

Driving Culture in Consumer Communities of Practice

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Abstract

The role of marketing is a natural function within communities of practice. Firms can leverage this role to drive culture within consumer communities of practice by supporting online manifestations of these communities.

With the proliferation of the Internet, relating to customer communities is becoming essential for a firm to compete in the market place. As a firm develops strategy to create relational capital within these communities (Dewhurst and Navarro 2004), a manager is seeking the ideal; that is, can a firm maintain a community around the firm's brand?

It is difficult to get customers to contribute the time, energy, and commitment to form viable customer communities around a single brand of product unless that product is significant in *defining* a particular lifestyle (RVs) or *pastime* (gardening, cooking, auto repairing) [Achrol and Kotler 1999, page 160, emphasis added].

Although difficult, some companies appear to have successfully created such brand communities: Apple Computers, Harley-Davidson and Nintendo (Achrol and Kotler 1999).

How was it accomplished?

The dot-com era demonstrated a flurry of activity focused around the Internet medium to create such brand communities. The speculative frenzy is over, and lessons can be learned from the successes and failures of such virtual communities. Some super communities have developed (Yahoo, Facebook, MySpace, SecondLife) but most mass market attempts of communities have failed miserably. The market correction of this speculative era has made many managers skeptical. Firms seldom will invest in Internet strategies related to building online customer communities. Rather, managers intuit tactics based on how they perceive the Internet medium can enhance their current strategies (collecting CRM data, online support, etc.). Although subtle, this difference may in the long term determine the ability of the firm to compete in the market place.

The Internet is more than just another medium; it is a virtual super community. The purpose of this paper is to delineate the key elements of customer communities, describe the

importance of the marketing function with these communities, and describe factors firms need to consider as community-building strategies are being considered. With this information, managers can extend their intuitive tactics into viable, integral Internet strategies.

CUSTOMER COMMUNITIES BECOME CONSUMER COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Relational networking as described by Achrol and Kotler (1999) is the foundation for customer communities (page 160):

A customer community is a body of consumers who are involved with a company in a social relationship. They are involved because the product represents a significant aspect of their lifestyle and because they can enhance their satisfaction by participating in information- and experience-rich exchanges with the company and among themselves.

Although clearly market oriented, this product-focus is not necessarily consumer-focused; *ex post* descriptions do not help firms generate *ex ante* strategies. A customer community is not necessarily the same thing as a consumer community. Further, as suggested by the authors, a new sociological lens regarding coalition behavior (social network theory) needs to be used to understand this relational phenomenon (Achrol and Kotler 1999). Consumer communities of practice (Cox 2005) will serve as this new lens (Wenger, McDermott, and Synder 2002, page 4):

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.

In order to understand what communities of practice are, how they develop, and how firms can potentially leverage relational capital of such communities, theoretical foundations must first be explored. Similar to marketing literature (Gavetti and Rivkin 2007; Mintzberg and

Lampel 1999; Homburg and Jensen 2007; Johnson, Sohi, and Grewal 2004; Day and Negungadi 1994; Weick 1978; Vargo and Lusch 2004), sense-making is a good starting point. From the perspective of the consumer, sense-making is an integrated composition of context, cognition, and action over time. Extending human agency theory, and bridging anthropological and psychological views, Jean Lave describes cognition in practice (1988, page 12, emphasis added):

The natural attitude, praxis, activity, cultural practice, habitus, dispositions and practical consciousness are embedded in a diverse spectrum of theoretical formulations of the social and cultural character of human thought and action, and in the different conceptions of culture, structure, knowledge, self and body, not to mention the nature of theory and method.

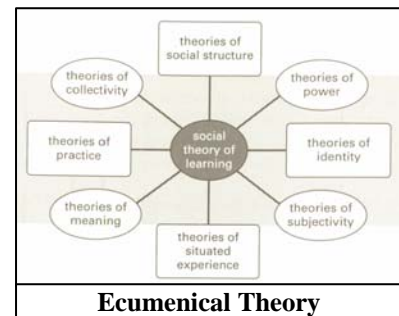
This phenomenological lens, in context, is essential to bridge the gap between the ideal and real consensus-forming social order.

With this lens, culture becomes accumulated knowledge of facts and historical socialization and complexity of behavior is a

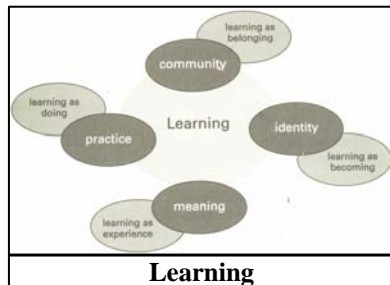
reflection of the perceived complexity of the environment over time (Lave 1988; Homburg and Pflesser 2000).

Humans are complex—bounded by rationality, personality, and situated environment which creates a perceived constituted order. This order is constantly reified in practice: the enactment of this cognition by the human actor based on perceived context (Lave 1988, page 180):

This requires a broadening of the terms of analysis to reflect the claim that the “person,” including the person thinking, is constituted in relation with other aspects of the lived-in world. An embodied self is entailed with the world and their relations are not completely decomposable [... placing] emphasis on the notion that persons are directly engaged with the world. This stands in opposition to the pervasive tendency in Western thought to dismiss the significance of the active experience in the generation of cognitive processes.



The inseparable nature of cognition, activity, and the world is the essence of understanding human actors interacting—creating consensus, negotiating, reifying cognitive

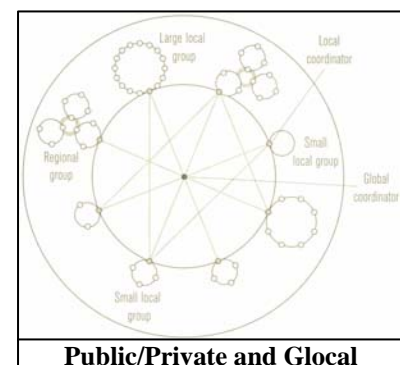


processes. Learning about and participating in this “lived-in” world gives meaning and identity to an individual (Janson, Howard, and Schoenberger-Orgad 2004). Shared interpretations/practices provide meaning for individuals to

cluster based on similarly perceived identities (Wenger 1998). Newcomers or “just plain folks” need to understand the process by which they can fully participate in the collectively-defined community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, page 29): “Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts.” The interactions among the members are constantly in flux—change becomes the natural unit of analysis. Identity of the individual and the community are constantly being examined as the everyday experience of the individual interacts with the sociohistorical context of the community. As such, engagement in practice becomes much more important than simple information exchange. Many times, full participation into a community can be considered as a rite of passage, whereby the old-timers legitimize the participation of the new-comers—such legitimization also reflects the new-comers commitment.

STRUCTURE OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Size, shape, lifetime, composition, intentionality, and place determine the form of any particular community of



practice; nonetheless, a common underlying structure (Thompson 2007) can be generalized—a community of practice is a unique composition of: a domain of knowledge and issues, a community of people who care about the domain, and activities or practices these people do that is relevant to their domain.

The domain (D) can be considered a *raison d'être*—the construal of which may be abstract or concrete, homogeneous or heterogeneous, subjective or objective, specific or general,



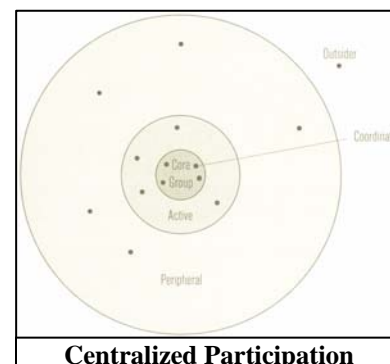
artisanry or professionally trained expertise (Trope, Liberman, and Wakslak 2007). The domain creates common ground, common identity, and common purpose defining the community's place (points of parity and points of difference) in

the world—its place in regards to larger super communities of practice and smaller micro communities of practice (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham and Clark 2006).

The community (C) represents the people involved and the processes of interaction (Wenger et al. 2002, page 28):

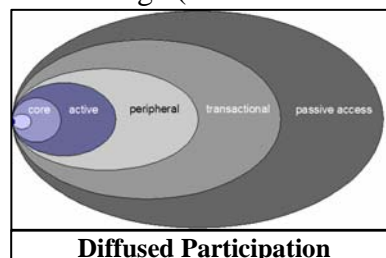
The *community* creates the social fabric of learning. A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on the mutual respect and trust. It encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully.

This mixture of intimacy and openness to inquiry is a unique blend of the heart and the mind. The modes of interaction may vary (from face-to-face to virtual), leadership (Muller 2006) may be centralized or distributed; however, participants in a community of practice must *feel* autonomous and self-



determined in how they choose to relate to others (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000).

The practice (P) represents the activities associated with the denoted domain: sharing (Vestal 2006), maintaining (Wenger 2004), and developing (Verburg and Andriessen 2006) knowledge. These “socially defined ways of doing things” are based on sociohistorical traditions which require potential prerequisites for participants to demonstrate legitimacy (Wenger et al. 2002). Levels of participation can be clearly defined as boundaries with core, active, and peripheral participation (Wenger et al. 2002) or can be viewed as a gradient of participation levels (from active to passive) with fuzzy boundaries between levels (Shaffer 2006; Hatch and Shaffer 2007). This alternative view emphasizes the diffusion process and clarifies the informal, non-hierarchical structure of interactivity allowing for a continuum of exchange (from transactional to relational [Coviello, Brodie, Danaher, and Johnston 2002]) within sharply defining in-group from outsider.



VIVACITY AS THE MARKETING FUNCTION

Consistent with Achrol and Kotler (1999), cultivating a community of practice is not easy. Frequency and quality of activity are desired, but how can that be achieved in a voluntary, organic community that is delicately balancing participation and reification? Wegner and colleagues suggest seven principles to nurture the self realization of this spontaneous “human institution” (2002, page 51):

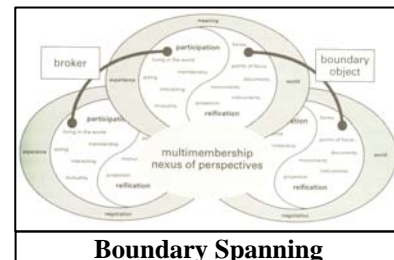


1. Design for evolution.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.

3. Invite different levels of participation.
4. Develop both public and private spaces.
5. Focus on value.
6. Combine familiarity and excitement.
7. Create a rhythm for the community.

The marketing function can play an essential role in the developing of a community of practice following these aforementioned principles. Ideation has to be promoted to make non-members aware of the community, and increasingly legitimize participation by members. In addition, boundary spanners communicate (generally through stories) to broker harmony within levels of a community and across communities. As such, the marketing function is embedded into the diffusion (inside-out) and the attraction (outside-in) process. This “push awareness – pull interest” duality is the essence of activities within a community of practice.

A few examples will serve to illustrate strategic considerations for a firm to take this knowledge about communities of practice to drive culture in a community (Cross, Laseter, Parker, and Velasquez 2006); that is, to leverage the marketing activities—the firm chooses which elements of meaning to proliferate (diffusion) and



communicate (persuasion) to its constituents. The firm’s influence can be symbolized as the sun in the cultivating metaphor suggested by Wegner and colleagues (2002). The community of practice (plant) will incrementally grow toward the sun (each reification cycle), and the sun will radiate light toward the core, which will reflect to peripheral participants.

Proposition: The significance of the ability of the marketing role to drive culture is related to the complexity of the structural integrity—the more complex the greater the potential influence of the firm.

To understand consistent Internet tactics that are congruent with conceptual considerations of communities of practice (Vestal 2003; thereby creating meaningful strategy for a firm), a few clarifications:

1. The firm can influence, but cannot create or control a community of practice (Schwen and Hara 2003). The community of practice already exists; creating online tools for the community to proliferate is not creating a community of practice (Wenger 1997; Wenger 2004).
2. Social networks may be large online communities, but are not necessarily a community of practice (Facebook is not a community of practice).
3. Communities of practice can exist virtually (Dube, Bourhis, and Jacob 2005; Chua 2006; Murillo and Spicer 2007; SecondLife or “god games” are virtual²: the medium and the domain), but the face-to-face need of human interactions may reduce their vivacity (A Harley Davidson Forum [e.g., [The Road Between the Rides](#)] can never supplant the Sturgis gatherings).
4. Online support to proliferate a community of practice needs to allow for both public and private interactions with the members.
5. Core capabilities of the virtual manifestation of a community of practice can rigidify (Choo 2006) and destroy the community of practice (Bailey and Hendrickson 2000; Roberts 2006; For example, when the boundary objects [governance, power] impede newcomer development and the community stops negotiating: Wikipedia review process).

OPERATIONALIZED PROCESS FOR A FIRM – EXAMPLES

CONTEXT	<u>Toy Woodworking Kits</u>	<u>Organic Produce</u>
Firm’s market as CoP SCOPE	Niche market	Mass market
Structural nature	Concrete, homogeneous, objective, specific, artisanry-oriented	Abstract, heterogeneous, subjective, generic, balanced orientation (artisanry and professional expertise)
Domain considerations	Why are consumers interested in the firm’s kits? In kits in general? In woodworking in general?	Why are consumers interested in organic? How does this higher-order construal manifest itself in practice? What issues are of interest to relate the firm to these practices?
Community considerations	Interest might extend to model builders and general woodworking, but realistically the social fabric will be very	General interest in organics with adjacent interests (going green, sustainability, environmentally friendly) has established local and

	specific to the products offered by the firm in the niche market	internet communities. Can the firm leverage Internet resources to consolidate local interest on a global stage?
Practice considerations	Activity will be seasonal (as aligned with woodworking in general); timeliness of the content (stories as diffusion and communication) is not as important as a historical record of the activity	Support of local communities in siloed fashion (Hart and Wolff 2006); time is of the essence; political sensitivity requires careful newcomer sensitivity (Lee and Valderrama 2003); global coordinator needs to be people-oriented (Homburg and Jensen 2007), moderate, choosing which content to emphasize in the global stage (see Fractal Figure: Public/Private and Glocal).
Internet tactics	<u>Integrated with firm's online presence:</u> Online forum/gallery to allow consumers to learn about how the kits are assembled, sharing tips and tricks for any given kit—simply diffusing maven information.	<u>Spun off as a new entity, managed by a global coordinator, sponsored by the firm:</u> Local community support (blog, forum, calendar, gallery, wiki) with global pillars (boundary objects) to manage quality (with metrics) of the content (Garavan and Carbery 2007); Global management of news, siloed content to create vivacity in a balanced fashion

BENEFITS FOR THE FIRM

Consistent with strategic initiatives, it is imperative to identify the benefits (Duguid 2005) for a firm to attempt to drive culture in a community of practice (Millen, Fontaine, and Muller 2002). For concrete structures (woodworking example), the implementation of technologies to foster a community of practice is simply an extension of other Internet related activities: extend the customer service arm, add frequently asked questions, let customers share

pictures and stories of the learning associated with the activities they do related to your firm's products. Such activities will inherently increase the customer-oriented intelligence which potentially can benefit the firm.

For complex structures (distributed communities of practice) the benefits may be more difficult to ascertain. Although subtle, these benefits may apply to any implementation to cultivate communities of practice. First, the community of practice can be seen as an upstream resource necessary for the long-term survival of the firm. This resource, if properly enabled, can provide insights to be driven by the market (maven feedback) or drive the market (ideation that triggers innovation [Voss and Voss 2000]). If properly done, the online manifestation of a community around an abstract domain can reach critical mass, becoming the online dominant design (Srinivasan, Lilien, and Rangaswamy 2006) for a given domain. Like all dynamic capabilities (Day 1994; Eisenhardt and Martin 2000), this can create competitive advantage; however, its sustainability may be as ethereal as the community itself: it only has value as long as it serves the interests and passions of those who participate (Wenger 2001).

Second, the firm can leverage the community to drive social causes. For example, in the recycling domain (adjacent and integral to the organic produce example), a new type of corn-based plastic has been developed that is both recyclable and compostable (PLA plastic). Different from traditional petroleum-based plastic (PP plastic), incumbents in the recycling business are trying to influence government regulators to restrict the product as it hurts their profitability (costly to develop recycling/composting programs for the new plastic). Drop this cause into a community that cares about the environment, and the call for discussion will shortly follow a "grass roots" call to action (Kumar, Petersen, and Leone 2007). The more active the

community, the faster and the more powerful the response will be.

Third, the firm can leverage the community to create brand value, a market based asset (Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey 1998; Varadarajan and Jayachandran 1999). Communities of practice only exist if they give meaning and related identity to its constituents which may align with branding or co-branding strategies. Blurring the boundaries of brand identity and community identity, the firm can leverage the customer as a co-producer (Vargo and Lusch 2004). As Achrol and Kotler (1999) described, a “defining pastime” will create strong brand equity which in turn can enhance or accelerate cash flows (Srivastava et al. 1998).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MARKETING STRATEGY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Practitioners and academics can both benefit from the insights presented. Primarily focused toward practitioners, this paper provides a framework for a manager to represent (Day and Nedungadi 1994) the concept of communities of practice, and a process to use in the decisions related to supporting a online manifestation of a community of practice—the nuanced difference between Internet tactics and integrated strategy. Further, it aligns with popular readings related to concepts around viral, grass-roots marketing (Gladwell 2002; Rosen 2000; Brown and Duguid 2002; Godin 2003) by supporting practical strategies grounded in realistic outcomes—a focus on value creation (Mizik and Jacobson 2003) by way of supporting a consumer’s motivation to be self-determined: autonomous, competent, and connected (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000).

The implications of the presented framework and process can also benefit the academic community. Most importantly, the significance of the marketing function in a community of

practice drives strategy to influence in an online context (Bharadwaj, Clark, and Kulviwat 2005). This aligns with emerging thought on the importance of marketing in the new information age (Achrol and Kotler 1999; Rust, Ambler, Carpenter, Kumar, and Srivistava 2004). Second, the insights in group dynamics enhances the relational exchange and learning literature: bonding effects, close partnering, knowledge integration mechanisms, absorptive capacity, relationship lifecycles, CRM, CLV, agency theory, and transaction cost economics (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Jap and Ganesan 2000; Jayachandran, Sharma, Kaufman, and Raman 2005; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, and Evans 2006; Rokkan, Heide, and Wathne 2003; Wuyts, Dutta, and Stremersch 2004; Zahra and George 2002; Williamson 1981; Bergen, Dutta, and Walker 1992; Coviello et al. 2002; Payne and Frow 2005; Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer 2004; Kumar and George 2007; Slater and Narver 1995). Finally, it clarifies some strategic dilemmas associated with classic strategic views (Jacobson 1992): specifically entry barriers, network externalities, and the nature of competition (Wenger 1999; Srinivasan et al. 2004; Bharadwaj et al. 2005; Han, Kim, and Kim 2001). Entry barriers are inherently problematic when the strategic focus is to create openness and sharing. Network effects and associated externalities have no long-term value in organic communities; which demonstrates the need for contracts to lock-in customers, which many times alienates them (McGovern and Moon 2006). And the classic western view of competition as a zero-sum game (Bharadwaj 2005; Shaffer 2007 [analogous to chess]) needs to be reframed in a relational context (Nielsen 2005).

Images

Ecumenical Theory	Wenger 1998, page 14
Learning	Wenger 1998, page 5
Public/Private and Glocal	Wenger et al. 2002, page 127
Community of Practice	Wenger 1998, page 73
Centralized Participation	Wenger et al. 2002, page 57
Diffused Participation	modified from Shaffer 2006
Harmonized Rhythm	Wenger 1998, page 63
Boundary Spanning	Wenger 1998, page 105

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