

# Trying to build an online community? Don't get tangled in a Web

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MARCH 3, 2008

Few brands have the enviable ability to naturally attract an online community. The lucky ones - sports sites like NHL, NFL or NBA teams; media, music or gossip sites; or power brands like apple, adidas, or Harley-Davidson - have the ability to attract their customers and their target group by virtue of what they deliver. These brands inherently have content that people care about and are keen to discuss.

But, for most brands, standing out, attracting attention and getting people to spend significant online time with you is much harder work. Unless you have a brand logo that people care enough about to pay to wear, you have to deliver something different to create an online magnet that draws people in and connects them to your brand.

One approach that's making a real difference in engaging customers online is hosting conversations on topics that customers care passionately about. Figuring out how to do this right takes some effort, and getting it wrong can be costly. Online social media experts Alexandra Samuel and Rob Cottingham of socialsignal.com offer the following tips:

## **Build conversations around what your**

### **customer and potential customers have in common**

Your community needs to generate significant enthusiasm - and active contribution - if it's going to thrive. Focus on topics or questions that your customers are already talking about. If you don't know what your customers are talking about, use a blog search tool like Technorati to find people who have written about your brand, product or service and then browse through their blogs to identify the topics they care (and write) about most.

### **Leverage values and interests that resonate authentically with your brand**

Maybe most of your customers are young men, and maybe young men love talking about action movies. You could create a great site for uploading film clips and talking about movies - but if your product is deodorant, there's not a lot of resonance between the site concept and your brand. Ensure that it makes sense for your brand to be defining the space you are creating for your online community.

### **Offer something; content, tools, relationships**

With limited time, and limitless options, people will only visit your site if you have something that they value. Creating content that educates or entertains is the easiest place to start; but it has to make sense that your brand would naturally deliver it. Other options include offering useful tools (e.g. a fitness planner, retirement calculator or content organizer); or an ability to create conversations or relationships around something that is important to your customers (e.g.

environmental, community, cultural or social issues).

### **Brand lightly**

People will be much more likely to participate in a community that feels like an end in itself - or a way of accomplishing something that is personally or socially valuable - than one that feels like a massive ad.

Keep your company logos unobtrusive and skip the massive banner ads promoting your latest product or initiative.

### **Separate 'church and state'**

To be of real value to your customers your social community site should feel like a place where they can connect, create and collaborate. Your primary website is the space for your customers to find out about (and perhaps buy) your products and services. Nobody likes to share their feelings in the middle of a shopping mall, so keep your social community site separate from your primary website.

You can create links to your main site but don't push product in a place where you expect people to freely express themselves and make it clear that user profiles will not be used as sales tools.

### **Explain your motives**

Your site needs an "about" page that explains why you're sponsoring this site. Make it clear you share your customers' interest in the topic or conversation that is the site's focus.

Be honest about your hope that the site will reflect well on your brand and help you connect with customers. And be clear that you plan to keep sales and marketing efforts in one corner or on another site altogether.

The ultimate goal for brands has not changed. It's to create loyal and passionate customers.

By making the effort to engage customers on a deeper level however, and using your brand as a catalyst for community, you create not just loyal customers, but true brand advocates.

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