

QUIRK'S

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How online communities can tap a company's greatest unused resource: the consumer

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The explosion in social media has forced marketing and research professionals to figure out how to exploit the power of social media for insight advantage. How can we engage the stakeholder in meaningful, contextual dialogue? Blogs, reviews and wikis provide opinion, but we know little to nothing about the people creating such content. As a response to these challenges, many companies are turning to online research communities for a decision-making advantage - harnessing the power of communities but applying them to the research process.

A true community allows for meaningful dialogue between organization and participant via a member Web site; a participant management tool to build up member portraits; multiple dialogue channels (i.e., surveys, discussion forums, etc.); and member content creation. Examples include blogs, wikis, instant chat, personal/VIP areas and member-created polls. Importantly, there should be an explicit research objective communicated to the participant.

Best and most loyal

In terms of brand advocacy, the opportunity is there to identify the best and most loyal customers and get them involved in decision-making around new products, services and initiatives. For example, Condé Nast, publisher of Vogue, Glamour and GQ, created title-specific research communities to select

magazine covers, brainstorm article ideas and shortlist editorial topics. Why? To drive editorial satisfaction and brand relationship, with the ultimate goal of increasing reader retention, circulation and advertising revenue.

Co-creation research communities have been deployed by Unilever, LEGO, Dell and Starbucks, and all tapped into the reality that consumers are much less passive since the advent of the Internet and need an outlet for their ideas. By giving the respondent a seat at the decision-making table, you can build strong and long-lasting relationships that may not have been possible through offline media.

A Toluna client cited the following further benefits of its employee and customer panels. They:

- strike a balance between outsourcing complex projects to research agencies and focusing in-house on quick-turn-around projects;
- facilitate real-time dialogue between marketing and customers with a high level of engagement (more than 50 percent response rates to surveys or discussions);
- achieve high-quality open-end text responses; empower employees by giving these ready-made internal advocates tangible input into decision-making (in retail, employees are often among the best customers);
- increase staff satisfaction and retention; provide a channel to relay customer feedback captured on the shop floor; allow you to react rapidly to internal demands for information;
- raise research's internal profile (i.e., when insight is relevant and timely, it will be used more to drive change); and
- provide profiling context (e.g., enhancing discussion threads and survey responses with demographics, attitudinal and purchasing behaviors).

Another revenue stream

Media planning, advertising, PR, digital and market research agencies are embracing research communities, which can be white-labeled rather than branded and built around a general sample of the population or defined segments such as early-adopters or opinion-formers.

Motivations for adoption include winning new clients by supporting the pitch process and offering clients access to the community for follow-up work. The community model allows agencies to move beyond the project-by-project cycle and when times are hard, add value and another revenue stream by providing custom research figures.

Agencies are also finding that research communities internalize research fieldwork costs and increase margins while allowing creativity and idea generation to flourish; the fruits of the creative process can be evaluated quickly by an external audience.

A seat at the table

We can categorize people into two groups: participants and non-participants. Until the Internet empowered every individual to publish their thoughts, reviews and opinions worldwide, the former far outweighed the latter. But this empowerment has given the community member a seat at the table alongside the brand owner and the researcher. Make sure that newfound status is respected by rewarding respondents for their time and energy.

Engage them. Is the topic interesting and relevant?

Show them the impact of their work. Share results and findings from previous surveys and discussions and show

changes resulting from member feedback.

Recognize their efforts. Offer socially-visible rewards and recognition, such as VIP areas and member ratings; create personal areas and encourage member-to-member interaction; and provide financial incentives that are appropriate to the commitment required.

Before diving in

While online communities have their advantages, assess if this approach is right for you before diving in headfirst. Consider your company culture. Do you feel comfortable sharing information with customers? Do you have the resources, expertise and senior buy-in? And bear in mind the benefits of in- vs. out-sourcing. Could you gain more by being close to the participants? Also remember that co-creation may be desirable, but it is not to be used to replace research expertise. Inform your community that their ideas could be used; beware innocuous solutions resulting from many voices; and don't take member opinions as gospel. Finally, if you choose an online community approach, establish clear objectives for the research community beyond pure dialogue. Quantifiable objectives such as those employed by Condé Nast and others keep the bigger picture in mind.

At the heart

Implement projects where brands and agencies listen and don't project. We are offered a huge opportunity by listening to our customers and placing them at the heart of our marketing strategy - and online panel communities offer an effective way to do this. | Q