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What do today's successful companies have in common?

They bring the customer into the heart of their decision-making.

BY JULIE PAUL



Success for brands today can be attributed to many things, be it the unique ability to take advantage of market trends, outwit a competitor or make smart decisions about how to best market their products. In all cases, brand success is best accomplished by getting into lockstep with customers and bringing their feedback into the heart of the decision-making process.

BRINGING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK INTO THE HEART OF DECISION-MAKING

Today's environment is almost a marketer's dream come true. Consumers are more willing than ever to voice their opinions and do so using social media, customer surveys and more. The abundance of information can be daunting, and in some cases, provide unwarranted weight to specific feedback. Branded communities provide marketers with a unique opportunity to streamline the insight generation process and take advantage of consumers' willingness to provide feedback. In addition, branded communities offer consumers a forum for participation and the ability to exchange in a three-way dialogue with like-minded consumers, and also with the brand directly.

The experience for participants is organic, but for marketers, branded communities are a strategic tool that offers unrivalled depth and breadth of consumer feedback. Branded community clients report that they conduct research more often and spend less on their research program overall, providing a significant return on investment and improved decision-making.



THE EVOLUTION OF BRANDED COMMUNITIES AS POWERFUL MARKETING SUPPORT

Branded communities have evolved since their inception, and their reach extends beyond the customer insight function, often into other areas of the business. Many branded communities now power customer support programs, help promote a sense of ongoing customer engagement and loyalty, and obtain more direct, usable feedback from social media followers. Branded communities are no longer static, they are accessible on the go via mobile devices and can power in-store evaluations. Ethnographic research using passive metering provides a more holistic consumer picture that can often shed light on previously unknown behaviors, and in some cases, consumer segments.

GOING BEYOND COMMUNITY TO BIG(ER) DATA

Branded communities are becoming more sophisticated as brands become more reliant on them and incorporate feedback into all aspects of their decision-making. We've seen the front-end of branded communities become more sophisticated and offer more features, but the infrastructure itself has grown to meet today's customers' needs. Companies have begun to dynamically profile members, and

add numerous fields of information to their customers' records. This information includes survey response and participation as well as customer information, social media data and more. In other cases, customers have logged advertising exposure (non-exposure) as well and used this to test advertising awareness and recall. Deep profiling helps to create richer insights and can power new segmentation schemes.

The ability to incorporate more data into the insight-generation process has been a welcome addition to the market researcher's toolkit.

PRACTICES AND PITFALLS

We've seen most of our clients succeed and extract immense value from their branded communities, but we've had a few that have approached their branded communities as static panels that require no ongoing contact. While those panels have been useful, they don't often deliver the full value that we've seen from well-managed, engaging branded communities.

Largely, when customers begin to consider branded community approaches, they barely scratch the surface of what's possible — there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Companies that approach their community and seek advice (not only from their market research agency, but from their technology provider) should consider a white board and creative thinking. There is a tremendous upside to considering a branded community, and harnessing it can lead to new insight, better thinking and marketing breakthrough.



Julie Paul joined Toluna as Senior Vice President, Online Communities after leading the vision, planning, and launch of the Interactive Custom Panel Division for Ipsos North America.

Now more than ever, consumers have a lot to say about brands.

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