

Build a Community of Customers

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Like it or not, we are living and operating in a web 2.0...going on 3.0 world. Consumers are more involved in our products, our services and even how we run our businesses. When the Internet first caught on for the design and furnishings industries, it was all nothing more than posting your brochure or catalog online and hoping customers would find your site, run to your store or studio and buy something.

Then, we moved into the Web 2.0 world where those same customers wanted interactivity to clinch a deal. They wanted to find you on-line, have you or someone who represents you to answer questions, send samples and otherwise be 'engaged' with your company.

Now, customers want to build a relationship with you, your business and your staff. Even that level of interactivity isn't enough for them anymore. Now, they want input into your business, your products and your services. They want to pay a compliment or complain about the service or the products, and usually voice more of the complaints than *atta boys*. If they have an idea about your company and how you can better meet their needs, they expect someone high up in the company to be available to hear their ideas and respond. Or better yet, to make that change immediately.

Some 30 years ago, *community* was the norm for businesses. Somehow, it all got lost in the self-service, fast-food, do-it-yourself world we've come to know. When you walked into a store, they knew you by name, you would have chats across the counter about your family and theirs, what the local high school teams were doing and how everything was going to Hell in a hand basket. Store owners and managers were on site and available, walking the floors and greeting customers. That was community then.

We now live in a technology-focused world. We're pushed into a hectic, rapid paced world with seemingly unlimited choices, all of which can be found on the Internet, from the comfort of your home at any time, day or night.

Community is as important now than it was then. Community is not that difficult to understand. It's nothing more than a unified group of individuals with common characteristics or interest. Most of those who form communities are at home sitting in front of their computer monitors, or walking around with their smart phones text messaging, on the Internet, or enjoying one of a rapidly growing number of *apps* designed to get customers in touch with companies hoping to sell them a product or service.

But, people themselves have not changed. In *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, we find that one of the basic needs of Man is to belong and be accepted as a part of a community. People put in situations of solitary confinement literally go crazy without the ability to interact with others. How can you capture this very basic and important need and use it to move your business forward? Create a community of customers and potential customers.

Although there are myriad ways to create community through the ever-increasing number of social media platforms available on the Internet, the focus of this program is on building local communities. If you own or operate a global business, an on-line community makes sense. But, for those who have a local or regional store or even several locations, building a local, face-to-face community is probably a better way to approach this concept.

There are a number of things to be gained from a local community of customers:

- Make your store, offices or showroom known by providing a central gathering place
- Create strong relationships with existing and potential customers
- Become a strong resource for your community
- Put a positive light on your brand
- Become a major player in your niche
- Reveal the people behind your company
- Market research by using community for polls, surveys, focus groups
- Uncover trends
- Opportunities to hear and respond to customers.

There are several very valuable intangibles to be gained from building a community of customers: trust, credibility and loyalty. Trust is critical to any business relationship. Customers need to know that you are honest and have their interests in mind when they deal with you. Getting to know community members personally goes a long way to building that trust as you get to know your community as people, not just customers or their next deal. People do business with other people that they know and trust; they don't do business with brick and mortar stores, companies or web sites.

Building relationships with trust ultimately creates customer loyalty, something that is in rather short supply in the current marketplace. Customers are confronted with an almost limitless number of options and choices today. If you don't gain their trust and loyalty, there is always another supplier they can move on to if they don't like the product, your service, the lead time or your pricing. Capturing that loyalty is crucial, and doing it through community building is essential to success.

Another, and possibly the most important of the intangible values that come from building community, is the ability to create brand ambassadors who will promote you and your business. Call them ambassadors, evangelists, advocates, champions or proponents, but their value is the same: they can open doors for you with their families, friends and colleagues. This is a group singing your praises from a personal, objective point of view to others who know and trust them and their opinions. What is the value of these champions? Priceless.

Next step: getting started. Deciding to develop a community of customers is nothing to be taken lightly or without significant planning and commitment. Take time to develop your strategy – what do you hope to accomplish through this community? Draw a picture of what you expect it to be. If you have mind-mapping software, use it to develop a visual image in your mind of how the community will look. Who is going to manage the community and what staff will need to be involved on a daily basis, a per-project or event basis? What can you do to attract customers into your community? How will you present your community to customers? What will attract them and what can you provide to keep them coming back.

Remember that community is not about sales – yet! A community built around sending out what amounts to advertising and sales pitches over and over again will gain you nothing and likely chase people away. The world of push marketing (print advertisements, direct mail) is gone and pull marketing has taken its place. Think of ways to ‘pull’ customers to you and your business through what your community offers them of value.

What is community about? Ideas are unlimited. Many of the on-line communities are built around a global brand or product. Retailers post special sales, discounts and coupons to attract customers back. As many of you are involved with more than one product or service, and probably don’t relate to the sales and discounts approach, might go back to that local mindset to find the common interest upon which to base your community.

Those located in or around the Napa Valley or other wine-making areas could use that as a theme for your community. Arrange winery tours or hold wine tasting events at your location. Have speakers come in and talk to members about wine. If you are located in an area where racing is a big thing, like North Carolina or Indianapolis, that could become the basis of your community. Hot issues like sustainability or aging in place could be your theme, as could causes like Habitat for Humanity or Feed the Children. Local sports teams might even attract a following from your industries. Talk with some of your long time customers and ask for input as to what might attract them and others to be a part of your community.

A restaurant in my area has done a great job of branding their company and building a community of customers. While it is a bit outside the world of design and furnishings, it serves as a good example of how a community can be built. The Winking Lizard Tavern is a family-oriented sports bar enterprise with locations in northern Ohio. Their logo is a cartoon lizard that is used throughout their restaurants, including in their menus and on placemats. Items in the menu are named based on the lizard theme. Each location has a large ‘terrarium’ that houses a live Iguana, which provides excitement and entertainment for families with children.

The company developed a community based on lovers of beer. Each year, they host a World Tour of Beer. Beer lovers can ‘join’ for a \$10 membership fee. They are provided with a list of beers from around the globe. During the year, they need to drink 100 different beers from the list to complete the ‘tour’. Those who complete the tour are recognized at a big party and presented with a customized jacket complete with the annual tour logo. A great handbook, worth the membership fee alone, provides members with some educational information on beer and beer drinking, plus it lists all the beers on the tour with descriptions of the country, the brewery, and details in what makes that beer special. A number of other community events are planned during

the year, ranging from golf outings, sports events and cookouts. Everything is focused on building and keeping the community active.

It doesn't take a genius to see how this community has been financially rewarding to this company. For each member, the company can potentially sell 100 beers during the year. And, who goes out to drink beer and doesn't order something to eat too? This program is very popular, and the members can be counted on to bring in new members to join the fun.

So, let's get back to the selling part of community building. When can you start to sell? While you may want to convert your efforts into sales as soon as possible, the short answer to the question is: you can start selling after you've spent time developing relationships with your community. When you've shown them you are interested in and value them as people, not sales receipts. When you've built relationships based on trust and credibility. When you've shown them you value them and their opinions and see them as an important part of your business success. When they know you care about them and their interests, not just about having another name in your database to push product and service at.

Temper your sales pitches on an 80/20 or 90/10 basis, with the higher number in the ratio representing 'community' and the lower number representing 'sales pitch' information. In essence, take a soft-sell approach, putting your efforts into building relationships with people who will come to know and trust you as a credible. This is what will create those valuable intangibles that will result in sales. It will also create a flock of ambassadors to share you story with others, bolstered by their own relationships and trust levels.

Develop community; customers are demanding it as the standard in today's business world. Create relationships that are long-lasting and loyal. Open your mind to input from customers as a part of doing business. Your efforts will pay off in a big way.