

# For the love of a brand – How brand communities work

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## Introduction

From time immemorial, human beings have realized that they were alone and craved for companionship. We made friends, talked to each other, shared ideas and thoughts, worked together and did things which were far better than what we did alone. We understood the power of doing things together in that it gave us new ideas, greater strength and better results. In the process, we created communities. These communities have been the building blocks of the human race. From tribes to nations, from districts to countries, the communities built us up. They gave us a sense of belongingness, a feeling that we were part of a greater whole. Our happiness, sorrows and troubles were all shared here. We found solace and solutions as well as the beauty of sharing our good times and multiplying them. Here we resolved our conflicts with less animosity and more friendship. Here we created an identity that was distinct from others, which defined us. Here we learned “all for one and one for all”. We learned to stay united as one and loyal to all.

Fast forward into the present where brands and marketing departments have discovered the strength of the community. Today many brands want to leverage these community concepts for creating long standing relationships with their customers. Thus customers who used the same products or brands and loved them were encouraged to come together and form brand communities. Companies like the Harley Davidson Motorcycles went on to create communities of people who rode their motor cycles and loved to meet others who did the same. Their passion for the motorcycles and the lifestyle they followed riding them helped build up the “**Harley Owners Group**” – one the strongest brand communities ever. The **HOGs** had annual events in USA where thousands of Harley Owners gathered for rides and celebration. Local HOGs helped in maintenance of the machines, procuring spare parts, launching new machines, sharing specific technical knowledge and riding together for miles and miles each year.

After the internet took over as the world wide community of people online; social networking sites, discussion boards, forums and blogs became popular where people could share their opinions, thoughts and ideas on a wide variety of topics – from cooking to carnations, and automobiles to astrophysics. People were sharing music, videos, photos, recipes, décor ideas; make up techniques, DIY repair/ decor and life hacks online. Everyone loved to talk about everything online and meet up with like-minded

people to share their knowledge, methods, thoughts, opinions, concerns and causes. Thus the concept of communities became much stronger. This is where the brands also decided to migrate to the internet.

Online communities can be of two types:

1. Communities that are aimed at social networking, social causes or special interests that do not have any affiliation with a brand or company
2. Communities which are created and managed by or on behalf of brands or companies such as Apple or Sephora that are aimed at bringing the brand's loyal fans together

This article focuses on the second category of communities – those that are related to a particular brand or company. These communities are referred to as Brand Communities. What sets these communities apart is that fact that they are set up as a platform of interaction for brand lovers, admirers, users and just about anyone with any interest in the brand. The people belonging to such communities need not be necessarily online but may extend offline also with members interacting with each other regularly on matters of common interest. It is the shared interest in a brand or company or product that remains as the unifying force among the members.

**Albert Muniz Jr.** and **Thomas O' Guinn** coined the term Brand Community in the year 2001 in their article of the same name published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. They defined a brand community as a specialized, non – geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. According to them, brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of a community:

1. shared consciousness,
2. rituals and traditions and
3. a sense of moral responsibility

**Constance Elise Porter** defines virtual community as an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and / mediated by technology and guides by some protocols or norms. **Howard Rheingold** contends that virtual communities are separate entities as physical communities that exist on the internet and are progressions from real life communities. **Manuel Castells** thinks of virtuality as a complementary factor in actual life. The ubiquity dimension of technology allows people to break out of the need for proximity. Distance and geography are no longer the determining factors of a community but are replaced by shared interests, opinions and activities. **Craig Calhoun** maintains that virtual communities strengthen existing ones by

linking people with similar tastes. It augments what already exists in real life and supplements community building efforts.

Online brand communities leverage the power of the internet and social media to bring people together and discuss anything and everything including their brands. As people come together to create meaningful relationships and have discussions with each other on topics that are of interest to them they form a strong bond with the brands and companies. These communities are an important medium of communication for businesses because they enhance the organization's relationship with not just customers, but with anyone interested and active in their market - including employees, competitive brand users and market experts.

### **Brand communities for brand management**

With constant engagement with brand community members, brands must be able to create online word-of-mouth publicity or brand advocacy. A huge opportunity remains for developing new products, product variants, new markets, newer technologies, using better components and materials, design changes and modifications and distribution and payment channels. Segmenting the community on the basis of special interests or expertise or product usage or product variants can make them more manageable and productive. The chances of increasing brand loyalty through tailor-made offers for each segment are high since the company has a captive audience of customers from its target market segments

### **Participation as a form of control**

Companies often fear that brand communities represent a loss of control. Conventionally companies have indulged in one way or uni-directional communication techniques. They were either sending out one-way mass- marketing communications or responding only to a very small or limited percentage of their consumers. Large corporations have on many occasions failed to indulge in meaningful interactions with their real customers, listen to their opinions, take care of their problems or look into their suggestions. Instead they have used marketing research to understand and respond to their customers – a technique which was used for want of a better method. The internet has changed the rules of this game. Today a customer can literally talk to a company, air their views, comment, complain, ask questions and expect to be replied to and conversed with as though with another human being. This is where a brand community comes in as an open forum for discussion where the corporate organization is not just a silent observer but an active partner joining hands with its customers to serve them better. But in doing so, they must also face the music – the complaints, conflicts, issues and problems that are bound to happen in a human

world. It is for the company to accept that errors can arise in spite of the best efforts and to convert these into opportunities to give the customer the ultimate delight. In doing so, a brand not only gains customer loyalty or prevents the loss of an existing one, but it also wins positive word-of-mouth from a customer in trouble – something that is more valuable than a million likes on Facebook. So rather than a loss of control, brand communities give a company a chance to be in control. The key here is participation. A company that can ensure maximum participation will be able to leverage the benefits of brand communities to its maximum advantage. To ensure participation, a system must be in place to compensate the customer as well as reward him/ her for the time, interest and efforts. Offering valuable content and resources is a method of ensuring participation and increasing visits and conversations around the brand or product.

### **Communities as tools for research**

Brand communities foster and supplement the research activities of a company by creating real time conversations between users who are telling each other the things companies want to hear. Research agencies along with the marketing and other departments can use the conversations to gather insights into new product ideas, product preferences, product usage, pricing and retail preferences. It is important that close, active, real-time monitoring of these conversations happen so that the company can respond in real time as a member of the group. The communities offer a chance for the companies to have their ear to the ground and respond immediately and effectively to problems and concerns by providing answers and solutions quickly and efficiently. For this to happen, the company must have processes in place which empower the employees who engage the community members to reply and act in coordination with customer service.

### **The ROI from brand communities**

Brand communities can produce significant results and return on investment if companies can successfully engage their customers. Engaging customers, listening to them and connecting will create valuable loyalty provided companies are willing to accept diverse opinions, criticisms and conflict. Communities often enhance the organization's relationship with all types of stakeholders including employees, competitor's customers, market experts and just about anyone interested in the brand. As brand communities grow, and the number of members and visitors increase, it becomes more and more difficult to manage. Companies must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of a poorly managed community that might actually end up driving customers away from the brand rather than retain and nurture them.

Continuous monitoring of the community's status, members queries, conversations and concerns is the trick here.

### **Myths and Realities**

The **Harvard Business Review** discussed the myths and realities about a brand community. Brand communities are perceived as marketing strategies that exist to serve the business. They are considered to be the gathering places for the faithful brand advocates who gather under opinion leaders to build communities on online social networks. The truth is that real brand communities are a business strategy that exist for helping and serving the members in a better way. They are a forum for open discussion where every member has a voice and a chance to be heard. They are platforms for companies to embrace conflicts, accept mistakes, solve problems and seek solutions. Most of the time, online networks are just one of the tools that are used among many others to create and facilitate a brand community. And unlike what most people believe, it is not enough to have strong brand for a community to come into being. The whole concept of a community must be engineered and nurtured to create a strong brand and a loyal fan following.

### **This is NOT for everyone**

While it is true that an online community can make a huge difference in a brand, it does not mean that every brand should go and try to build an online community. This is because, an online community is based on a shared interest between its members which; along with the brand creates a bond. While everyone might enjoy their morning cup of tea, they might not want to come together on its community and talk about it, unlike cosmetics or skin care about which people might have tips and things to share. Hence it is for a brand to decide how to use social media and brand communities to their advantage. An electricity provider may discuss electricity conservation or environmental issues in its page and attract users who share this interest. Even then, the chances of building a huge community around a brand would be high only when there is a common platform or shared interest about which the members are passionate enough to spend time discussing. For a customer to be passionate about your brand, the product, service or experience that you offer must live up to very high standards. It is the experience that your market offering gives that builds strong brand communities like the **Harley Owners Group**. After all, to a loyal rider, a **Harley Davidson** is not just another motorcycle, but something that makes you want to tattoo its logo on your skin for the rest of your life. It is such passion that creates powerful brand communities.

## Brand Communities in India

**Hindustan Unilever** [formerly Hindustan Lever Limited – HLL] created the first all-girl online brand community in India for its shampoo brand **Sunsilk** called the *Sunsilk Gang of Girls* page. It contained hair care and fashion related information and provided access to solutions through content, blog and live chat. It was a huge success with Indian young women who loved the content, discussions, quizzes, contests and the ability to connect with others and talk about their hair concerns. The brand went on to introduce hair care and styling experts from across the world to address its customer's concerns and provide solutions. The conversations between customers and experts helped the brand gain valuable insights and in the process develop a new line of products that are specifically targeted at correcting hair management issues. Today the brand renamed as **Sunsilk Co-creations**; is present on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **YouTube** as well as on the web as a sought out destination for solutions on hair care from renowned world experts.

Apart from global brands like **Apple**, **Samsung**, **Oreo**, **Nokia**, **Xiaomi Mi** and **Dove**, Indian brands such as **TATA DoCoMo**, **idea Cellular**, **Fastrack**, **Shoppers Stop**, **State Bank of India**, **Flipkart**, **Snapdeal**, **Reliance**, **Yes Bank** and **Kingfisher** have leading brand communities. Apple and Samsung [Galaxy] have two of the most powerful brand communities in the world among which **Samsung Galaxy** is the leader in India. Another very interesting brand is Oreo which keeps coming up with very innovative ways to interact with its community members. While **Starbucks**, **McDonald's**, **KFC**, **Pepsi** and **Coca Cola** continue to be popular worldwide, they have also garnered their fair share of members from India. **Mahindra Scorpio** is currently the leader among automobile brand communities with more than 5.93lakh fans endorsing it on its Facebook page. The page has an amazing design with an embedded video and a comment board. Their wall is powered by the fans who continuously post updates which shows massive continuous engagement at a scale which is very difficult for most brands. There are videos, online games, polls, quizzes and product updates all presented in an interesting manner. Companies like **Femina**, **Aaj Tak**, **Khana Khazana**, **Royal Enfield** and **Cadbury Dairy Milk** have also built up a huge following online with their innovative methods of customer engagement and user generated content.

Thus it may be fairly concluded that brand communities have arrived as a unique form of expressing brand love among loyal customers. They are avenues for brands to understand their customers, gain insights, do research, introduce products, listen to complaints, solve customer problems and engage their fans continuously. The community and its members are a brand's most valuable asset.

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