PR IN THE COMMUNITY

THE GUIDE TO GROWING A NETWORK THAT SUPPORTS YOUR ORGANISATION

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The concept of a community-based business is not a new one.

If you can encourage people to engage with your business on a regular basis, creating a hub of useful information and services that can easily be accessed by your clients, partners and employees, you will potentially place your business at the centre of a commercially viable community.

Technology has helped redefine our idea of what makes a community and transformed it from a very "local" or "physical" business model to something with potential global reach. In the past we might have thought of a local post office or village pub as a community-based business. We are now just as likely to think of a global software or services company as an organisation serving a community.

The opportunity for community to propel your business or organisation to new heights, if harnessed correctly, is phenomenal. Digital Content Management Systems (CMS), social media channels and advanced marketing automation technologies now enable brands to engage with their audiences directly, developing relationships and creating new business opportunities.

However, as communities shift online, that doesn't mean the rules for managing a successful community have changed.

Relationship Management in the Community

A community-based business must serve the needs of its members, it must be accessible, trustworthy and above all, useful. Essentially, building a successful community is all about building and maintaining strong relationships – and as such, it's very much the domain of PRs.

Every community must adhere to a set of rules governing membership, standards, flow of information and privileges. As it only takes a small group of "rogue" community members to disrupt harmony and potentially damage the wider community's reputation, systems need to be developed to ensure members conform to the rules without restricting positive engagement. At the same time, information must flow as freely as possible for the community to flourish.

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This balancing act requires a solid investment in human resources as well as technology. Maintaining standards is the primary responsibility of the community manager, often supported by a team of admins which some organisations might choose to recruit from within the community itself (and not necessarily employees).

Nurturing the Flow of Information

Taking control of your own community space enables organisations to better plan and distribute the flow of information to their various publics. Owning the channels you use to reach your clients, partners and the media* can significantly improve the efficiency of your communications and help form a more cohesive alliance with your wider commercial and operational teams, making the PR's work more visible and accountable.

*It should be remembered that community ownership is not a means to bypass the traditional media. The media should be welcomed as active community members and encouraged to amplify content through other channels.

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As community leaders, PR professionals will have a greater ownership of the agenda and (within their own communities) need not worry about stories being "spiked", misappropriated quotes, badly cropped images, or other ham-fisted editing techniques doled out by the media. But this does not mean the PR's job is any easier.

The 24/7/365 nature of a digital community requires constant nurturing and while software can help, nothing beats human engagement. Remember, when something goes awry in any community, bad news can travel quickly and potentially cause significant damage to your organisation.

The Old Parish Pump

The building blocks of community should be very familiar to your PR team.

Regional newspapers were (and in some cases, still are) a great example of a community-based business.

Prior to the Internet, the regional press was the only place many people could access news and information relating to their local area. If you followed a local sports team, had an interest in local politics, attended local art or community events or just wanted to keep up with local gossip – your local newspaper was an essential daily or weekly purchase. For many organisations, the regional press was the only route to the commercial market if they want to promote a product, service or event; or share an idea or initiative within a certain geographic area. This powered another once powerful community assist (now largely lost to the Internet) – local classified advertising.

Interestingly, as the regional newspaper industry faces increased competition from the Internet, several publishers are fighting back by increasing their community focus and going hyper-local. While the model still has some way to go before proving itself, it is clear the proprietors of titles like The Times of Tonbridge and The Cleethorpes Chronicle are betting big on the promise of community. However, how these hyper-local titles monetise their communities outside of the traditional advertising model remains to be proven.

Niche Communities

Even so, these new newspapers are evidence that the tightest niche has the potential to find a sustainable audience via the web.

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Because online communities know no boundaries, niche communities that would have little or no commercial viability in a physical, local environment, can thrive as technology brings remote audiences together to form significant populations primed for commercial development via targeted advertising and/or ecommerce.

Online communities bring like-minded people together. They end isolation by facilitating introductions and acting as a meeting place to share ideas. Successful online community-based brands encourage their clients to "hang-out" with them on their blogs, via social media and online forums. They are often the first point of call for community news, advice and wider thought-leadership. As such, they generate a level of trust which drives brand loyalty and presents revenue generating opportunities.

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Notable Business Communities

WordPress: The Content Management System (CMS) supporting many online communities is also a shining example of a community-based organisation. As open source software, WordPress was built and continues to be developed by a community of thousands of volunteers. WordPress is further enhanced by a vast range of community produced design themes and plug-ins. All documentation supporting the software and much of the support via online forums is managed by volunteers. Automatic, the company behind WordPress, distributes software for free driving huge demand back into the community. Commercial opportunities arise in the form of traditional product sales but as paid hosting tiers, consultancy and managed services to support the platform.

LinkedIn: The business friendly social network has created the perfect environment for businesses to engage with their communities via LinkedIn Groups and the Pulse publishing platform. By combining the power of community, content and recruitment advertising, many media pundits now consider LinkedIn a real threat to the traditional trade publishing industry.

Airbnb/Uber: We no longer book a hotel room online or hail a taxi in the street. We join an exclusive community where everyone is accountable and reviewed by their peers. Companies like Airbnb and Uber have blossomed in recent years because of their appeal to a young, trendy community of supporters (the famed "millennials"). When the cool kids get involved, it's not too long before their parents sign-up and the media take note. Both Airbnb and Uber make community look easy with incredibly intuitive mobile apps that make contributing to the conversation as easy as a few swipes and a click.

Successful Relationships

The benefits of community extend well beyond taking greater ownership of public facing communications. Better relationships developed by community-led initiatives can enhance multiple areas of your organisation including:

- **Marketing:** Community-led activity is essentially a stealth-marketing strategy. By providing a platform for users to share ideas and facilitate "friendships", your clients and prospects might not even realise that they are being marketed to. Remember, people buy from people they like and are inspired to buy by people they identify with. A well run community ticks both of these boxes.

- **Sales:** Why would active participants in your community go anywhere else to make a purchase? Smart community leaders make it as easy as possible for community members to buy, without being perceived as "pushy" salespeople.

- **Customer Support:** One of the many benefits of community arises from the fact that people like to be seen as helpful. In a well-managed community this often means community members will assist others if they have a question or a problem with a product or service you provide. Sometimes (in a 24/7 online environment), community members will provide a more timely and accurate service than your own customer support teams. Who better to advise clients and prospects about your products or services than a well-informed and happy community member?

- **Product Development:** The very best products and services solve very real problems for your clients and prospects. Organisations that invest in community generate a valuable two-way communication channel between product/service developers and the communities they serve. Your online community can also serve as an early launch-pad for new products/services while in beta mode.

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User Generated Content

Aside from the resources required to manage communities, one of the biggest challenges facing many organisations is the production of useful and engaging content. Community enables organisations to harness the power of User Generated Content (UGC) to fill this void. UGC can come from multiple sources including, clients, prospects, business partners and industry thought leaders. In most cases it is useful, helping to generate:

- **Search Engine Optimisation (SEO):** Community-produced content can provide an excellent resource to aid your SEO strategy. Remember, Google loves fresh, engaging content. Why not employ the power of a community to help you write it.

- **Business Leads:** A question from a client or prospect can often be translated into a legitimate sales enquiry or upsell opportunity. This is just one reason why your community needs to be monitored regularly and questions followed up in a timely manner.

- **Testimonials:** Identifying clients who are willing to act as a testimonial can be difficult. A well-managed community will enable them to "out" themselves as happy and loyal customers.

- **Partnerships:** Partners are an ideal source of useful and engaging content. Harness the power of their thought-leadership via your blog, forums and social media output and show the world that your community runs much deeper than your own brand.

Community-based Revenue Streams

Some businesses are built entirely on community. Consider the niche publisher who runs an industry specific blog, forum, email newsletter, etc. Not only are they in the perfect position to target their community with well-placed advertising and ecommerce promotions, they can also build significant revenues from associated services such as training, consultancy and events, which can all be promoted directly to their community of readers.

Partners are an ideal source of useful and engaging content. Harness the power of their thought-leadership

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If you have expertise in a particular industry and you own a share of the community connected to your business, you not only have a highly sought-after product (knowledge) but also a platform to sell it from. An investment in the resources to manage a community can significantly add to your organisation's bottom line.

Routes to Market and Taking Ownership of Community

Savvy community-leaders will use the same technologies as their community. For example, having an understanding of social networks favoured by your community will undoubtedly help you generate conversations and drive traffic and engagement. This may mean getting to grips with unfamiliar social channels.

The central hub of your community should revolve around your corporate blog. From your blog, you can then hang all of your other community building efforts including your social media activities, email marketing, PR (press releases and other media engaging opportunities), forums, downloads, YouTube videos, etc.

While a traditional B2B business community might flourish on LinkedIn or Twitter, or a large consumer brand might find a perfect home on Facebook, organisations targeting millennials may find greater success on Instagram or Snapchat. Because each social network has its own particular nuances, this might present a significant learning curve for community managers.

IMPORTANT: While social media should be a vital component of your community activity, if you want to see real success you must drive members back to an environment that you control. This could be your blog or a forum/discussion group. You do not truly own a relationship when it takes place on a third party site.

Your First Steps towards Building Cohesive Community

You may already have some of the mechanisms in place to bring your community together. If you blog, post to social media, contribute to forums or publish regular email newsletters you will already be familiar with the various routes to market. The next step is to take all of these efforts out of their individual silos and co-ordinate a more cohesive strategy. This may mean investing in additional headcount to support the role of community leader/manager and admins.

While various departments can and will add value to your community, PRs' expertise in both content and relations make them the best candidates to take overall responsibility for output. This should not be managed in a draconian fashion (a PR police state does not create the right kind of environment for a thriving community), but rather via a carefully produced set of rules.

In Conclusion

Essentially every business has access to the tools with the potential to turn them into a community-based publisher. The demand for fresh content and high community standards will continue to create work for busy PR departments and agencies (both through the creation and steering of content). As PR and marketing assumes greater control of a greater share of content output, it should become easier to gauge the impact on the bottom line.

The media landscape is changing and brand-led community initiatives are taking an ever-increasing share of the market. With costs of entry low, small or previously unknown brands have the potential to make splash, while established organisations can get their stakeholders working on their behalf to offer more value for a greater return on investment than ever before. The power of a community has the potential to transform any organisation, and PR should be the main agent of that change.
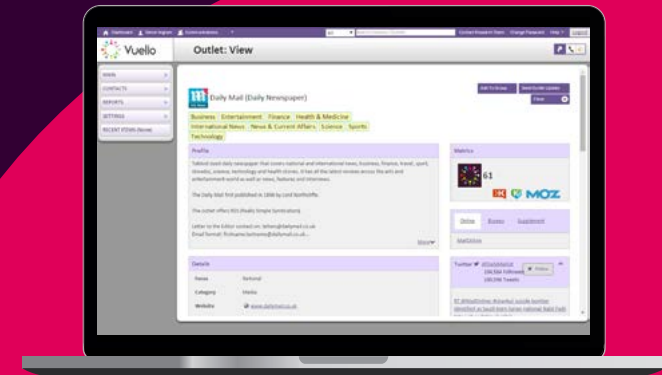
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