

Case Study

An inside look at Intuit's Inner Circle customer community

The Inner Circle customer community from top-notch tax preparation software company Intuit could be one of the most stellar examples we've seen of a customer community gone right.



What started out six years ago as an unshaped beta program has turned into a 25,000-member-strong product feedback group that has Intuit performing annual product updates and regular improvements to its TurboTax product based on comments and suggestions from its highly engaged community members. Not only do the customers who participate in this community offer up their opinions freely, but the various teams at Intuit also get involved and ask questions of their own, making this a truly engaged branded community.

Of course, it took time and some trial and error to get the Inner Circle to its present state, and Christine Morrison, TurboTax Social Media Marketing Manager, and Ali McCourt, Leader, TurboTax Inner Circle of Intuit were happy to share their community development story with us.

The Beginning

About six years ago Intuit received a good amount of interest from customers for a beta tester program it had been promoting on the TurboTax website. The only problem: There was no formal beta tester program in place.

With 1,000-2,000 customers offering to share their opinions about TurboTax, though, the company knew they were missing out on a fantastic opportunity to engage their customers and get product feedback from the people who actually use this software. So, they followed the signs and started the ball rolling on creating a private customer community.

Out the gate, Intuit didn't have a site specifically dedicated to this purpose, so the team running this project began getting people involved by contacting interested users with questions and direct requests for feedback via email. While the feedback poured in, Intuit also worked on getting a community site up and running and collaborated with customer experience program provider Informative (now Satmetrix) to get a community development and maintenance strategy mapped out.

The Middle

The Inner Circle community website was ready for deployment a year after the TurboTax customer community program was initiated, and it featured a host of social channels for customers to interact with, including a blog, user forums, an idea exchange center (similar to Starbucks' and Dell's), and poll and survey questions scattered about the site.

At first, a few of these features were run through the internal ringer, including the Inner Circle blog – posts had to be approved by PR and a number of higher-ups before going live. Eventually, though, that approval process fell away as the Intuit team became more comfortable with the community and developed trust for its internal and external community constituents.

To show just how much the company trusted and appreciated its community members, Intuit gave Inner Circle participants front-of-the-line support privileges a year after the community site was in full swing through a special 1-800 number assigned just to them.

The reciprocal nature of this community created a passionate group of members who were willing to go above and beyond on behalf of TurboTax and Intuit, but, unsurprisingly, there were a few points of contention that surfaced along the way, including claims that the member mix wasn't representative of the larger TurboTax consumer base.

As the community grew, those claims began to dwindle, and now the back end of the Inner Circle is highly segmented, with poll and survey questions linking back to a customer database. Because of this segmentation, Intuit can target its questions to groups of users to pull highly focused feedback from specific user demographics.

The Radian6 Element

In this instance, Intuit uses Radian6 as a recruiting tool of sorts, to help build out the Inner Circle community. The Inner Circle team has created a series of Radian6 alerts based on product and company mentions, comments, and customer passion, and they sift through those regularly to identify and reach out to folks with invitations to the community.

The team has also created source tags within the Radian6 platform to track regular commenters through Twitter, and has developed a system of outreach to get in contact with this audience segment to invite them to join the Inner Circle, as well.

The Results

A customer community is only as good as its back-end process within a company, because the feedback put forth needs to be used to have an impact, right? Intuit is well aware of that truth and presently incorporates 35 of the offered suggestions and feature requests that come directly from the Inner Circle into its TurboTax software on an annual basis. The Intuit team then shares those changes and improvements with the community via blog post and webinar.

This community has become an integral part of Intuit's product development cycle, and the folks who've managed it over the years have gained their own share of takeaways, too. Ali McCourt now oversees the entirety of the Inner Circle, and says one of the key things she's learned is that she has to find a balance between her internal teams and external community. And that might be the most important takeaway for any company looking to build and maintain a brand community – strike a balance between serving the needs of your company and those of your community.

The Intuit Inner Circle has found its community groove and will keep heading down this road, developing new program pieces and engagement tactics as its industry, company, and community member needs change. Radian6 is so excited to be able to play a part in this great community effort, and we're looking forward to seeing the Inner Circle keep developing!