



Customer Community Is the New Marketing: Are You Ready?

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How would your company look differently if you added 150 passionate advocates to your informal sales team?

That is the size of Salesforce's MVP Program today. This subset of the 1.4 million members of their online customer community may be tiny, but it's mighty. Erica Kuhl, Salesforce's Senior Director of Community, has adroitly managed an increase in nearly 1 million community members since January 2014. Overall, Salesforce community members spend twice as much on products than non-members.

During my recent CMO reception in Washington, DC, we discussed the benefits of other branded customer communities, and the role of Marketing in designing, building and nurturing them.

Communities have come a long way since the early, halcyon days of online collaboration. Just twenty years ago, message boards allowed customers to engage with one another, answer product questions, solve problems, and suggest new product ideas.

Today, branded customer communities take collaboration to an entirely new level. The best communities attract individuals who want to regularly gather online and interact freely based on their shared love for a brand.

Branded customer communities are social pages on steroids. They offer several incremental benefits beyond a social presence. For example, on many Facebook and LinkedIn pages, your company's brand operates at the mercy of their ever-changing privacy policies and formatting guidelines. The design seldom emulates the brand your marketing teams painstakingly developed. And forget mining the customer data. You don't own it, and you simply cannot do it dynamically. The platform is the hub, not your brand.

In addition to these platform limitations, your customers' behavior may present a compelling case for branded customer communities. [Studies have revealed](#) that members of customer communities spend at least 54 percent more than their counterparts outside the community. Social Times reports that 89 percent of people surveyed say that testimonials (written by customers, not your agency) are the most effective content, and 70 percent of people surveyed peruse online customer reviews when they are considering investing in a brand.

In other words, most buyers first search for answers on Bing or Google. People don't start their shopping experience at your website.

Wendy Lea, Executive Chairman of Get Satisfaction in San Francisco, shared her insights during my CMO gathering: "Today, Google is your home page...The (purchasing and brand) control are no longer in the hands of the company...The best thing we can do is lean in to the openness of customer conversations."

It may be just a matter of time before we see highly mature industries embrace customer communities. Lea says "Some industries are constrained, such as financial services and insurance, but that's not forever. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't listen to what people are saying about you. At least have a feed like HootSuite that shows you the conversations that are happening."

In these instances where privacy is a high priority, live customer communities may make more sense than an online branded customer community. Chris Pick, CMO of Apttio, helped launch the TBM (Technology Business Management) Council in 2006 with 6 eager CIOs. Eight years later, their mission has mushroomed. TBM Council's latest annual conference attracted 750 CIOs who are passionate about the business of IT. The Council operates as a separate nonprofit with 22 underwriters.

Every marketer who wants a seat at the planning table needs to assess the feasibility of launching some form of a customer community. It is a natural, organic method to kick start innovation and accelerate revenues. Furthermore,

your competitors may be asleep at the wheel and ignoring this golden opportunity. These questions will help you get started:

1. In what product/service areas can we create breakthrough, unique customer experiences?
2. How would we rate the level of experience, market credentials, and passion for this particular product(s) or service(s) we are considering for the community?
3. What are our objectives for creating a branded customer community? (e.g. gathering product feedback; handling complaints faster, solving problems collaboratively, celebrating successes, listening for new ideas, etc.)
4. What is the size of our customer community today? Will 1 percent to 2 percent of that base be enough to launch and sustain ongoing customer conversations?
5. How will we reward our top contributors or raving fans?
6. What's our 12 month plan to grow customer engagement and commit to fast response times?
7. How will we measure our success?
8. Who will be accountable for our success?
9. How will we ensure our executive teams continue to listen and contribute to the community?

Put aside your old beliefs that a command and control, power-driven corporate structure is needed to grow and moderate the community. Salesforce's Kuhl summarizes it well: My 'dream state' for who should own the community is that it does not belong to ANY single department. It's like email--it's pervasive. As the Senior Director of Community, my goals need to stay balanced, not swayed towards R&D, Marketing, or Product Management."

Lisa Nirell, the founder of [EnergizeGrowth®LLC](#), helps market leaders dramatically improve performance. Innovative companies such as Adobe, Bozzuto, and Hilton hire Lisa to gain fresh insights, formulate new strategies, and launch breakthrough marketing ideas.

She is the award-winning author of [The Mindful Marketer: How to Stay Present and Profitable in a Data-Driven World](#), and EnergizeGrowth® NOW: The Marketing Guide to a Wealthy Company. Check out her leadership columns in [FastCompany](#), Forbes CMO, and HuffingtonPost.

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