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Community eBook

Building & Sustaining Brand Communities

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CHAPTER 1:

The DNA of Community

Community is a word that's being bantered about with increasing frequency in social media, but what exactly does it mean? What characterizes a community rather than just a collection of people hanging around together? Does a Facebook or blog following equate with a community? Are there levels of interaction and depths of relationships necessary in order to distinguish between a community and just a group?

Let's look at some of the key elements that make up communities in today's online sense of the word:

1. Shared Purpose

Members of a community gather around points of common interest, affinity, or experience. Whether that be for the love of a particular product, a shared hobby, or a common difficult experience such as an illness or hardship, community members are first and foremost united by common threads. Their individual interpretation, commitment, or perspective on those threads can vary widely, but there will be some common denominator that initially brings a group together.

2. Networked Interactions

The strength in community, especially online, isn't just the relationship that the community members have with the cause, brand, or organization that assembles the community. Instead, the relationships that forge between and among the members themselves are what weave the fabric of the community tightly together, and ultimately become the framework that allows the community to grow and thrive for the long term. Activity among and throughout the network is one of the characteristics that can distinguish a successful community from a stagnant one.

3. Hosts As Contributors

Communities gather around shared interests, but a company can serve as the catalyst or the hub around which those gatherings happen. Passionate fans of a brand can form a community. Advocates for a cause can form another. Often, organizations believe that they can will a community into existence, or merely collect their customers or fans in a single place and have an instant one. But in today's online environment, one defining measure of an engaged community is often the degree to which the host - the company or individual building the community - is an active, engaged participant in it. Not as a marketer, not as a promoter, but as a contributor, conversationalist, and listener.

4. Continuous and Evolving

Online communities are rarely finite, nor are they static. The best and most successful communities ebb and flow. The profile of membership changes, people move through phases of observation, participation, and back again. Some leave and never come back, others stay for the long haul and adopt different roles along the way. The only consistent factor of the makeup of a community is that it's not consistent, but rather an organic thing in itself that changes along with the needs, interests, and profile of its members.

Want some more discussion and discourse on what makes up a community? Have a read through these posts:

Audience or Community: Chris Brogan
Social Media Is Not Community : Rachel Happe
Defining the Term Community: Jeremiah Owyang
What Is Community?: Jake McKee
What Is Community: Chris Pirillo

CHAPTER 2:

Making a Case for Community

Community building is not quite as easy as the Field of Dreams. If you build it, there is no guarantee the community you seek will come and participate. More often than not, the communities already exist, or are ready to come together around their common interest. They might just be awaiting your participation.

Listen at the Point of Need

To find these communities or social hubs, start by listening. Myriad conversations about your organization, brand, and industry are happening with or without your participation. Listen to what's being talked about across the social web about your brand. Get a feel for the sentiment of existing conversations, understand what your potential community is interested in, and give yourself some solid context before making the leap into community building.

Begin listening by setting up simple keyword searches for your company name, your industry terms, and the names of your competitors. There are several free tools to get you started like Google Alerts, Twitter Search and Social Mention to help aggregate the buzz. When you have a social media strategy in place, then you may want to consider graduating to a paid monitoring tool like Radian6 to assist in monitoring as well build in deeper analysis, workflow, and social media engagement around your community efforts.

The conversations that start emerging in the online world as a whole can help guide you toward a community strategy of your own. Are your customers looking for ways to connect with each other and share their interests? Perhaps your clients would like a forum in which to share best practices? Maybe your customers could benefit from more streamlined online help, support, and peer sharing forums? You'll be able to hear what they're asking for by putting your ear to the ground in social media.

Also, don't forget to pay attention to how your workforce is engaging in social media. Whether they're using it personally or professionally, you can learn a great deal about your internal evangelists and how they view the social media landscape. As you discover your fans among the community and figure out ways to engage your critics in dialogue, your team members will be a great asset. Listening carefully and educating your internal crew about what you learn can help prepare them to participate, engage, and connect with your community in a meaningful way.

Define Your Goals & Strategies

Your listening efforts pay off here: illustrating why you want to build community, based on what you've learned about the expressed needs and interests of your customers, prospects, and industry connections. You'll have to communicate that vision internally, and clearly spell out the goals and objectives you have for community, as well as how they'll benefit the business overall. Begin by asking yourself questions like this to outline your attitude, intent, and mindset around community building:

1. Why do you want to build an online community?
2. Does the community have to be built and hosted by us, or can/should we participate in existing communities across the web?

3. What are you hoping to achieve by building this online community? Do you have specific goals in mind that you can measure against?
4. What will make your online community unique?
5. What will your community experience with you that they can't experience by just being your customer?
6. What internal resources do you have to support an online community? Do you have a staff and budget to allocate toward this initiative?
7. Why will people join your online community?
8. What other areas of your business can a community strategy support, like customer service or product and service development?
9. How will you measure success, and are you committed to adapting your strategy based on what you learn?
10. What tools, technology, and infrastructure might you need to support and deploy all of the above?

If you can answer these questions without hesitation, you're probably in a great place to start building out a community strategy of your own. Doing so will take a bit of planning and effort, and communication inside your company walls to illustrate the vision and goals.

Communicate Across Borders

Making the case for community in your company involves being a translator and a business person all wrapped into one. You may understand the intrinsic benefits of gathering a community together and fostering the ones you have, but you'll need to put that need and investment in business terms in order to make sure management is on board.

That means staying away from fluffy, nebulous language that talks about the "Conversation" as a reason to invest in community, and instead mapping out very clearly what your research has shown to build the case, how you've built your strategy, the goals you have, what resources you'll ask for in order to execute on your strategy, and how you'll report on success and results ongoing.

When you begin discussing a community strategy, don't do it in a vacuum, either. If you're starting it from the marketing or communications department, bring together folks from across your organization like product management, human resources, customer service, legal, finance, sales. Talk to them about what you're planning and solicit their feedback. A community strategy can have an impact on many areas of an organization - both positive and potentially challenging - so it's

important to get buy-in from the people that might feel the trickle-down effect from your initiatives. You might even form some strong internal alliances and find folks interested in supporting your strategy in other ways from their respective disciplines.

Once you're on the road to strategic community building, you may need to consider the human resources to support that strategy. Whether those roles are integrated into your existing team structure or standalone jobs, it's time to start looking at who is going to be responsible for executing on your vision.

CHAPTER 3:

Resource Commitments

People

At the start, many companies will begin their community efforts by asking people in existing roles with the interest or expertise to investigate options. Whether that's a marketing manager or a customer service pro, the initial forays into community participation are often wrapped into responsibilities that already exist.

As your community participation grows, however, you'll need to consider how you want to allocate human resources to help you engage and build community moving forward. If your primary engagement is going to be in external communities, like forums, blogs, or Twitter or LinkedIn, you should consider who has the interest, awareness, and ability to participate regularly and actively in those networks to build trust and relationships. Depending on the focus of your outreach and the goals you've set, even participation in external social networks can represent a significant time commitment of several hours a day to listen, engage, respond, and then report on results.

If community will become a cornerstone of your customer relationship efforts, you'll probably need to think seriously about whether you need a full-time, dedicated resource (or several) to build and manage these strategies. Between listening, engagement, planning and measurement, robust community-driven organizations can easily keep several full-time people busy, across several departments and disciplines, in order to make a community ecosystem work as an integral part of the business.

Time

Community building is a gradual and sustained effort, and requires a dedication of time to make happen. There's no one-size-fits all answer for how many hours a day it takes to manage a community strategy, but here are some guides to keep in mind:

Listening and Monitoring is the cornerstone of any community and social media initiative. Depending on the size of your industry and how much conversation already exists around your brand and the conversations that interest you, listening actively will take you anywhere from 2 hours per day to a full-time commitment. Some larger organizations that have a deep online network employ several full time resources on the front lines to help them listen for relevant conversations, and route them to members of different teams for engagement and response.

Engaging and Participating is the most obvious and probably time-consuming part of community development. Most companies start with a couple of hours per day simply responding to the posts and conversations that mention them in external social networks. As an organization matures with its social media and community strategy, the volume of conversation will increase, and more resources will be needed to not only respond but initiate and build relevant conversations too. And, of course, with a dedicated online community for your business you'll likely need several people who are "on call" at least in part to respond to the members and discussions happening there.

Measuring is an important factor to consider as well, and it can take dedicated time on a regular basis. Measuring and reporting on community success manually - with spreadsheets and basic tracking mechanisms - can be done, but can quickly become overwhelming and hard to maintain. More sophisticated monitoring and measurement platforms can help streamline the process and the time it takes to gather data, but it's still important to have humans doing the data evaluation and extracting the appropriate insights in relation to business goals. That can be anywhere from a couple of hours per week to full-time analyst roles, depending on the depth and complexity of the community efforts.

Capital

Social media tools are often touted as free, but that's not entirely true. Not only are there human and time investments that have real costs associated with them, but tools and platforms that can serve a more strategic social media plan often require monetary investment.

Monitoring and measurement platforms are one area to look at investing in, as they can represent a significant savings in time and help provide deeper analysis than manual tracking can. As an example, Radian6 starts at around $600/month.

If you're considering building out a community hosted by your company, you'll likely want to look at a community platform provider or web developers that can help you build community-like features into your website with tools like BuddyPress. Some out-of-the-box community software solutions like Ning are free, but costs can also range into the tens of thousands for custom platforms depending on features, functionality, and the complexity of your needs.

Training & Education

Like any area of business, deploying a community strategy of any kind will take planning and consideration. As part of that, you'll need to figure out how you'll train and educate the people you want to be involved in the community, both internally and externally.

Your internal folks especially will need some guidance. As part of your plan, take into consideration how you'll educate the relevant stakeholders about:

- Costs and budgets involved
- Technical needs and training, like software or platform administration
- Guidelines for participation and engagement in the communities themselves
- Information Flow: who needs to know what related to the community, and when and how that information will be shared
- Goals, strategies, and results ongoing

If you're building a community of your own, you'll want to have some guidelines for your participants, too. What's your policy on comment moderation? What kind of resources can they tap offline related to your company? How will you share updates, changes, and other information with them ongoing?

New strategies always require lots of groundwork, and community is no different. Keep the lines of communication open, and plan for the fact that you'll be spending some time and energy educating and guiding folks about what you're up to.

Infrastructure

Now is the time to start talking to your technical folks to make sure you have all the pieces in place to make a community strategy happen. That means pulling the IT folks and your management teams in a room to discuss:

- Firewalls and access points to external networks, and how that will impact your community or outreach strategy
- Email groups you need to set up to communicate with the right folks
- Deployment of other internal communication tools or collaboration tools in order to share information seamlessly
- The existing nature of your website and how your community plans might impact its use, structure, or navigation and information gathering
- Support and budget for web-based or software-as-a-service platforms you may require
- Installation or integration of other software, including community platforms (especially internal components)
- What team members need what access and permissions for all or any of the above

Depending on the culture of your company and your established processes and procedures, these conversations can be complicated, but they can't be overlooked. The social web may exist largely in the cloud, but there are real implications for the internal technical infrastructure of your organization, and it's important to discuss those with all of the appropriate people involved early and throughout the initiatives.

CHAPTER 4:

Community-Focused Roles

Companies are increasingly evaluating whether or not they need people on their teams to be responsible for building and sustaining community initiatives, and yours might be among them. Sometimes those roles are based on communication or customer service roles, other times they're considered as a standalone. We'll focus our discussion on what exclusive community roles might look like, and what you might consider when hiring someone to fill those needs.

Do You Need a Community Manager?

The answer to that question is dependent upon several factors, including the goals you've outlined for your community strategy overall. Here are a few questions to ask yourself while considering a community team member or several:

- Are we committed to community and social media strategies as a long-term, integrated part of our business?
- What are our goals for the community to start with, and how do we envision it evolving over the next 6 months, year, 2 years?
- Do we have infrastructure and resources to support positions focused on social media? Growth?
- What experience level does our budget support? Who will manage this person, and what is their level of expertise in social media and community? Do we need this person to come in as the expert in these strategies, or do we have knowledgeable staff with which they can collaborate?
- Are we doing anything resembling community management now? If so, how much time does it take, and what's the breakdown of tasks and responsibilities?
- Are we prepared to empower the community person to create and implement new ideas and test them?
- Do we have an idea of what "successful" community management looks like to us, and can we articulate it?

The goal to have a community or social media role is a good one, but keep in mind that these roles are designed to help wire community strategy into other areas of the organization. Eventually and ideally, these kinds of jobs will evolve when a community mindset becomes part of each and every role, perhaps with specialists that have particular experience in application of the tools within their disciplines. (Think of it this way: we don't have email managers that do nothing but. The *use* of email and digital stuff touches every role, whether it's inward or outward facing.) That person will need to be part educator, too, to continually communicate the community vision inside the company and help show others how it might apply in their department.

What To Look For

When hiring for someone who "gets" social media, it's easy to get distracted by all of the talk about who knows which tool better, who's popular on social networks, or who landed on the latest list. But most importantly, seek out a professional that balances business skills with social media knowhow, strategy with execution, and can demonstrate interest and interpersonal skills with the people both inside and outside your company.

You'll need a balance of both personality characteristics and professional skills, perhaps like these.

Attributes

Some of the most consistently successful social media and community practitioners in a business context possess a broad array of inherent characteristics that don't always fit neatly on a resume. When you're exploring these positions, consider attributes like:

Curiosity: The desire to explore new ideas, in detail, and without specific direction to do so. Curiosity about the intersection of human interactions and technology is a specific aspect that's helpful, and a passion for the potential of the work and the organization's purpose is key to instilling that in others, both internally and externally.

Innovation: Ignore the buzzy nature of this word for a moment and concentrate on what it really means: the introduction of something new. Community strategy often requires new approaches to existing processes, both internally and externally, including communication, strategy, execution, measurement, reporting, and training. (This needs to be carefully balanced with realism and pragmatism, too, but it's usually better to rein someone in than have to prod them forward.)

Motivation: Folks thriving in community jobs are self-starters, often capable of creating clarity from a bit of chaos, and devising their own marching orders without constant direction or specific instructions. If they can instill and nurture this in others, too, so much the better.

Collaboration: "That's not my job" and "get out of my sandbox" don't play well in these kinds of roles. They're far too new to be that rigid, and players in this role need to be cooperation-oriented to work with others across the organization.

Translation: In many companies right now, we need people that have the patience and clarity of explanation to teach others about the impact of the social web, and who work well across departments within a corporate culture. These roles, most critically, need to know how to work and educate across silos, in the terms that make sense to the relevant colleagues.

Humility: The goal here is to elevate the entire company and your colleagues as contributing, valuable members of the community and leaders in the industry. Not the individual and their "personal brand".

Diplomacy: Community roles are today's change agents. And change inside a company requires a lot of legwork, communication, negotiation, discussion, education, and trial and error. And the outside community will present challenges that require patience and tact. It's a balance of emotional intelligence here.

Connectivity and Awareness: This is a people job, inside and out. You need folks that can talk to people, work with them, socialize with them, connect with them in multiple places. They need to interpret how the network and the people in it need them (and don't), and how all of those interactions work together to encourage more, deeper, and better connections that ultimately elevate the quality of your work and company.

Expertise

Business Process/Planning and Analysis: From mid-level on up, you want someone who understands financial frameworks for profit and loss, strategic and long-range planning (including how to write goals and objectives), and how to map out execution at a tactical level. The key here is the ability to think at a global company level, not within a silo, and not in a linear fashion.

Social Media Anthropology & Participation: If you have someone spearheading social media or community they need to have experience using it themselves in order to fully understand its implications and unique culture. Yes, that means familiarity with the most widely known tools and technologies, and some of the most consistent and popular applications (for better and for worse) of same, and interest and observation of what's new on the scene (without the tendency to chase everything new because it is). Academic knowledge is good, applied is even better.

Hedgehog Management: Community programs that are well thought out have lots of moving parts to manage and drive. People who excel at community jobs can tackle projects that span multiple networks or areas, and keep all the pieces moving toward a bigger, crystal clear goal (or in Jim Collins' terms, Hedgehog Concept).

Customer or Client Service: Whether it's a formal title or not, you really want someone who has experience communicating with customers directly, and fostering those relationships in order to meet their business goals. The most powerful bit of social media is in mobilizing those relationships.

Written Communication Skills: So much communication and engagement online is in the form of written communication. If you can't write coherently and professionally, you're going to struggle. On this note, many community and social media positions will and should include elements of content marketing, which means that the ability to create and contribute solid content is key.

What To Avoid:

Along with what you *should* look for in a community person, it's probably worthwhile to discuss what to avoid. Here are a few things to steer clear of when you're writing the job description and ideal candidate profile for someone to join your team:

- Too heavy an emphasis on use of tools. Tools can be learned much more easily than mindset or strategy.
- Don't hire just "anyone", or assume that community management can and should be an intern's job. Anyone doing this job needs some big picture thinking, and a deep understanding of the business and your goals overall. Whether they're junior or senior, be sure you're prepared to empower, train, and educate them accordingly.
- Overlooking the importance of engagement, and not allowing that person to be on the front lines. Building traffic, eyeballs, and links is just one aspect of community; you need to know what you're hoping to do with those eyeballs when you get them - something that

benefits them, not just you. "Monetizing" is not what you build community for. Sales is an ancillary benefit, but not the direct purpose. Intent to build community has to come first, and your community manager needs to be allowed to pursue that without an immediate and direct tie to the bottom line.

- Content creation in a vacuum. Content isn't valuable out of the gate. The community manager, if they're going to be a content creator as well, needs to be able to observe, read, share, and consume other people's content and participate in external communities in order to get a sense of what might be valuable to your members.

Next, let's take a look at how you might put together a job description for a community role.

What A Community Job Might Look Like

Job descriptions can take all sorts of shapes and forms, and many of the tried-and-true formats could probably use a bit of an update. It's a great idea to include some of the attributes and more generalized business skills above as part of the groundwork of any job description you draft, and especially one for a community role at any level. But the meat in them is where you outline the roles and responsibilities of the position you're hiring for. Here are some examples of what that section of the job description might look like, compiled from real life examples and experience (including ours at Radian6, and those of friends and folks we work with):

- Establish and use listening platforms to gauge the health of the brand online, and potential for participating in new communities.
- Build outreach initiatives outside of sales or marketing goals to give our brand a personality and voice within the industry and the communities we care about
- Engage the community actively and responsively, both in relevant outpost communities and existing resident channels (like brand communities), and teach and empower team members to do the same, with consistency and clarity
- Create and manage a workflow and process for community engagement and response activities as needed
- Serve as a point person for inquiries or issues that emerge in social media channels, including media requests, customer support issues, or other related questions (and, if applicable, route accordingly to internal contacts)
- Build training programs to help other areas of the company learn and tap the potential of social media for their roles

- Collaborate on internal communication programs to inform and educate around social media initiatives and their broader implications
- Help create necessary training materials, participation guidelines, or other social media materials for internal and external education.
- Create and facilitate content in multiple media to further engagement goals, both internally and externally, and contribute resources and expertise to prospective and existing community members
- Curate, manage, and build out dedicated online community platforms, if applicable, including coaching for other participants from the company
- Consume, curate, and share relevant, interesting industry information and content with internal and external communities
- Understand and observe the parallels and implications of other online activities, including web analytics, email, and search, and work with appropriate team members
- Communicate and collaborate on how social media activities impact other business operations, including customer support, human resources, product development, sales and business development, and translate online community and social learnings into business insights
- Establish relevant metrics (new or existing) to map the impact of social media activities in both a qualitative and quantitative fashion, and amend strategies based on learnings and patterns

Reporting wise, community positions should report to whoever is chiefly responsible for *driving customer experience and a sustainable, positive company presence through online channels*, and whatever business function is being most heavily supported by these initiatives. That might be someone in PR, marketing, customer service, client or donor relations, even product management. It needs, in whatever case, to report to someone who gets the importance and potential of this, even if they don't necessarily understand the "how" at the early stages.

Salary ranges for community management positions tend to range across the board, depending on the level of responsibility and overall experience of the individual in the position. Most often, they run commensurate with similar experience and responsibility levels in marketing, communications, or customer service positions inside the same company. Check out some salary ranges here on GlassDoor.com, and you'll see that they run the gamut from more junior level salaries all the way up to senior level compensation.

CHAPTER 5:

Community Building Best Practices

Have Clear Goals

Much like we talked about earlier, having clear goals and objectives for your community is key to its long term success. Whether it's a better, more complete support experience for your customers, idea generation and product innovation, peer sharing, or educational and helpful content, the most successful companies keep their goals top of mind so they can shape the experience and approach around them.

If you're open enough, post your community goals and objectives right inside the communities themselves. Share them with your members and prospective members, and let them weigh in about whether your goals and their needs are lining up neatly. They'll appreciate your sharing what your hopes and expectations are for the community, and they'll welcome the chance to share their thoughts and opinions with you about what can make a richer, more engaging experience for them.

Assemble An Invested Team

There's no question that a committed community strategy will require dedicated people to make sure it works for the long term. Active communities require active management: from moderation, guidance, and interaction to stewarding information from the community to the organization and back again. Healthy communities also benefit from community managers that not only care for the existing community, but who actively seek out new members that can contribute in a positive, valuable way. They can help curate the best content, encourage new ideas, and highlight some of the outstanding efforts by community members to make them feel valued and rewarded for their participation.

And it's a mistake to just hand off the community to anyone who happens to be interested in the internet; your community will likely be made up of a mix of customers, prospective customers, and

even people who have an interest in your market or industry but who aren't necessarily potential customers. The varied personality types and potential relationships for your organization means putting them in the hands of professionals with people skills, patience, and positive, enthusiastic representation of your brand and company.

Make an Early Investment

Starting a community is undoubtedly an investment, and it's going to be a more substantial one at the start. As the community *builder*, you'll need to do the legwork to seed the community with valuable content, opportunities for members to come in and explore, and ways for individuals to chat, connect, and interact with both you and other members. At the start, your participation ratio might be as high as 80% company-driven participation to tend to the budding 20% of the community you're starting to foster.

The bulk of your commitment will be in terms of time, expertise, and people, from setting up the infrastructure of the community (if you're hosting one) to spending time making people aware of the community and interacting with them once they get there. Your community team will spend significant time in the early stages of community to listen and learn, too: absorbing the conversations about your company or industry in order to frame a relevant and compelling experience back at your home base. While your goal may be an engaged, self-sustaining and active community, that doesn't happen without a sound initial foundation, crafted by you.

Build and Share Value (a.k.a Community First)

Community forms and endures based on a sense of belonging - the sense that you as a contributor are being heard, received, and welcomed among the collective. Respect your community by embracing the idea of collaboration, contribution, and sharing in all facets of your organization's online presence. Community doesn't function well as a sales channel or another promotional pipeline.

The purpose of building a community should be to help provide information, avenues for idea sharing and discussion, and the opportunity for members to interact and connect among themselves. Listen to your members. Talk to them actively, learn what makes them tick, and understand what makes them want to connect with your company and your community members. Their needs are the foundation of what you're building community for, and the best way to understand those needs is to listen and encourage conversation.

As the host company of the community, you should also endeavor to be a contributing, dedicated *member* of the community you build. Highlight community members and their stories, and share things of value (hint: not marketing brochures) that can be helpful. Show members you take interest in their passions as much as you want them to take an interest in your own. Enhance your understanding of their perspectives as they, in turn, learn the values you hold and try to express through your participation. Inspire your community with content and contributions that put them at the center. Community members need to feel valued, and always benefit from consistent nurturing through respect, recognition, and empowerment.

By investing in the community you hope to build, not only will you earn a stronger relationship with individual members, but you'll encourage the engagement, participation, and contributions from other community members and increase the overall impact of your efforts.

Learn to Let Go

At the very center of a successful community is dialogue: true two-way conversations that foster open and honest communication. Many companies make the mistake of trying to steer the conversation in the community where they want it to go by forcing "messages" or promotional conversations into the mix, or worse, actively controlling and policing what's being said and when. Unfortunately, from the community's perspective, that approach tends to engender distrust, frustration, and a sense that individual contributions aren't welcome or valued.

Community leaders gain trust and affinity by sharing stories, fostering constructive conversation and feedback, and hosting dialogue rather than commandeering it. Avoid the "us" against "them" mentality by inviting representatives from the community to share insights that will help you better understand their needs, activities, and issues. Embrace the brilliant give-and-take that forms a healthy community, and the shared, collaborative contributions that make them so very unique.

Bring the continuous input back to your company so you can act where it makes sense, and let your community know where they've helped inform, educate, or guide your efforts. Allow community members to be themselves, acting as a guide and connector along the way to make it comfortable for members to engage and discuss what's on their mind. Resist the urge to force your presence into a "corporate" one, and instead let the individual personalities and creativity of your participants shine through to connect with individual community members. And always invoke the Golden Rule through your community engagement: *"Treat others as you want them to treat you."*

Establish Guidelines from the Start

To help illustrate the type of experience you're hoping to build, create some community guidelines as a foundation for participation and interaction. Ensure your community guidelines are visible and accessible, and empower your team to answer questions or concerns from your members and guests. Help outline your ideas about constructive participation, how you'll handle comments and posts from the participants (especially anything that could be considered nasty or defamatory), what your company is hoping to achieve through the community, and any other disclosures or disclaimers you may need to make up front. Members will gladly read your guidelines if they are simple, positive, and devoid of corporate lingo.

Guidelines should be developed with the culture, needs, and motivation of your community in mind. Check out these examples of some community guidelines to help get your ideas flowing.

And of course, guidelines are only a starting point. According to Angela Conner, author of 18 Rules of Community Engagement, interpretation of your guidelines for each situation is a key to effective community management. A community is built on human interaction, and the nuances of personality and culture that can't be distilled into black and white answers. Knowing who your community is and interacting with empathy, encouragement, and understanding will allow for smooth and approachable interactions.

Connect the Organization and the Community

Continually keep in mind how your community impacts areas of your functioning organization, and do what you can to bridge that knowledge, information, and experience back. Not all of your community members are going to want to be directly connected with your corporate "brand", but they *can* find value in connecting with people in the areas of the business that affect their experience with your company.

For example, communities can benefit from having engaged, connected

members from the organization side across multiple disciplines (vs. just marketing or communication or support). You might just find that you have product, account, or even HR folks that have a keen interest in creating an awesome customer experience and would make outstanding community representatives in addition to your dedicated team. And if your community feels a broad-based company investment in the community, they're more likely to return to what feels like a vibrant, active online space.

Be Patient

Community isn't instant, nor do you want it to be. Much like a vibrant, diverse garden, community takes time to take root, and requires nurturing over time in order to thrive.

Understand that your community will evolve and change over time, including the fabric of the people, content, and areas of interest. If you approach building your community from the mindset of guiding it for the long term instead of forcibly defining it for the short term, you'll reap greater rewards and find that your community members will help shape the future of the community among themselves. The results will be a richer, more engaged, and more active community that feels invested in the outcomes and the health of the community as a whole.

CHAPTER 6:

Measuring Community Impact

As part of a sound community building strategy, most organizations want to know how they're going to define success and measure the impact of their community efforts. Goals again form the foundation for a sound measurement discipline, and creating SMART goals - ones that are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timed - will help clarify what metrics make the most sense to indicate progress toward those goals. There's no universally applicable set of metrics for every business, so it's important to spend the time doing sound goal planning in order to determine which ones are most helpful to you.

Benchmarking is also critically important; once you've determined where you want community to positively impact your business, you need to determine your baseline for those success factors. If you want to improve customer retention, you'll need to at least estimate where it is now. And if you're starting with something brand new like content creation, your baseline might be "zero", but you'll need to look at the factors that point to success in that arena in order to build a measurement structure that works for you.

Tools and platforms can definitely be a positive investment on the measurment front. It's absolutely possible to measure your activity and success manually, using things as simple as spreadsheets and calculators. However, the more sophisticated your community involvement gets, the more touchpoints and moving parts you'll want to track, and the more time consuming it will become. Beyond just counting members and hits to your website, you'll want to be looking at engagement trends and activity over time, more robust looks at brand health via sentiment and key conversation topics, content interaction and consumption, and impact of community building on things like lead generation or CRM.

As you build your strategy, consider evaluating measurement tools and platforms that can help you track the specific metrics and measurements that apply to your unique goals and objectives. The entire purpose of measurement is to give you intelligence about what's working, what needs adjustment, and what's not working at all. Don't get caught in the trap of trying to measure everything; rather, look carefully at the two or three indicators toward each of your goals that can help you understand whether you're reaching them.

Want some ideas for what to track and measure? Here are a few ideas that might get you thinking about which align with your goals:

Conversations and Engagement
- Proactive blog posts, comments, or conversation threads initiated by you
- Blog post/comment ratio
- Tweet/retweet ratio
- Length of comment strings per company-initiated post
- % of engaged on-topic posts per week/month
- # of total monthly conversations
- Presence by media type
- Types of conversations and their ratios: support, topical, good-will

Community Health
- Growth rates for different properties
- Member satisfaction
- Member renewals/retention/attrition
- Average member engagement level
- Internal community connections per member - actual (friends) and implied (conversations)
- Ratio of company to community posts/conversations

Buzz and Competition
- # of posts vs. competitors
- % positive posts vs. competitors
- Recommendations and referrals vs. competitors
- Share of Conversation
- Reviews of your product or service (and sentiment of same)

Sentiment Trends
- Positive/negative/neutral ratios over monthly, quarterly, annual periods
- Same ratios as compared to competition
- Recovery time for sentiment ratios after a crisis
- Emergence of evangelists: % of positive posts from single source
- Emergence of detractors: % of negative posts from a single source

Issue Resolution Time & Costs

- Posts/issues resolved in social media channels
- Resolution on first contact
- Average resolution time
- Issues initiated online and resolved offline
- Cost per issue (as compared to offline mechanisms like phone)
- Peer-resolved issues (support)
- Supportive comments/defending gestures by community members

Lead Generation & Sales

- Community membership overlap with sales database
- Referrals via online channels
- Referrals by media type/channel
- % leads originating through online channels (vs. offline)
- % leads closed through online channels
- Conversions and conversion rates by media type/channel
- Direct response sales
- Cost per Dollar Raised

Website Analytics

- Referral traffic volume from community sites
- Time on site from online referrals
- Conversions from online/community referrals
- Conversion/click through percentages for various referral channels
- Inbound links

Content Performance

- Downloads
- Uploads of UGC
- Revenue from paid content
- Shares (ShareThis, retweets, inbound links), Bookmarks, Votes (Digg, Stumble, Likes)
- Unique conversions for company-created content
- Unique conversions for external content

CHAPTER 7:

A Look Toward the Future: Community Maturity

An important discussion point in organizations embracing the idea of community is that successful long-term community development is much more dependent on a *mindset and business intent* than community as a "thing to have". The desire to build and foster community has to pervade each area of the business, from customer service to communication to product and service development. It's a re-emerging sense of putting people at the center of the business, but beyond just customers, to include:

- Customers
- Potential customers
- Vendors, suppliers, and advisers
- Industry leaders
- Internal teams and employees

The friends and smart folks over at the Community Roundtable have begun building out a framework to illustrate a maturity model for community, including eight core strengths and elements that they believe are necessary in order to foster a community-driven organization, as well as four phases or steps that demonstrate progress toward an integrated community mindset. Have a look at their matrix here:

Community Maturity Model™

THE COMMUNITY ROUNDTABLE

	Stage 1 Hierarchy	Stage 2 Emergent Community	Stage 3 Community	Stage 4 Network
Strategy	Familiarize & Listen	Participate	Build	Integrate
Leadership	Command & Control	Consensus	Collaborative	Distributed
Culture	Reactive	Contributive	Emergent	Activist
Community Management	None	Informal	Defined roles & processes	Integrated roles & processes
Content & Programming	Formal & Structured	Some user generated content	Community created content	Integrated formal & user generated
Policies & Governance	No Guidelines	Restrictive	Flexible	Inclusive
Tools	Consumer tools used by individuals	Consumer & self-service tools	Mix of consumer & enterprise tools	'Social' functionality is integrated throughout
Metrics & Measurement	Anecdotal	Activity Tracking	Activities & Content	Behaviors & Outcomes

www.community-roundtable.com

Most organizations today are probably somewhere between a "strong hierarchy" and an "emergent community", with a few of the more mature socially-equipped organizations making strides in the "community" classification toward being fully "networked", as The CR folks call it. Let's look at this last level - the ideal picture of a mature community organization - and talk a bit about what we think these characteristics mean for companies who have goals to get here.

Strategy: Networked

In a socially constructed organization, community strategy isn't something that operates distinctly, but is rather the underpinning of all areas of the business. Strategies and goals for everything from communication to customer service to HR and internal education take into consideration the impact and implications of community, both internal and external. The focus is on how to engineer strategies that support the humans that drive the business, both inside and out, and consider them as an integral part of operations.

Leadership: Distributed

Traditional corporate hierarchies can stifle communication, interaction, and collaboration. In the mature community organization, leadership for the community mindset is distributed among departments and disciplines, and those leaders work together actively and often to guide the strategy as a group rather than behind walls and silos. Some organizations might even work well in a team-led structure, building a collective of different roles in the organization and building strategy and making decisions as a group.

Culture: Activist

Action matters more than talk, and waiting for things to happen or change isn't always conducive to progress. Organizations that are wiring in community are taking an active approach to developing relationships, creating valuable content, understanding what their customer's ongoing needs are, and finding ways to form a continuous information and feedback loop to stimulate progress. Rather than reacting to things as they happen, they're listening carefully and planning for the evolution of their business. And activist cultures aren't always changing something; they can be maintaining something that works well and continuing to champion for less process over more when it benefits the community ecosystem.

Community Management: Integrated Roles

While there may be an ongoing need for centralized community leadership, organizations that are immersing their organization in community-driven culture will see the need for these practices to be integrated into existing roles and responsibilities. That means infusing community interaction and customer experience into front-line roles like customer service, sales, and communication, and even in backstage roles like research, analysis, legal, compliance, or finance. There's a wealth of insight to be had through not just direct community interaction, but from the anthropology of the community itself.

Content and Programming: Integrated Formal and UGC

User-generated content is a mainstay of the social web, but most companies are not yet comingling their content with the content that's created by their community members, nor necessarily leveraging it well. Future built organizations will look to not only highlight the work of their community members and what they've created, but meld it with company-created content and even tap the content creators themselves to collaborate on other things. In the spirit of the customers of a company knowing its product and culture best, mature community organizations will understand and harness the potential of customers and community members as their most powerful spokespeople and advocates.

Policies and Governance: Comprehensive Guidelines

It's undeniable that the more immersed community becomes in an organization's structure and behavior, the more they'll need guidelines to steer that strategy. For mature organizations, those guidelines will include everything from culture, philosophy, and value statements to operational procedures and information flow, code of conduct expectations, content creation guidelines, regulatory or compliance issues, and more. And rather than being called out as distinct to "web 2.0" or online activities, they'll be integrated into both the online and offline activities of the company overall.

Tools: Integrated Social Functionality

Today, it's community platforms or discrete social networks that are often separate and distinct from other online properties or business software and function as same. As community and the social web become more of an integrated part of business operation, software providers will continue to mold offerings that fuse social technologies with enterprise processes like analysis and measurement, CRM, marketing and communication technologies, research, even predictive or progressive financial modeling. Existing technologies likewise will become more "socialized", opening up more collaborative ways to share and iterate on information and processes, and the ability to count community insight among key information sets and decision-making criteria.

Metrics & Measurement: Integrated With Core Business Metrics

Not unlike tools, metrics and measurement for community and social media related efforts are still being looked at through a distinct, singular lens. Most often aligned with traditional marketing or advertising metrics, web analytics, and increasingly customer satisfaction measurements, community measurement will continue to evolve and illustrate impact on other measurable business functions. Rather than demonstrating community success or failure in its own right, businesses will seek to merge measurements of engagement, content interaction and value, customer affinity, and online activity with correlations to financial performance and concrete ROI, stock movement and shareholder value, sales and lead generation numbers, product innovation momentum, recruitment and retention of talent, training and education, and other established measurements for overall business performance. In fact, for forward-thinking organizations, social measurements can form the cornerstone for a measurement ecosystem that wraps together multiple impact points in the company to create global, integrated growth indicators.

CHAPTER 8:

Wrapping Up

Community is more than a thing, more than a collection of people. It's a mindset and an approach to doing business that reflects a focus on customer experience, the role of a company within the industry it serves, and the intersection of corporate presence with personal touch. As the emergence of the social web continues to help businesses see the impact of the online space on the way they've always done business, a community strategy will grow in value and importance along side other business strategy.

Need Help?

That's what we're here for.
Stepping into social media is an exciting but very important step for your business. Bridging brands between their offline and online existence is more important than ever before. Hopefully this guide will get you started and give you practical food for thought about how social media can work for you.

Your time is limited, but relationships are always a good investment. Radian6 can help you lay a strong foundation for social media strategy with a comprehensive listening, monitoring and engagement platform, and the expertise to deploy it well. Questions, comments, or feedback for us? Just let us know.

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