Building Brand Communities

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Introduction

This paper will explore the characteristics of “brand communities” — products and services that inspire strong loyalty, powerful emotional responses and a sense of community among customers. In recent years, we have seen the importance of branding as a strategy for business growth and development. Much has been written and researched on the concept of branding and its practical application for business success. Brands that are particularly successful seem to enjoy a strong, loyal base of customers that interact with one another and the company. These active groups have become known as brand communities.

Research to define and better understand brand communities has begun. In particular, the seminal work of Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) stands out in the field. This paper will examine the relevant research to date along with highlighting some current examples of brand communities in action. The primary goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of brand communities and the strategies used to construct them. The key objectives for the paper include:

- Define the concept of brand community and provide examples.
- Articulate the characteristics of a brand community.
- Explore the theoretical foundations that inform community development.
- Identify common characteristics and strategies among the target companies that have built strong brand communities.
- Suggest strategies for creating brand communities.

We should begin with a review of branding. What is a brand? How is it different from a product? A brand is a “collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer.” (Kitchen & Schultz, 2001). It is a promise or covenant between the company and the consumer that a certain experience or set of benefits will follow when the brand is used. While the product is a tangible thing, the brand represents a promise for a larger experience. It represents an expectation of performance often built on its reputation. Here are some well-known examples of brand promises:

- BMW - the ultimate driving experience
• Volvo - safety
• FedEx - overnight delivery
• Hewlett-Packard - innovation
• Wal-Mart - lower prices

Philip Kotler (1999) defines brand as a value proposition. These are the specific benefits associated with experiencing the brand and the positioning of the brand relative to the overall market and competitors. The value proposition at Wal-Mart is “more for less.” They offer the same, name brand products for lower prices than their competitors. The value for consumers, especially those on a tight budget, is clear. This strategy also serves to differentiate Wal-Mart from K-Mart, Sears and other major competitors.

Each brand has a specific identity. Consumers can associate with and share in this identity by experiencing the brand. Brands can ultimately lend consumers a certain identity (Travis, 2000). A BMW automobile confers upon its driver a sense of prestige and performance that signals he/she is a successful person. In this sense, the concept of the brand goes beyond features and benefits reaching a deeper level of psychological connection and integration with consumers. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is often referenced to explain that the highest need for “self-actualization” is the underlying concept that attracts individuals to specific brands. There is an implicit promise of sharing in the identity created by the brand.

This congruence of brand and personal identity is behind much of the advertising we see today. Think of the television commercials for beer showing attractive men and scantily clad women. These ads appeal to the adolescent male fantasies of the ideal lifestyle. There is an unspoken promise that drinking a particular brand of beer will somehow lead the consumer to the promised land of perpetual spring break.

Brand Community Definitions

What then is a brand community? According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), a brand community is described as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.” The authors
postulate three key characteristics of a brand community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility.

Shared consciousness is an intrinsic connection among members and a collective sense of difference from outsiders. Shared rituals and traditions serve to perpetuate the shared history of the community e.g. Saab owners who honk and wave when meeting other owners on the road. Moral responsibility is a sense of duty and obligation to the entire community and its members. This may include recruitment of new members, assisting members with training or solving problems. As an example, Macintosh user-group members offer troubleshooting advice and repair techniques to each other.

Marc Resnick (2001) defines community as “an opportunity for customers to interact with each other to achieve their needs.” Although the communities are usually maintained by customers, they can be subtly encouraged and sponsored by companies. The two major company goals for these communities are building brand image and maximizing contact with customers. Communities also provide “non-intrusive touch points through which information about customer demographics, preferences, and lifestyles can be directly observed.” (p. 2)

Kanamori and Kimura (2003) have studied net communities and their role in brand marketing. They identified the following characteristics of net communities:

- Asynchronous language communication.
- Anonymity among members.
- Emphasis on comments stemming from consumer experiences.
- Sense of volunteerism to help members in need.
- Autonomous interaction among members with respect to consumption of goods.

Kanamori and Kimura define three general types of net communities based on their purpose:

- Information access - Accessed for the purpose of gathering information.
- Consummatory - Facilitate exchanges among community members.
- Creative - Accessed to create value such as new products and ideas.
They go on to further categorize two themes among net communities. The category community is formed around specific lifestyle themes and product categories. The brand community adopts a specific brand as its theme with membership drawn mainly from supporters of the brand.

Jim McAlexander (2002) and fellow researchers have conducted studies of brand loyalty to Harley-Davidson and Jeep. Their research focuses on “brandfests” such as annual off-road rallies for Jeep owners and mass rides for Harley enthusiasts. They expand the concept of a brand community to include the fabric of relationships between customers and the product, the company, and fellow customers. By conducting ethnographic fieldwork in which they actively experienced a “Camp Jeep” brandfest, the authors gained key insights:

• Brandfests allow high-quality interaction among normally disparate members of a brand community.
• The benefits of socialization were symbiotic for owners and marketers.
• Marketers contribute to community building by creating the context for interaction and may also play an active role in establishing some of the shared rituals.

Their research illustrates the important role of facilitating shared customer experiences in building a community. The virtual ties of an online, asynchronous community become interpersonal ties and relationships formed through shared experience. Members often become brand missionaries and enthusiastic supporters as a result of their experience. Ultimately, a company can build and sustain its competitive advantage on the basis of ownership experience rather than a traditional features and benefits strategy of product differentiation.

Brand communities may also be related to other types of informal groups. The notion of community has been used to describe other aggregations formed on the basis of common interest. For example, the concept of “communities of practice” has been articulated and studied by Wegner (1998). For Wenger, engagement in a common social practice is a foundational condition for how we learn and form our identities. While his primary application is a social theory of learning, we can observe elements of a shared practice within brand communities.
Communities of interest are looser associations of people who share a common interest such as a hobby or cause, e.g., scrap booking, environmentalism. In this type of community, there is less formal structure, leadership, and face-to-face interaction among members. Communities of interest are often formed on the Internet, and this has led to the use of another term, the “virtual community,” to describe them. A virtual community may have even fewer boundaries and frameworks, existing as a temporal mix of web surfers who visit or interact with each other. Virtual communities may address common interests or simply collect opinions on issues that members feel connected to.

These other models of community will be exhibited when we look at some current examples of brand communities.

Theory

Theories from the fields of communication, sociology, and psychology can be useful in understanding how brand communities form and function.

Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification (Burke, 1969) is a foundational element for brand communities. Burke wrote that communication increases identification between people, leading to shared meaning. He categorized three sources of this identification:

- **Material identification** - resulting from owning the same goods, e.g., cars, clothes, computers.
- **Idealistic identification** - Results from shared attitudes, ideas, and values, e.g., same church, political party, special interest group.
- **Formal identification** - results from an organized event, e.g., attending the same university.

This identification can function in three ways. There may be a conscious effort to connect by means of similar interests — referred to as the common ground technique. Identification can be on the basis of antithesis where individuals are united against a common enemy. Finally, there is the unconscious level where identification may occur below the surface. For example, the use of a pronoun such as “we” creates subliminal connection among audience members.
The symbolic convergence theory, developed by Ernest Bormann, John Cragan and Donald Shields (Littlejohn, 2002) is another useful reference point. It posits that a person's images of reality are guided by stories reflecting how things are believed to be. The central concept is one of fantasy themes consisting of characters, plot lines, scenes and sanctioning agents. These are stories that support a larger rhetorical vision. Some current examples might include corporate war stories, shared experiences, and group achievements. As fantasy themes are shared, the larger rhetorical vision is shaped and convergence occurs. Rhetorical visions build and maintain shared consciousness.

Both Burke and Bormann belong to the symbolic interactionist school of social theory. The core belief here is that man creates his own meaning through interaction and sharing of experiences. We can see a direct link to the concept of brand community in which members get meaning, interact with one another, and build a portion of their identities with other members around the common themes afforded by brand experiences. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective we can see brand communities as a source of meaning and identity for people — not simply an opportunity to share common interests.

The concept of community itself is one of the popular themes in modern sociology. The traditional foundations for defining community consisted of geographic proximity, ethnicity, social class or political distinctions. Anthony Cohen (1985) offers an important and unique insight by defining community on the basis of shared meaning. For Cohen, it is shared meaning and not geography or other structural elements that creates a community.

In a general sense, community represents a group of people who have something in common with one another that differentiates them from other groups. It is the boundaries that ultimately define the community and for Cohen, the boundaries are created symbolically in the minds of the community members. Community is symbolically constructed and based on a system of values, norms and moral codes. The symbols of a community are seen as mental constructs that provide people with the necessary means to formulate their own meaning. Rituals confirm and strengthen social identity and sense of belonging.
For Cohen, a community ultimately exists in the minds of its members. It can be transformed, preserved or even deserted. Although it has a shared history, it is malleable and can mean different things to its members. He sees an intimate relationship between community and identity with the highly symbolized community providing a sense of identity to its members. Community becomes a repository of meaning and source of identity.

Daniel Boorstin (1974) was perhaps the earliest commentator on communities based on consumption which he characterizes as "invisible new communities ... created and preserved by how and what men consumed." Boorstin postulated that the definition of a community was shifting away from a geographic and interpersonal collective to a loose gathering based on consumption of brands in the consumer society that followed the industrial revolution.

Michel Maffesoli (1996) contends that mass culture has disintegrated and that social relationships are conducted through fragmented tribal groupings. He believes that we live in the time of the tribes. These tribes are based on shared lifestyles, values and interests. Examples include sports clubs, political parties, hobby groups and single-issue pressure groups.

The tribes are loosely organized but Maffesoli contends they exert a powerful sense of integration and inclusion among their members. Group solidarity is maintained through shared rituals, shared values and similar styles of dress. These tribes are organized around the popular phrases, brands and sound bites of consumer culture. Maffesoli contends that beyond mere fashion fads, new forms of social collectivity are taking root, which challenge our established modes of politics and tradition. These tribes formulate what Maffesoli calls “lifestyle cultures.”

A common theme among all of these theories is the social construction of reality. Brands reach out to consumers in an attempt to become part of their lifestyles. Customers perceive brands as a promise for a specific experience. This experience is often shared socially with others leading to the formation of a community and a shared sense of identity.
Brand Community Examples

Porsche Owners Club

Porsche is a legendary manufacturer of sports cars with a rich tradition of racing and high performance. The company was formed just after World War II by the Porsche family and is one of the few remaining privately owned automobile manufacturers.

The club offers its members several events designed to help them enjoy their sports cars and experience their full capabilities. These include:

- Autocross - An autocross is a closed-course driving event where the objective is to complete the course in a safe manner in the shortest amount of time possible.
Driver Education - Many PCA Regions offer driver education programs that allow members to learn how to drive their cars in a variety of circumstances. Emphasis is placed on improving safety skills as well as high-performance driving.

Rallies - The objective of a rally is to follow a course, usually on public roads, to the precise detail specified in the rules.

Concours - A concours is a judged event where cars are prepared to "as delivered" condition. Points are deducted from a maximum possible value based on condition and cleanliness.

Porsche Parade - a weeklong gathering of people and Porsches from all over the world. It is held in a different location each year.

The author was an active club member for eight years and has observed the culture and characteristics of the community firsthand. Porsche community characteristics include exclusivity, tradition, prestige, and the mystique of owning a legendary sports car. Club members tend to be successful, performance-oriented, independent and passionate about their vehicles. I can recall vigorous debates about the correct method of washing a Porsche — from the top down or the bottom up!

Monthly dinner meetings and newsletters are used to keep members informed and build the community. Members also receive a national magazine and occasionally visit other regional clubs. Internet usage was not widespread during the time I was a member but e-mail is now used to transmit club information and to connect members. There is still an important social element to the club, however, with meetings and track events as the primary elements in building community.

The Porsche Club community also defined itself by competition with its archrival — the Corvette Club. Autocross and track competitions with Corvette owners were held each year and this friendly rival contributed to the strong identity of the club and its members. Cohen’s concept of boundaries contributing to community development was clearly illustrated here as Porsche members defined themselves at least partly by what they were not — Corvette owners.
Macintosh User Groups

Mountains of books and articles have been written on the Apple brand and its loyal acolytes. The focus of this investigation will be strictly the Macintosh User Groups (MUGS). These groups consist of Apple computer users dedicated to the Macintosh platform, Apple computers, software and related technology. There is literally a plethora of local chapters organized around the world. The groups are independently operated and have no formal connection to the company.

What is remarkable is the variety of local clubs and the specialization into sub-communities that combine other brands or key characteristics. Some of these include:

- **IMUG** - International users group for multilingual users and designers.
- **CMUG** - Christian Macintosh computing. Theological connections as well as the typical technical support.
- **I/O MUG** - An Internet-only users group dedicated to enhancing the use of Macintosh computer systems by sharing information, support and insights with Macintosh computer users throughout the global community.
• NHMUG - NASA headquarters, Macintosh support group whose primary purpose is to help the Macintosh user community within NASA know about new developments in Mac technology, and how the Mac can best be applied to the business of NASA.

Each local club offers a range of support services to its members including training sessions, product reviews and technical support. The support is often provided free of charge by other members. Clubs elect officers and hold regular meetings and swap meets. Many publish newsletters or maintain professional web sites. Each club is an independent entity and most are established as nonprofit support groups.

The characteristics of this community include independence, individualism and a strong loyalty to the Apple brand. While they are loyal to the Macintosh platform, members are not afraid to criticize the company and look to each other for solutions and problem solving. The community members have a wide range of computing ability but most are reasonably proficient and use the technology in their daily lives.

Opposition to the hegemony of the Wintel platform also unites this community. There is a good deal of passionate and irrational Microsoft bashing and loyalty to Apple. Conspiracy theories featuring Bill Gates and his evil empire circulate among the chat rooms. Columnists who write articles unfavorable to Apple have been known to receive a flood of angry e-mail messages from Apple supporters. We can see a proud, underdog mentality and a clear demarcation of community in these actions.

Members of the MUG stay connected with monthly meetings and e-mail lists. Many regional groups also maintain their own web sites. The example shown here from the Vancouver group demonstrates a high level of technical sophistication that is fairly common among the regions. Although the web sites serve as community hubs, most clubs continue to hold traditional, monthly meetings to enhance social connections and networking. The MUG is truly a grassroots organization bound by loyalty to the Apple brand and it serves as an archetype for successful brand communities.
The Burning Man Project

The Burning Man Project is an annual experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance. Burning Man is held in the Black Rock Desert outside of Reno, Nevada. Each year, a theme is chosen for featured works of art and performance. Past themes have included Fertility, Time, Hell, Outer Space, The Body and The Floating World. This year’s theme is Beyond Belief.

The Burning Man project has grown from a small group of people gathering spontaneously to a community of over 25,000 people. The event has been held annually for one week around the Labor Day holiday since 1986. Each year a huge sculpture of a man is erected, often with elaborate detail and surrounding structures. On the seventh and final night of the event, the man is burned.

The impact of the Burning Man experience has been so profound that a culture has formed around it. This culture pushes the limits of Burning Man and has led to people banding together nationwide and putting on their own events to try and rekindle the feeling of being part of this community. Additionally, Burning Man has over a
thousand volunteers who work before, during and after the event and some who work year-round to make the event a reality.

The characteristics of the Burning Man community include individuality, creativity, artistic expression and irreverence. The community is very focused on radical self-expression, reliance on each other and environmental sensitivity. Their goal for each event is to leave no trace behind in the desert.

While there is no specific nemesis that unites this group, they do stand as an alternative to mainstream American culture. In a country where we take all of the fundamentals and comforts of life for granted, Burning Man members strive to survive in harsh desert conditions and reconnect with the experience of banding together in tribes to coexist with nature. In a culture where we acquire our icons from the mass media, the effigy of the burning man and the individual art displays and installations all remind us that creativity originates in the human spirit.

Burning Man is a uniquely temporal community, one that unites for a week each year and then disbands. Membership in the community is open to anyone who buys a ticket and shows up, but many among the 25,000 attendees come back each year and maintain contact with the event through the web site or a regional group. This transient membership base is atypical for brand communities and illustrates a looser, more dynamic structure than the Porsche and Macintosh communities.

Another distinction of this community is that it is not linked to a traditional corporate brand. Although a legal structure has been formed and the organization does engage in some commercial ventures, it is not a traditional business entity. Here, the brand emerges from the founder, Larry Harvey, and the loyal members. The brand is built from shared values and the experience of a tribal community, celebrating self-reliance and self-expression. In this sense, Burning Man is a brand community built around the experience of belonging to a unique, artistic group. It is the prototypical manifestation of Maffesoli ‘s (1996) concept of tribes — new forms of social collectivity that challenge our traditional notions of community.
The X-Phile community consists of fans of the now-defunct television program, “The X-Files.” This web site example is a fan club community offering a newsletter, photos, chat room and message board. It also offers branded merchandise, scripts and other X-File memorabilia for sale. In searching the web one is struck by the huge number of sites devoted to the X-phil community. It is an international phenomenon with 368 group listings on Yahoo alone. Some of the sites I previewed include:

• Collectible card game clubs - for players of a card game associated with the television show.
• FAQ sites
• Quote sites, review sites, joke sites, multimedia archive sites.
• Fanzines
• Message boards

The X-Phile community can be characterized as science-fiction enthusiasts, interested in paranormal events and specific fans of David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. In fact, allegiance to the stars appears to be as strong as to the program itself. Clearly, many members identify with the protagonists. Members exhibit a general interest in other paranormal television programs and movies, often commenting on issues such as extra-terrestrial visitors, UFO sightings and government conspiracies.
If there is a counter-point to this community it might be the rational view of the world. X-ophile members are more likely to believe in the existence of an alternate reality that operates behind the façade of the traditional world, unseen by those who are not attuned. Conspiracies, alien abduction and parapsychological phenomenon are the hallmarks of this worldview, one that is reinforced by the entertainment industry.

While it is tempting to dismiss the X-ophile community as simply a virtual fan club, I think there are shared values among many of the members and a sense of belonging that emerges in the chat rooms and discussion boards that keep the community alive. The X-phi les are a good example of Kanamori and Kimura’s (2003) asynchronous, relatively anonymous net communities.

**Classification**

By comparing these four examples of brand communities, we can begin to develop a taxonomy. The first classification is whether the communication process is primarily face-to-face or virtual. While all communities may have elements of both methods, there is usually one dominant technology used by members. The second classification deals with the depth of interest – the ties that bind members together. We might classify these as either communities of practice or interest.

**Fig. 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Virtual /FTF</th>
<th>Practice/Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Porsche Owners Club</td>
<td>FTF – members meet in regional clubs and participate in driver education and social events.</td>
<td>Interest – the common denominator among members is ownership of the same vehicle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macintosh User’s Group</td>
<td>FTF – members meet regularly in regional groups.</td>
<td>Practice – members typically use Apple technology in their professions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning Man Project</td>
<td>FTF – Community is focused around the annual event in the desert.</td>
<td>Interest – shared interests include conceptual art, ecology and self-reliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-Philes</td>
<td>Virtual – Primary contact is via the Internet. Operates like a virtual fan club.</td>
<td>Interest – science-fiction loving aficionados of the television program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brand Community Characteristics

Niche Brands

Most are niche companies rather than mass-market leaders, e.g. Apple vs. Microsoft, Vans vs. Nike, Porsche vs. BMW. People have a tendency to support an underdog struggling against corporate giants. It is less common to see people associate with market leaders. I have not come across independent Toyota clubs with owners full of messianic zeal although the company clearly has a very large and committed customer base. You can be admired and successful without having a sense of community but the support of a community can be a valuable asset for small organizations struggling to establish themselves and survive. By staking out a specific niche, the process of identification with consumers is made easier. Van’s is a good example since their market niche is the skateboard community. By targeting a specific demographic group, they are essentially looking to create a brand community as their primary marketing strategy.

Visible Leaders

Company founders are identified and known and are often an important part of the organization as opposed to corporate officers and directors. There is usually a personal sense of connection to the company founders. Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines was the chief prankster and a visible symbol of the irreverent attitude that made Southwest a more enjoyable experience for customers. He focused on gaining employee commitment to his vision of customer service. Today, the profitability of Southwest is equivalent to the total profits earned in the airline industry. Steve Jobs is the chief evangelist for Apple and typically announces all of Apple’s major new products at meetings that approach the level of rock concerts. Larry Harvey is the founder of the Burning Man Project and continues to direct the annual events. He also publishes articles in the newsletter, speaks at various forums and lectures on cyber culture. Since a community relies on personal connections and sense of identification with the brand, this is enhanced when there is a chief personality representing the organization.
Humble Roots

Most started as small ventures or home businesses rather than well-financed corporate ventures. Apple Computer got started in Steve Jobs’ garage. The Burning Man festival began in 1986 with about one hundred people on a beach outside San Francisco. This is a far cry from the 25,000 people who now congregate in a temporary city outside Reno, Nevada each year. While many large corporations do start as small ventures there seems to be a stronger connection to the early days of the company within the brand communities. This may be due to the emphasis on mythology and history that binds the community together.

Product Focus

The focus of a brand community is typically on a specific product or service rather than a conglomeration of brands and business units. I know of no brand community associated with a multinational conglomerate such as General Electric or Panasonic. The brand is really the essential ingredient in stimulating the development of a community. The brand can be a specific product or can represent the entire company. In Apple’s case there is a common denominator of computing that underlies all of its hardware and software products. The company is perceived as a provider of tools to enhance the computing experience, especially in the creative arts. Having a strong brand is an essential foundation for the construction of a brand community. The brand unites members who may otherwise have very different interests and backgrounds. Some common demographics may be apparent such as income levels among Porsche owners, and age among youth-oriented brands like Vans, but it is the brand experience that ultimately brings them together.

Loyal Customers

One question that arises here is what comes first, the brand or the community? There are examples of companies attracting a strong following in their nascent periods. The makers of Endnote, a popular footnote software program had a loyal following within the academic community, spread mainly by word-of-mouth, prior to releasing the product commercially. It does not seem to be necessary to build a significant brand in
the market place in order to attract a community of consumers. If the promise of the brand is attractive and if it delivers on this promise to the early adopters, community development may follow. What is essential is having a loyal customer base that identifies with the company or brand and cares about its well being.

**Evangelism**

Above and beyond loyal customers it is also necessary to have evangelists — enthusiastic customers who voluntarily spread the message and become unofficial and unpaid brand champions within their local sphere of influence. Since a key feature of the brand community is independent structure, it relies on local leadership to organize, operate and attract new members. The role of the community leaders is critical to the entire process. So how does an evangelist differ from a loyal customer? A customer consumes the product or service and may also recommend it to friends. An evangelist *actively* seeks to convert new users and to spread the message. The evangelist has a strong identification with the brand and sees it fulfilling a major need in her life. This propels the evangelist to carry the message to others and to actively seek out or initiate a community. The evangelist clearly associates part of her identity with the brand and looks to develop it through social interaction with other converts.

**Independence**

Brand communities are not built or managed by corporations. They are autonomous and often loosely structured. Leadership is provided by unofficial brand champions and evangelists rather than corporate staff. Although support may come from the corporation, the most effective brand communities operate on their own. This sense of independence is important in many situations to reinforce the voluntary nature of the community and to separate it from the traditional marketing programs used by organizations. This is an important distinction in distinguishing a brand community from corporate marketing activities. Although companies often try to construct their own communities in order to relate directly to customers, a true sense of community with the requisite levels of commitment and identification begins with a groundswell of independent activity.
Communications Networks

A strong communications network is commonly found in the brand community. Communities use websites, newsletters, e-mail and meetings to keep communication strong among members. Electronic communication is becoming the key ingredient in building the networks. For global communities and those that are not geographic specific, this is an essential ingredient. Message boards allow members to share ideas and build online relationships with each other. The newsletters keep members informed about community events. Nowhere is this seen more dramatically than with Apple. There are literally hundreds of independent sites devoted to various aspects of the Apple experience including the users groups themselves, technical support, product rumors, collectibles, etc. It would be a project in itself to just categorize the many sites supporting the brand communities.

The companies themselves also feature strong communications networks. Some will offer links to the independent community sites. It seems that the companies in question understand the nature of their customer support and actively seek to build strong relationships with their customers and the general public. This is not an essential ingredient as we see with the X-Phile brand community. The show is defunct and no official marketing efforts continue, but the independent sites continue to operate. In general, however, the organization cultivates dialogue, interaction and a deeper relationship with its clients.

Consistent Brand Messages

Consistent marketing communications reflect the characteristics of the community, i.e. Apple messages such as “think different” reinforce the individuality of its community members. Advertising and public relations support and enhance the community message lending a sense of identity to the members. While the brand building may be a cornerstone of the community, there are occasions when the community precedes brand development. For example, a group of hip, Manhattan club people started wearing Hush Puppy shoes at a time when sales of the brand were absolutely moribund. Spread by word of mouth, the brand soon had a loyal following within the fashion community and eventually became a mainstream, retail success story.
(Gladwell, 2000). In this example the brand community revived and totally repositioned the brand, effectively creating the message for the company.

**Cool Factor**

The cool factor — the sense that the brand experience is cool, different from the mainstream and somewhat exclusive is also a common characteristic. The cool factor for Apple is stylish design and an integrated digital computing experience that allows neophytes to create sophisticated text, image and video output without being graphic artists. For Harley-Davidson owners, the cool factor is the outlaw image portrayed by the motorcycles. We are conditioned by countless Hollywood westerns to think the outlaw is more interesting and cool than the town sheriff. Hush Puppies became cool when top fashion designers started wearing them. Creating a temporary community of 25,000 eccentric and artistic people in the middle of the Nevada desert is definitely a cool event. Mulder and Sculley deal with paranormal events and battle extraterrestrials each week — far cooler than the standard FBI cases reported on the evening news.

**Social Interaction**

Events such as brandfests and club meetings provide for rich face-to-face experiences and connect community members with each other and with company officials. The Porsche Club rallies and driving events bring owners together to experience the performance capabilities of their vehicles in a safe setting. Macworld conventions in New York and San Francisco combine training programs and product exhibitions with the excitement of a rock concert as innovative new products are introduced. Although global communities can exist exclusively online, it seems that the stronger communities benefit from traditional social interaction among members.

**Strategies to Build Brand Communities**

**Product Differentiation**

Differentiate your product or service. Customers don’t get passionate about “me too” products. There are different strategies to use in differentiating your brand. Three general options are focusing on product leadership, customer intimacy or operational
efficiency (Treacy, 1995). Low cost providers such as Wal-Mart and Dell typically innovate and provide cost-effective manufacturing and distribution solutions. Product leaders like Merck design unique and proprietary drugs to cure specific diseases and medical conditions. Other companies such as Nordstrom’s focus on customer intimacy — building a close relationship with customers and providing outstanding levels of service that exceed expectations. Communities can aggregate around any of these three models. The important thing is to differentiate and create a unique identity.

**Brand Identity**

This unique identity becomes the foundation for the brand. Developing a strong brand is a key strategy for attracting a community. The focus of the brand must be articulated and the customer experience needs to be carefully designed and maintained. “All the brand’s energy and resources must be concentrated on and committed to building a reputation in one narrow brand, and one narrow brand only” (Travis, 2000).

**Target Market**

Define your target market — the more narrow and focused your definition, the more likely you are to connect. Ethnographic research will reveal needs and preferences. If you can describe your ideal customers completely and develop a strategy to identify and reach them, you are far more likely to attract and stimulate a brand community. Many brands fail simply because they do not resonate with their customers. Although research is not a panacea in all cases, you will increase your chances of success if you start by understanding the people you are trying to reach.

**Opinion Leaders**

Cultivate influential opinion leaders, a.k.a. early adopters, technical experts, leading academics, etc. These are people who can influence others to experience your brand. Good word-of-mouth is a great way to spread your message and provide the seeds for a brand community. You may find these people in universities, media outlets, technical organizations, or on the Internet in chat rooms, on bulletin boards and in communities of practice. Gladwell (2000) defines two types of influential people — mavens and connectors. Mavens are collectors of information who discover products
and services and then recommend them to friends, starting a word-of-mouth communication program. Connectors are people with a broad range of friends and a wide, social circle. They disseminate the positive buzz about a brand. Opinion leaders can develop into evangelists, providing effective sales and marketing results, especially for young companies trying to get established.

**Brand Experiences**

Create brand experiences — find ways for your customers to have a rich, hands on experience with your brand. Jeep owners go to annual “Camp Jeep” events in which they learn off-road driving skills and connect with other owners. The Saturn division of General Motors conducts a “Saturn Homecoming” event in Tennessee, inviting Saturn owners from all over the country to attend. Medical device manufacturers often conduct training and educational events that allow clinicians to learn new techniques, network with teaching professionals and experts, and earn continuing education credits.

**Customer Dialogue**

Establish two-way communication. Use focus groups, moderated chats, brand events and your web site to maintain an open dialogue with your customers. This will allow you to tailor your product and your marketing message to better meet their needs. Just as software companies use public beta versions to gain valuable feedback, online forums may serve as nascent communities. The official web site can often supply inspiration for community members to meet, interact, and cooperate. This serves as a jumping off point for the establishment of private sites and the development of brand communities. By providing electronic links between the organization and its customers, the development of online community is facilitated and encouraged.

**Design Aesthetic**

Focus on design to further distinguish your product. Good design, whether it’s applied to brands, corporate identity or marketing communications, needs to be professional and consistent. The cool factor is more likely to increase when a lot of thought is put into the design element. Customers respond very favorably to a brand that exudes personality.
Corporate Personality

Put a corporate personality front and center — people relate to each other better than to a faceless, corporate bureaucracy. Put a spokesperson out in front of your company who can create relationships with customers and represent the lifestyle or benefits you are trying to provide. The CEO should serve as the brand champion, the articulate and passionate spokesperson for all the benefits associated with the brand and the organization. Steve Jobs of Apple and Carly Fiorina of Hewlett-Packard are excellent examples of corporate CEO’s who represent and communicate their brand experiences. A spokesperson lends personality to the brand.

Underdog Mentality

Play the underdog — everyone loves the underdog and you are more likely to attract a following if you are perceived as a small fish battling the big, corporate whale. This is a great strategy for small companies and new ventures. It fits well with the goal of controlling a niche market. If you are a brand manager for IBM, disregard this option but follow the rest.

Caveat Emptor

Finally, recognize that brand communities are not essential for business success. Wal-Mart and Dell built their empires on efficient distribution systems and low prices. Both became the largest players in their respective industries. No one gets passionate about joining a Wal-Mart brand community but they still have millions of loyal customers. No one attends a Dell product rollout with messianic zeal but they are the largest manufacturer of computers with a market share that dwarfs Apple’s. Ask yourself if the brand community is a viable and effective component for building your brand. If it’s not important, focus on other strategies.
References


