trends that marketers are focusing on in 2021. Marketers are placing increasing focus on the customer's wants and needs, and what better way to understand these than by giving them a say in a community platform?

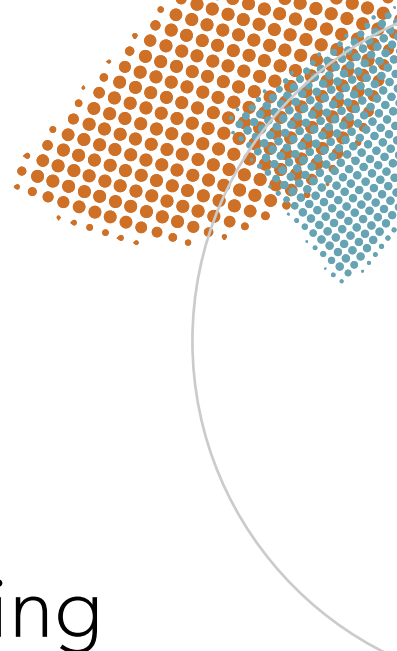
The importance of customer success and experience cannot be underplayed. Marketing isn't all about winning new business – it's also about retaining the business you already have. In this respect, community platforms are not just great for the customer, but they're great for revenue, too.

4. It's too expensive to set up

A few years ago, it may well have taken significant funds and resources to even set up a community (particularly online), but technology has evolved to such a point that it's become a relatively inexpensive process to quickly and easily establish the foundations for a new community.

Of course, the amount of value you derive from a community directly relates to the amount of effort to dedicate to its upkeep. "Maintaining a community is high effort in terms of time and resource," warns Zoe. "A dedicated community manager is important – so start small and build, testing along the way to improve engagement."

"Marketing isn't all about winning new business – it's also about retaining the business you already have"



Section 8

How Covid-19 has changed the face of community marketing

Even the most introverted B2B marketer will begrudgingly admit they miss rising at the crack of dawn for a roundtable, or dragging themselves across the city for a conference. After all, it's the human aspect of relationships that makes B2B marketing so special – and the Covid-19 pandemic has tipped this dynamic on its head.

Humans crave interaction, connection and a sense of belonging, and the events of 2020 and 2021 have thrown these into even sharper context. Prior to the pandemic, much of community marketing relied on physical events as its central, unifying pillar. Now, the community landscape has become increasingly digital-first, as brands use more creative ways to build, engage and nurture thriving communities. "Just because the pandemic has stopped us from physically travelling into work, doesn't mean our desire to interact and be part of a community has dwindled," explains Suki.

The hours freed up by the disappearance of daily commuting means people have more time to dedicate towards community and, as Suki observes: "The restrictions of lockdown have resulted in an increased desire for learning, professional development and expanded skillsets, and the community is in a perfect position to enable and empower this."





Section 9

Virtual events are here to stay

The rise of virtual events means online communities are flourishing: online networking spaces, exclusive virtual roundtables, personalised webinars, more regular podcasts – all these content formats are thriving.

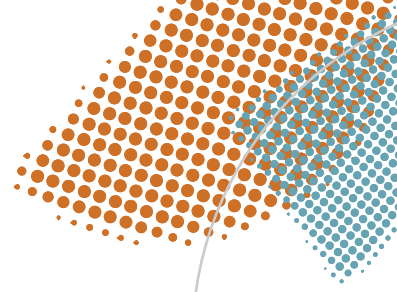
“Normally, we’d be in the office talking to peers about challenges or opportunities, or at networking events and conferences,” says Zoe. “Online communities have the ability to fill this void and work as the hub or centre piece for other tactics, such as virtual events and interactive content, which can be deployed and integrated within the community at the heart of the marketing strategy.”

For examples in action, just look at last year’s Adobe MAX, or IBM’s Think Digital Summit. These flagship events swapped the physical for the digital in 2020. Conference halls that would previously have housed an exclusive subset of people (often those who lived close to wherever the event took place, or could justify splashing out on a plane ticket) transformed into dynamic digital hubs, attracting hundreds of thousands of virtual attendees, from all around the world, of all ages and levels of seniority.

Indeed, according to Forbes, for some platforms, virtual events are up 1000%. And it makes sense – virtual events aren’t bogged down by thinly-veiled sales pitches from sponsors, or awkward lunch breaks with questionable sandwiches. Because a virtual audience isn’t captive, they have to work even harder to capture and retain people’s attention. They have to cut straight through to content that adds value. No inane introductory waffle or sales jargon – only the good stuff.

This will, invariably, result in higher-quality in-person conferences as societal restrictions lift across the world, and community marketers will use the lessons learned during the pandemic to create even richer events and experiences, on and offline. With an online community, events – both virtual and in-person – stop being discrete one-off occurrences, and instead take place in the same content and media-rich space as everyday community engagement.

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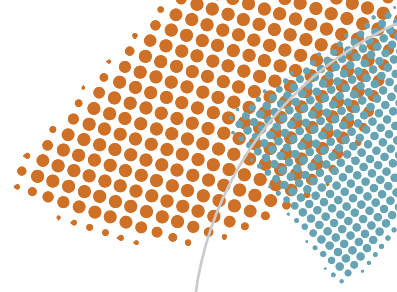
Section 10

Humanisation

Buyers today want the brands they buy from to be more human. That starts with empathetic leadership. Community marketing represents the most human approach to marketing out there. No matter how authentic a brand is on social media, at the end of the day, it's still a faceless marketer sitting behind a Twitter handle and logo. Communities put a brand's people front and centre.

"Being part of a community is like being part of a team," says Lisa. "Our role isn't to dictate to and tell customers what they need to know. We're there to listen and respond to what's coming up on the horizon and, because of that, we're having more conversations with our community members than ever before."





Section 11

Community marketing: Here to stay

The benefits of community marketing are clear and, while it shouldn't be seen as a silver bullet replacement for other tried and tested forms of advertising, if executed correctly, it can be an extremely valuable addition to a B2B marketer's toolkit.

- › **Customer retention:** Community marketing increases customer loyalty and advocacy, from focusing on key, high-value accounts, to giving a space for ongoing customer education, insight and feedback.
- › **Valuable customer insight:** Even if your community isn't directly pulling in revenue, the data collected is richer and more contextual than any quick form or questionnaire could produce.
- › **More empowered salespeople:** A more informed salesperson is a better salesperson, meaning sales teams also benefit from a strong community.
- › **Product/service development:** Communities provide the perfect hub for developing new products and services, by trying and testing members and taking on-board their valuable feedback. Most critically, show your members that they're actively contributing, and they'll be even more invested in the final product.



Also important to remember is that community marketing won't be the right fit for every B2B brand out there, which is why Suki at Xeim urges B2B marketers to ask themselves several key questions before setting out on, and during, their community development and marketing journey.

- › Do you understand what your prospective members need and want?
- › Will your community be in a position to address these needs and enable these wants?
- › Does your community represent a cost-effective way of meeting and talking with your customers?
- › Are you using the right technology to ensure you're engaging with members in the right place and at the right time?
- › Are your members constantly feeding back with constructive criticism and helping grow/develop/improve the community?

Trust is the underlying theme here. It's hard earned in B2B marketing, and communities represent one of the most effective channels for winning trust. "We want to know that we are not on our own," says Lisa. "We want to know that there are other people that are like us and that there are other people that we can call on for support networks."

True, many aspects of how we work changed overnight with the pandemic, some for good, some for bad. But it's irrefutable that our need for a sense of belonging, to connect with like-minded people, has only intensified – and community marketing will continue to play a crucial role in the ever-changing world of B2B marketing.

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About

B2B Marketing and Propolis

Powered by the community, for the community.

Established in 2004, B2B Marketing is now the number one go-to resource for B2B marketers across the globe.

Right from the start, we had a clear mission that remains as strong and clear today: to provide marketers at business brands with the tools, insight and inspiration they need to grow and succeed – as both individuals and businesses.

To do this, we need to continually evolve to make sure we are delivering what you need.

This is why Propolis was born.

We're proud to serve as the focal point for the B2B marketing sector, and to be a force for greater connectivity, enabling marketers and leaders to share experiences and learn from one another.

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Zapnito

Zapnito is an online community platform that connects brands with their communities. A hub for content, community and virtual events, Zapnito communities engage customers and audiences at every stage of their journey.

Intuitive content management and networking tools create multimedia-rich hubs that ignite conversations, as well as online learning, virtual events and monetisation options.

Zapnito is the only community platform with native video panels, for seamless face-to-face interaction, which can be recorded and published.

zapnito.com



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