Community Building: Avoiding the Breakdowns and Reaping the Benefits

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ABSTRACT:

Today, more and more brands are turning to community-based marketing in an effort to be involved, inclusive and accountable to their brand communities, online communities and the physical communities they operate in. Yet, not all community-based marketing efforts are effective. Many times they waste valuable resources and miss opportunities. What makes some community-based marketing efforts complete home runs, and others complete failures? How can we avoid the breakdowns and ensure our initiatives have benefit for both the community and our brand? This article looks at the root causes of common failures in community-building efforts, and offers ideas for making your community-based marketing smarter, more effective and something your customers talk about long after the initiative ends.

Think back to a party you've thrown that was – let's just admit it – a total disappointment. It doesn't make sense, does it? You planned and organized for weeks, invited interesting people, and treated your friends to all types of delightful party fare and expensive bubbly. Yet, something was off. The energy was low, everyone left early, and no one even said "thank you" on the way out. You did everything by the book, yet it was a bust.

Fast forward to the opposite scenario: a last-minute gathering you threw together in an hour, served leftover chips and made everyone bring their own beer. Yet, your guests lingered for hours. No one wanted to leave. And everyone reminded you, weeks later, what about the wonderful time they had. You did nothing by the book, but this party was a hit. It leaves a hostess scratching her head.

In many ways, community-based marketing (the subtle style of marketing that focuses on building relationships with customers versus bumping up sales or traffic) is a lot like planning and hosting a social soiree. You offer up a gift, whether it's a contribution of money, time, resources or skills, in an attempt to bring people together, get dialogue flowing and form bonds. The goal is that we all end up closer, more connected and perhaps more loyal to one another. But, like parties, it's often perplexing why some community-building efforts work, while others fail miserably. Today,

customers are wearier than ever. They are bombarded by advertisements from every angle and, in response to the economic downturn, they're demanding more social accountability from companies. In response, brands are turning to community-based marketing in an effort to be involved, inclusive and accountable to their brand communities, online communities and the physical communities their business operates in. However not all community-based marketing efforts are effective. Many times, they waste valuable resources and miss opportunities. What makes some community-based marketing efforts complete home runs, and others complete failures? How can we avoid the breakdowns and ensure our initiatives are beneficial for both the community and our brand?

First, we need to establish the strategic reasons for community building. It's more than an investment in our public image. Tapping into the community can help us maximize our resources and discover innovative approaches to challenges. Second, we need to be on the lookout for the misguided community-building efforts that lead to inefficiencies and cost us money, resources and opportunities. Finally, we need to remember that successful community-based marketing is about facilitating something real – an authentic exchange, actual improvements, and the expression of values.

This article looks at the root causes of common failures you will see in community-building efforts and offers some ideas for making your community-based marketing smarter, more effective, and something your customers talk about long after the initiative ends.

The Do-it-All Hostess

A few months ago I was invited to brunch at an acquaintance's house, so I asked what I could bring. I offered to pick up some doughnuts or make my favorite fruit salad. "Oh don't worry about that, I'll take care of everything," the hostess said. I spent that entire brunch feeling uncomfortable about not contributing anything. Was she trying to show off? Did she suspect I was a lousy cook? Was my taste in pastries an affront to her palate? Rather than feeling at ease and enjoying her beautiful spread, I just felt paranoid.

Failing to include the community in community-building efforts is a lot like asking guests to just show up at your home and be mere recipients, rather than active participants. While the host (or community manager) thinks he's saving his guests trouble, he is really just missing out on an opportunity to make them feel included and have a stake in things. Additionally, he increases the probability that he is overlooking, misunderstanding or misinterpreting the needs and tastes of the community, because he is relying so heavily on his own.

This is precisely what Oprah did when she set out to create the exclusive Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, which opened to much fanfare in 2007. Like a generous hostess putting on a luxurious spread for only a handful of elite invitees, Oprah decided to build a $40-million private school in a town outside Johannesburg as a gift to a handful of local South African girls who showed promise.[i] From the very beginning, Oprah was driven by her vision, and failed to take into account input from those in the community. In a sense, she told them "don't worry, I'll take care of everything." Early on, local planners advised Oprah to keep the school's design very basic, since the local girls were accustomed to sleeping on dirt floors or sharing beds, and anything above that would be a luxury. Oprah rejected the local advice, saying, "I am creating everything in this school that I would have wanted for myself."[ii] She proceeded with custom embroidered sheets, terraces off each dorm, and spacious closets. "Every tile, door handle, and finish has been Oprah's particular choice," *Newsweek* reported.[iii]

While the school certainly had positive aspects to it, it missed the mark on several major things. For one, parents soon grew frustrated over school rules that only allowed them to visit their daughters to once a month.[iv] Additionally, the South African government had originally planned to play a role in building the school, but pulled out when the criticism started flying that the school was "too elitist and too lavish for a poor country."[v]

Oprah missed out on making the school resound with the community because she refused to consider their input and relied solely on her own preferences and instincts. In her attempts to give a generous gift, she would up with what the *Boston Globe* called "a prominent example of a project that fulfills an outsider's vision and not a community's."[vi]

Oprah's approach is one replicated over and over by companies in community-based marketing. To maintain control and ensure quality, companies take on the entire burden of community-based initiatives. Ironically, taking on too much causes a company to miss out on important contributions from the community that could strengthen their projects and make them resonate more. It also disincentives the community from helping the project succeed, because they don't have anything invested in it. Successful community building means allowing those in your community to contribute, rather than just receive.

Whatever You Want

Growing up, my mother let me decide what my birthday parties would be like. "Whatever you want to do" was her motto. It often resulted in creative but messy occasions, like that Hollywood party in which I put big holes in the family room ceiling to hang my backdrop. Looking back, I often wonder if it may have been wise for my mother to inject some friendly adult common sense.

As representatives of conscientious and forward-thinking companies, we don't want to come across as controlling, so we take the opposite approach: We

empower the community to take over and do whatever they want. Handing over the reigns seems like such a community-conscious thing to do, but it can actually lead to great inefficiencies. The community may not have the capacity to make the decisions facing them, which could result in an inferior outcome.

In 2005, welfare group SOS–Kinderdorf International approached Bangalore-based Mistry Architects to build villages for the survivors of the catastrophic 2004 tsunami in India.[vii] An innovative and award-winning firm dedicated to green practices,[viii] Mistry developed a plan to build eco-friendly homes with thatched roofs, which were cost-effective and had a positive long-term effect on the environment. But the villagers requested concrete roofs, which were more costly and not sustainable, so it would be easier to build on and expand their houses later on.[ix] Although Mistry stressed to them that alternative materials would be much better than concrete, they delivered the concrete roofs in the spirit of giving the locals what they wanted. Firm Founder Sharukh Mistry said "after much discussion, each one in the community came up to us and said, 'Can you please give us concrete houses?' So we have built concrete houses for the village."[x] While the villagers were happy, the costs were much higher and the impact to the environment was more.[xi] The community, which had no expertise in construction, sustainability, or budgeting, decided how the homes would be built, which resulted in numerous environmental tradeoffs.

We must include the community in the decision-making process. But if we want to generate the smartest solutions that benefit the greatest amount of people, we cannot transfer all responsibility to those who do not have the capacity to make those choices. Oprah's school shows us that we shouldn't dominate all the decisions, because that creates missed opportunities to build community. However, we don't want to put all the decision-making on the community or customers, because we run the risk of an inferior outcome and an unwise use of resources. Find the middle-of-the-road solution: use our expertise to help guide community-based initiatives and provide organization and structure, then invite the community to participate as partners in the decision-making process. Seeking out an equal partnership is what will create the best outcome.

The DNA Disconnect

Years ago, a no-nonsense, no-frills couple I knew had an incredibly over-the-top wedding. At the point when dozens of doves were released into the air, it hit me: This wedding made no sense at all. There was such disconnect between the couple's personalities and the style of the event. It was as if they had forgotten who they were. No one could argue it was a beautiful affair, but everything about it went against the couple's DNA. It was nice, but strange.

This brings us to a classic community-building pitfall: the DNA disconnect. When we invest in projects that are not relevant to our brand's DNA, no matter how great they are, we confuse our customers and find ourselves in the midst of serious inefficiencies.

In 2010, Pepsi diverted the $20 million it usually spent on Super Bowl advertising to a cause marketing campaign called Pepsi Refresh.[xii] Here's how it worked: the public submitted ideas for grants and voted on their favorite ideas. Then Pepsi awarded grants based on the voting results. While 80 million votes were cast in the first year of the campaign, something wasn't quite right: Pepsi sales dipped that year, and Pepsi dropped behind Coke and Diet Coke to the third-place soda.[xiii] Experts seemed to agree that the brand identity of Pepsi as a fun splurge (and perhaps an unhealthy one at that) was out of touch with its community-building efforts to do good for the planet. *The Atlantic* noted that "this was a soda company, not a charity. Pepsi's namesake product is brown carbonated sugar water, hardly the platform for an earnest call to local action."[xiv] *Forbes* noted there was a "cultural mismatch."[xv]

To be as effective as possible, we should focus on what our brands are good at and what our existing expertise can add to the community, rather than trying to build something new that requires a customer to make a large leap to connect the dots. It doesn't matter how great the initiative seems to be. If it doesn't connect seamlessly to our brand's DNA, we are confusing our customers and causing them to second-guess the authenticity of our efforts.

Joining versus Creating

Several years ago, I found myself living in a new city where I knew no one. I tried to build a social group for

myself, recruiting new friends one by one. It was very slow-going and not all that successful. Then, I decided to join a trivia team. Suddenly, I had an instant network of a dozen friends with common interests. Joining an existing group, rather than building my own from the ground up, turned out to be a quicker way to meet people in a new place.

Companies today are obsessed with creating new communities. But instead of building a community from scratch, we can and should be tapping into the efficiencies that come from joining an existing community and allowing our brand to add value to it.

The Flying Heritage Collection (FHC) is a nonprofit organization in Everett, Washington that showcases privately owned vintage aircraft from WWII.[xvi] The FHC hangar attracts war veterans, private collectors, historians, school groups, and the tourists visiting the Boeing Everett Factory right down the road.[xvii] Of all the organizations to have a dynamic social media presence, this probably is not one you would expect to find on the list. But each day, hundreds of fans comment, share, and "like" the content that appears on the FHC Facebook page.[xviii] When you look deeper into the interactions, you see that the page is less about FHC and more about existing communities of engineers, history buffs, collectors, restoration specialists, pilots, and war vets. A single photo post showing planes parked outside the FHC hangar often collects more than 100 comments, as fans use it as an opportunity to share their expertise and stories – everything from how planes were parked in times of war to paint job techniques.[xix] FHC has found a way to fit its brand into bigger conversations that are happening about aerospace, war and hobbies, while stealthily promoting its brand at the same time.

Creating a new community from the ground up can be a slow process and, many times, it's not very successful. Additionally, it requires an extensive use of resources. Tapping into an existing community allows you to make your brand relevant in that community and gives you instant access to conversations, relationships, and engagement already taking place. Look around for communities that your brand can join and enhance the dialogue going on right now.

Sharing the Burden

The age-old potluck is popular because it allows a party host to distribute costs and prep among all the guests. The format is pretty straightforward: Everyone contributes a dish, drinks, or perhaps the paper plates. The message is simple: We're sharing the burden of this party. When it comes to marketing, sharing the burden is key in effective community building. Tapping into community expertise is a way to shift some of the responsibility onto others, maximize our company's resources, and focus on the areas that we cannot outsource.

The Seattle Times, the largest newspaper in Washington State, began a community initiative in August 2009 that illustrates how effective this approach can be.[xx] Like most newspapers, it was struggling with declining ad revenues and had been forced to make significant staff cuts to stay afloat. As part of this, it closed its suburban bureaus in 2008 and stopped publishing its zone editions, focusing efforts on metro news.[xxi] Around that same time, newspaper staff noticed independent blogs popping up and covering niche neighborhood news. "Our feeling was we could compete either with these local neighborhood and specialty blogs, we could ignore them as a lot of newspapers are doing, or we could embrace them," said Executive Editor David Boardman.[xxii] Management decided to partner with a handful of neighborhood and niche blogs, promoting the bloggers' posts as headlines on SeattleTimes.com and linking out to the blogs. Bringing in local bloggers allowed the newspaper to direct readers to micro-local coverage, but at a much lower cost than hiring reporters. Additionally, the coverage was more robust because the bloggers lived in the neighborhoods and were intimately familiar with the issues. In a survey that determined how people were responding to the collaboration with the local blogs, eight in ten respondents said the partnership made it easier to connect with community news.[xxiii]

A company would be wise to look for areas where the community can come in and supplement its efforts, bring in their expertise and free you up to focus on other issues. Doing so will not only optimize the use of resources, but it will also connect the community to your brand and offer a stake in your company's success.

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Mutual Accountability

Surprise parties are, as their name implies, a little unexpected. The idea is to delightfully stun the recipient with a shindig. But, as I'm sure we can all recall, a surprise party is sometimes not all that delightful but rather embarrassing, awkward, or disappointing.

In most cases, we as marketers cannot afford to throw surprise parties. We can't afford to embark on community initiatives with the attitude of "surprise me." Instead, we need to be informed throughout the initiative, and we need to be honest to ourselves about whether or not it's working. This is why accountability is so crucial when it comes to community-based efforts. If we don't build accountability measures into our plans, we run the risk of never knowing whether our investments are effective or not. Demanding accountability, and giving it in return, also demonstrates that we care what results from the money and resources we put into our initiatives – and that's key.

In February 2012, Bill Gates called the United Nations food agencies "inefficient" and urged them to create a scorecard system that would rate states receiving aid in areas like seed development, farmer education, and increased food productivity.[xxiv] "Without the scorecard, donors tend to fund fad-oriented, short-order things," Gates said.[xxv] It's no surprise Gates was calling for increased metrics and accountability. His charitable organization, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, guards against surprises by integrating intense accountability built into its grant-making program. Why all the hard-nosed measurements and tracking? Isn't it a little much? The Foundation says it measures the results of its work in order "to improve what we do and, ultimately, to improve more people's lives."[xxxvi] Grantees are expected to track progress in order to hold the Foundation and recipients accountable for outcomes, understand why some efforts succeed and others fail, and share what works and why.[xxvii] In return, the Foundation announced two years ago that it intended to be more accountable to grantees as well, making transparency and responsiveness priorities.[xxviii] Not doing so in the past was "preventing our partners and us from having our maximum impact," said CEO Jeff Raikes.[xxix]

Without its accountability safeguards, the Foundation would merely be giving handouts and outcomes would often come as surprise. But since it requires grantees to track and report back consistently, the Foundation knows which initiatives have the largest impact and can better allocate its resources to areas that have demonstrated successes, or reshape efforts that are underperforming.

If we want to have the greatest impact on the greatest number of people, we must ask for accountability from the community. But it doesn't end there – we also need to be transparent and accountable in return. Two-way accountability allows our initiatives to be as effective as possible with the resources available. It also protects against surprises that can cost us in the long run.

Final Takeaways

Community engagement can be a powerful tool that can strengthen connections with your customers and enhance your brand's image. However, *why* we embark on a community engagement initiative is just as important as *how* we carry out the effort. As a marketer, your role is an essential one in making community engagement projects successful and meaningful. You are responsible for ensuring that efforts are created and executed with the community's best interests at heart and that they are in line with genuine values of your brand. Your philosophy and mindset matters when it comes to community engagement. An authentic initiative, rooted in a deep concern and a desire for real relationships with customers, has the potential to yield phenomenal outcomes for your company and for the community you serve, while a selfish initiative will always fall flat.

In her guidelines for being a good party host, etiquette authority Emily Post includes this simple rule: "Keep your guests feeling welcome." She continues, "Make sure guests are warmly greeted, then made to feel welcome throughout the party. Look after each guest as much as you can."[xxx] Effective community builders are those who, like good hosts, have others' interests in mind and do whatever they can to make sure it shows. ∎

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