The Seven Deadly Sins of Brand Community “Management”

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Introduction

Community is on the radar of every marketer charged with brand expansion, and justifiably so. Community members buy more, develop deeper brand affiliations, and advocate more strongly on behalf of the company and the brand. They influence each others’ opinions and behaviors, and the meanings co-created by community participants offer brands an authenticity that is rare in today’s cynical consumer marketplace. Strong brand communities reduce marketing costs by shifting the burden to grassroots word-of-mouth activities. Just ask Harley-Davidson about its return on investment from the millions who participate in the lifestyle dedicated to its brand. Communities can be cultivated to deliver the symbiotic relationships that make this virtuous cycle flow.

Still, if you ask marketers to explain their strategies for creating and capturing community value, many have little idea how to leverage the full power of the idea. Worse, they often subscribe to dangerous misconceptions about community strategies for the brand. Before companies can reap the benefits that community strategies promise, they must understand the principles that guide how communities work. Building on a combined thirty years of brand research, case writing, and practical experience using brand community strategies to achieve business goals, and leveraging cross-disciplinary thinking from sociology, anthropology, psychology, and culture studies, we identify and dispel seven commonly-held myths about engaging community for the company and the brand:

1. Brand community is a marketing strategy.
2. Brand communities exist to serve the brand.
3. Build the brand, and the community will follow.
4. Brand communities should be love fests for faithful brand advocates.
5. Focus on opinion leaders to build a strong community.
6. Online social networks are the best way to build community.
7. Successful brand communities are tightly managed and controlled.

Harley-Davidson, a brand whose success was built on its community strategy, is used as a running example to highlight community-building myths and realities, drawing on our extensive experience as an external advisor to the Harley Owners Group and a Harley-Davidson executive, respectively. Contrasting and supporting examples are drawn from our research, teaching and consulting work across a wide range of industries and brands.

For companies with existing brand communities, we offer new thinking on ways to enrich and grow the community over time. For those with strong brands who are considering steps toward community, we offer cautionary tales to help avoid common pitfalls and basic principles for effective community design. We also include a “Community Readiness Audit” that can help any company – B2B or B2C – decide whether community strategy is right for their organization and brand.

Myth #1: Brand community is a marketing strategy

The reality: Brand community is a business strategy. The entire business model must support the community brand.
Discussion: Research has demonstrated that brand communities can provide very effective and high-leverage means of achieving sustainable growth. Yet, companies are often afflicted with a form of marketing myopia when they engage community strategies for their brands: management does not understand that the brand and the broader organization must come together to enable community strategy. Effective brand community strategies are not siloed within the marketing function, nor are they empowered through marketing investments alone. For maximum benefit, brand community strategy must be:

- Fully integrated into corporate strategies and competitive positioning
- Enabled by cultural and brand values
- Supported by organizational structures, systems, and processes.

Detailed Argument: For brand community to provide significant and lasting benefits, it must be framed as a high-level corporate strategy supporting the organization’s goals. Such has been the case at Harley-Davidson Motor Company, where the business model and competitive positioning have been built entirely around the brand community idea. When Harley-Davidson was reborn in 1985 as part of a leveraged buy-back, the company’s operating model was reinvented to put community at its core. Astute management recognized that the brand had evolved organically as a community-based phenomenon, with early roots in outlaw biker groups such as the Hell’s Angels and other motorcycling lifestyle clubs. “The Brotherhood” united all riders, regardless of demographic or social differences, through a shared sense of belonging and a common ethos. It offered the basis for a resonant and radically different positioning that could fuel and distinguish the Harley-Davidson brand.

A lynchpin of Harley-Davidson’s turnaround success was the strategic decision to become the one motorcycle company that truly represented the Brotherhood: a company that went out into the riding community to understand the needs of real bikers and the lifestyles they lived. Advertising campaigns in the ‘80s proudly displayed the tagline “By the People, For the People” as a reflection of this commitment. Harley-Davidson employees were systematically sourced from and deployed into the field to act upon this vision, and both the trust that was built and the feedback that was gained were instrumental in sustaining the company through its dark days and pointing the way to future success. For the Brotherhood, Harley-Davidson became the one motorcycle manufacturer that truly understood bikers on their own terms.

Over time, what began as a means of survival and competitive differentiation evolved into an operating philosophy and then a strategic imperative for the firm. Staffing all outreach events with company employees instead of hired hands, originally a cost-control necessity, was soon recognized as a key factor in building the grassroots Brotherhood brand. For employees, this regular, direct, and close contact with the people they served added an immeasurable sense of meaning to their work – so much that for years the volunteer program was routinely oversubscribed, despite the fact that it often meant working through summer weekends without time off. The strategic importance of what became Harley-Davidson’s “Close-to-the-Customer” philosophy was so strongly embraced by company leadership that at the first sign of a disconnect – a vague sensation that strategic questions were being answered theoretically with recommendations that weren’t grounded in direct customer feedback – a formal program was created to ensure that all executives spent time in the field with customers, and were accountable for bringing their insights back inside. Harley-Davidson took careful steps to ensure that the Brotherhood connection remained strong even as the company and the community both grew.

Regardless of corporate commitment, a successful brand community strategy cannot succeed without a supportive company culture and brand values. At Harley-Davidson, the idea and the ideal of community have been fully embedded in the culture since its turnaround. Harley-Davidson’s brand and
Corporate values embody the idea of the Brotherhood, an archetypal community ideal. The “Close-to-the-Customer” philosophy rooted in the Brotherhood ethos is codified in the company’s formal Business Process, along with its Vision, Mission and Values. This philosophy is constantly reinforced as a primary value for employees, beginning with their New Employee Orientation to the firm, and is reiterated in nearly every executive speech or presentation, as when Willie G. Davidson, Chief Styling Officer and grandson of a company founder, ascends the stage at a customer gathering somewhere in the world, waits for the crowd to quiet, then asserts “We Ride With You!” The emotional impact is stunning: Willie G. rides with me. Community is woven throughout the company’s cultural values, and the company’s values express the community brand.

Cultural values consistent with community strategy support direct contact between company staff and the people they serve, but also go a level deeper to demand that decision-making is grounded in an understanding of community needs. This can be enabled in various ways. Spending significant amounts of time with the community sharing real-life experiences, as Harley-Davidson does, is one way to build customer intimacy. This approach works for Harley-Davidson because it fits the values of the brand: core attributes such as freedom, adventure and individuality are balanced by ideals of community and camaraderie. But cultivating a community-supportive culture does not have to mean that all employees belong to the community. What’s needed is empathy, and a process for linking empathic insights to managerial decisions. A culture that makes decisions based on a careful consideration of how the lives of customers will be affected is supportive of community strategy; a culture that prizes protection of the brand image as articulated by Marketing is not. Brand community strategy fails unless it is preceded or accompanied by systemic cultural change along these lines.

Organizational design also plays a role in the success of brand community strategy. A structure organized in terms of functional silos, with measurement and incentive systems that support functional separation, often prevents a deeper understanding of the enterprise-wide costs and benefits of brand community-building as a strategic lever for the firm. To enable its community-centric strategy, Harley-Davidson took a radically different approach to organizational design, eschewing a hierarchical structure based on function for a flat organization with shared leadership responsibility for value creation across three broad areas of focus: Create Demand, Produce Product, and Provide Support. Likewise, in establishing and growing the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) from the world’s first company-sponsored motorcycle club to over a million members, Harley-Davidson created an entire 77-person stand-alone organization, reporting directly to the President, exclusively dedicated to building the infrastructure and cultivating the relationships that would enable the social life of the brand. Within this structure, Harley’s community investments were not marketing expenses with limited financial returns: they were company-wide, COO-backed investments in the business model granting competitive advantage to the firm.

The bottom-line benefits from building community at Harley-Davidson were tremendous: low marketing costs, high customer loyalty, and a rich pipeline of customer insights to shape product development. Strategic integration, fit with brand and cultural values, cross-functional sponsorship, and executive oversight allowed Harley-Davidson to reap the full benefits of its community brand. Brand community strategy was not a mere marketing augmentation, but rather a strategic imperative that fit squarely within the corporate vision and operating plans. Not every company can or should build its business model around the idea of brand community. But unless the community strategy is understood as a business strategy, it will not succeed.
Myth #2: Brand communities exist to serve the brand

The reality: Brand communities exist to serve the people that comprise them. Brand communities are a means to an end, not the ends themselves.

Discussion. Companies have a tendency to forget that their “consumers” are actually “people” – people who have many needs, activities, interests, and responsibilities in their lives. The strongest brands connect with people on multiple dimensions; at the extreme, the person becomes an incarnation of the brand. But the typical brand experience is something different. Today’s consumers are often less interested in the objects of consumption than they are in the social links and provisions that their product affiliations allow. Many managers ignore this reality and fail to recognize that for the members, their brand communities are a means to an end, not the ends themselves. A community brand develops loyalty, advocacy, and emotional attachment not by driving brand involvement, but by supporting members in living their lives.

Detailed Argument. Managers often fall into the trap of assuming that brand communities are all about identity expression: that the driving need behind people’s community involvement has to do with trying on the identities that the brand enables, or gaining status through brand affiliation. But communities that look to the outsider like vehicles to express a common identity are often about more pragmatic concerns. Some communities simply allow people to extend their resources and develop the skills they need to get things done. Consider for example, the findings of Johann Fueller and Marius Ludicke, of Innsbruck University, regarding the German outdoor enthusiast community Outdoorstein.com. This community evolved as a functional venue for members to pose questions and get answers about their shared lifestyle: Where is a good place to hike with children? Which shoes are best for rocky terrain? Whose tents have the best designs? Only later, after much debate, did the community develop its own brand of tents and backpacks, complete with Outdoorstein.com logo, to address their unmet product needs. The community brand emerged as byproduct of meeting members’ functional needs, not a need to express shared identity through the brand.

People are often more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliation than they are in the brand affiliations that allow those links to form. They join communities to gain new social connections or to level out their connections in some significant way. Facebook provides a straightforward example of a community that is all about social links, but country clubs and churches reveal similar dynamics. According to Mark Rosenbaum at Northern Illinois University, so-called Third Place brands – Gold’s Gym, Starbucks, Barnes & Noble, for example – serve as invaluable spaces for camaraderie, support and reconnection. His research suggests that people who develop strong interpersonal connections in these places are more brand-loyal and engage in helpful citizenship behaviors that keep the community strong. But brand loyalty here is a consequence, not a cause; it results from the personal and social connections engendered through the brand. In these cases, the community delivers against human needs for socialization and companionship, not a need to express identity through the brand.

Robust communities are built not on the backs of brands, but on a nuanced understanding of the members and their needs, both practical and emotional. Proctor & Gamble clearly understands this, as evidenced by its approach to Beinggirl.com, an online community in support of its Always and Tampax brands. While the site does provide product information, the brand role is subduced. The site’s tone and content are overwhelmingly focused on helping girls navigate the life experience of puberty, and reflect a
clear sensitivity toward the community’s shared needs and interests along these lines. The site is designed so that girls can gather information in a relatively private way; there’s a place to get questions answered by Iris, an expert in adolescent psychology; and chat features allow girls to explore with each other the challenging terrain of adolescence. Responding to the interests of its members, the site has also increased its focus on causes, giving back, and sharing the stories of real-life girl heroes around the world. By putting customers first, Procter & Gamble has built enduring relationships in an age cohort that for a time eluded the brand.

Pepperidge Farm learned this lesson the hard way. Initially, the company’s community-building strategy comprised a website centered around engaging kids in Goldfish-branded games. This brand-centric approach had obvious limits: kids have many ways to play games, and while the “fishies” were cute, the games were nothing unusual. Moreover, Mom is the one who buys the snacks, and having one more site where her kids could play games did nothing to help Mom in her life. The Goldfish team eventually took a step back and tried to identify where Moms and kids really did need help. Delving deep into child psychology research, they found alarming statistics about childhood depression and the chronic loss of kids’ self esteem. They decided to partner with a world-class psychologist specializing in the power of positive psychology, and re-oriented their site to create a community focused on children’s challenging lives. The new online community, Fishfulthinking.com, packages relevant knowledge into learning aids and discussion tools designed to help parents cultivate self esteem and resiliency in their kids. Putting the brand second is a hard thing for a brand manager to do, but it’s essential when cultivating a community.

The reality is that people have many needs in their lives, and effective community brands cast a wide net of support. (See Exhibit 1 for a compendium of community needs.) Community efforts that work to recognize and fulfill the needs of real people – individually and collectively – are those that gain momentum and deliver results. To play off a familiar phrase, “It’s the people, stupid; not the brand.”

Myth #3: Build the brand, and the community will follow

_The Reality:_ Cultivate the community, and the brand will grow.

_Discussion:_ People engage in communities through three basic forms of affiliation: pools, webs and hubs. In “pools” people have loose associations with each other, but strong associations with a shared activity, goals or values. In “webs” people have strong one-to-one relationships. In “hubs” people have strong connections to a central figure and weaker associations with each other. Political parties are pools. Social networks are webs. Celebrity fan clubs are hubs. Exhibit 2 provides marketplace examples for each form of affiliation. Brand community as it is typically understood is a “pool” phenomenon wherein a strong belief in the brand is the basis for affiliation. The community is based on a pool of shared meaning that is created by and surrounds the brand. But the pool is a weak model of community, founded on an asymmetrical and abstract relationship between the individual and a brand ideal. Robust community strategies engage all three forms of affiliation in ways that are relevant to the company, the consumer, and the brand.

_Detailed Argument._ The typical company knows how to build brand-interest pools. Decades of brand management theory have provided guidelines for identifying a differentiated positioning capable of
building brand advantage: identify a clear set of brand values that connect emotionally with consumers, communicate those values consistently, and a strong brand following will result. Think of Mini, or Swatch. But the pool is a weak form of community that offers only limited benefits: for the members, identity expression; for the company, brand loyalty and repeat purchase. Further, as a brand grows and seeks to remain relevant to an increasingly diverse audience, the brand meaning can become diluted and the sense of community diminished. And because brand pools are founded on an abstract relationship between the individual and the brand, rather than on human connections, it is relatively easy for members to drop out, often unbeknownst to the rest of the community. The web is a stronger and more stable model of community affiliation than the pool. The many and varied links between members bind people more tightly to the community, and because these are human relationships they are much harder to simply abandon. In contrast, the hub is a strong but unstable form of community. Members have compelling ties to a central figure who often commands great loyalty, yet the community tends to disintegrate if the hub figure is no longer present.

Although pool-based communities are inherently weak, they can be strengthened by creating webs of connection among the members. A simple tactic is to extend traditional brand-building efforts with additional web-creating features. Such was the case with Harley-Davidson’s Creed, a short film intended to generate and reinforce emotional connections with the brand – a typical pool-building approach. The Creed was posted on the company’s website, and then a page was created allowing visitors to submit their own creeds in response. These user-generated creeds invited comments, which then invited the submissions of others. Webs were actively fostered within the pool of shared brand meaning as individuals resonated with the value expressions of others. Both the brand and the community were strengthened as a result.

Places can also serve a natural function as focal points for web-building activities within a brand pool. For example, Harley-Davidson is using its newly-opened museum as a venue to cultivate personal connections among a wide variety of visitors. One of the many facets of this program involves placing decorative walls around the campus to display 3-inch stainless steel rivets that can be ordered online and custom engraved with personalized messages. When people go to the Harley-Davidson Museum they’ll visit these walls to find their own rivets, and take a look at the other rivets as well. Reading the custom inscriptions, they’ll start thinking about the other people represented there – who they are and what stories they have to tell. They’ll come across other folks who are also looking at rivets – and pretty soon they’ll be comparing rivet stories and talking about interesting inscriptions they’ve seen. Before long, they’ll be engaged in conversation, making new personal connections, maybe even planning to stay in touch and share a ride someday. Designing experiences to foster personal connections within brand pools at third places is a very effective way to incubate community webs.

Harley-Davidson is, to some extent, a brand that reinvented itself by recognizing an existing community web – the Brotherhood – and then articulating, validating and promoting the shared values of that group to create a strong pool of meaning encompassing both the community and the brand. As the Harley-Davidson brand was infused with new meaning, it became a vessel for the shared values of the Brotherhood community. The pool was then expanded by cultivating aspiration toward those values across a wider audience, while strategies like H.O.G. were used to build webs that strengthened the community base. Keeping the brand vibrant today means both continuing to incubate webs within the existing brand pool and exploring new ways to expand it. For Harley-Davidson, “hubs” offer interesting, yet challenging, opportunities for reaching these strategic goals.
Hubs are by their very nature double-edged swords for a brand. Brands can greatly expand their community pools by associating with strong hub figures or embracing those that emerge from within the brand pool itself. But hubs are built around charismatic personalities, and the size and stability of the hub hinges on the fate of the central character. Hubs can break off, taking members with them. Hub figures are only human, and there is always the risk that these high-visibility celebrities will engage in questionable or anti-brand behavior, quickly becoming liabilities rather than assets to the community brand. These challenges can be mitigated through careful hub selection and active cultivation of connections between existing and new members that serve to fully assimilate newcomers into the group. Still, the hub strategy works better for some brands than others, and whether hubs will create community value is largely determined by brand fit.

For Harley-Davidson, which represents notions of independence and equality among the Brotherhood, focusing on a celebrity, or elevating a particular individual to celebrity status, is a high-risk idea. Hubs in this context are best used on an occasional basis to gain access to new pools that hold similar values. Heath Kirchart, a top professional skateboarder with a strong affinity for Harley, provides a great example. Skateboarders and Harley riders share a similar set of values, and when Heath and his boarding team, Emerica, went on tour in 2006, they decided to make it a cross-country ride on Harleys. Emerica allowed the film of their experience, The Wild Ride, to be posted on the Harley-Davidson website, thus broadcasting shared values to both the hub community that surrounds Heath and the extended Harley community, creating a bridge between the two. Subsequently, Harley-Davidson partnered with Emerica to launch its new, youth-focused Nightster motorcycle in Emerica's SoHo showroom, with an event designed to create exposure and foster personal connections among young Harley riders, the Emerica community, and the extended pools that aspire to each. By relying on authentic, shared values, Harley-Davidson took a powerful yet calculated risk to both extend its brand pool and incubate new webs within it.

For Nike, the hub-based approach to community has always been a perfect fit: the brand is fundamentally about maximizing individual performance, so aspiration-inducing star performers provide the perfect vehicle to communicate the brand values. In fact, Nike’s brand was initially built by using hubs to create the pool of shared brand meaning. In its early days, Nike’s marketing efforts centered on athlete relationships. Grassroots sales teams shopped their shoes to athletes and solicited suggestions for product improvement. As performance advantages were proven, the company gained the attention of more prominent athletes, and was able to secure longer-term partnerships as a result. Today, what Nike stands for—the pool of shared meaning around its brand—is embodied in the top athletes the company cultivates and supports. When people think Nike they think peak performance, and they automatically visualize the athlete who most represents those values to them. Nike has clearly mastered the hub approach to community building, but more recent marketing efforts have explored whether webs can be integrated into the strategy. After several years of experimenting with its Nike+ online community, the company seems to have found the right approach to building personal connections in a way that’s true to the brand. The site cultivates peer-to-peer support and interaction by encouraging members to challenge and “trash talk” each other into setting and achieving training and performance goals.

Building a strong brand, while a critical marketing task, is a weak community strategy at best. Astute companies fully leverage community by engaging all three forms of affiliation—pools, webs and hubs—in ways that are relevant to consumers and the brand. Brand pools can be strengthened by actively cultivating webs within the community, and expanded by selectively affiliating with hubs to bring in new members. Hubs can be used to create bridges to new pools with shared values, and webs can be fostered to encourage assimilation of new members and deeper connections among the existing base.
Multiple approaches allow the firm to create and capture more value than through one affiliation form alone. Community as a system can be engineered for maximum strength.

**Myth #4: Brand communities should be love fests for faithful brand advocates**

*The Reality:* Communities are inherently political, and this reality must be confronted with honesty and authenticity head-on.

*Discussion.* Most companies act as though communities are cohesive social collectives organized in supportive harmony around the brand. This view assumes a very naïve notion of human psychology. Communities are composed of people, and people will operate in the same human ways regardless of the community setting. Some people will not get along. Some will make trouble and strain equilibrium. Infighting will break out. Communities will splinter, and cliques will form. An honest, authentic relationship pays off for community brands much more than a desire to keep things superficial and friendly. Smart managers keep their ears to the ground and are prepared to play community politics. There are no shortcuts in the inherently messy community game.

*Detailed Argument.* Management often forgets that at a very basic level, politics don’t just exist in communities, they define them. As founding brand community researchers John Schouten and James McAlexander taught us twenty years ago, strong brand communities are identified by sharp boundaries that separate the community from other groups. The Harley-Davidson Brotherhood eschews Japanese brand motorcycle riders. Apple enthusiasts hate Microsoft and Dell. Dividing lines are also fundamental inside communities. Levels of authenticity demarcate rider groups inside the Harley Brotherhood. Even among Trekkies, some are more hard core than others. These natural politics may be judgmental, but they are vital to the community brand. Strong communities thrive on a reciprocating admiration-validation system that provides a necessary foundation for the community brand.

Sometimes these internal politics get destructive, as research on the Porsche brand community by Jill Avery at Simmons College attests. The tension between high-status and lesser-status consumers was brought to the fore when Porsche launched its Cayenne SUV in 2002. Drivers who owned 911 coupes and Carrera roadsters were reluctant to accept Cayenne as a “real Porsche.” Conversations on Rennlist, an online Porsche enthusiast discussion board, document the community’s protracted battle over legitimatization credentials for the sub-brand. The Cayenne did not have a Porsche racing heritage. Cayenne drivers, largely “soccer Moms” in the community’s estimation, did not and could not know and respect the brand. Eventually, the “real” Porsche drivers banned Cayenne owners from the discussion group, and cast them off to fend on their own. Interestingly, a recent Porsche television campaign tried to hit this issue head-on. The ad attempts to demonstrate—through a characteristic engine roaring at the proverbial starting gate—that Cayenne is indeed a valid member of the Porsche brand family. But the entrenched community has other thoughts, as discussion commentary attests. “It cracks me up that someone would even want to challenge an SUV. Almost forgot it isn’t a real Porsche. Someone should tell them,” posts JRCTT on Rennlist.com. “A stretch that only delusional Porsche marketers could possibly attempt—and a flat-out insult to every great Porsche sports car that has come before it,” posts another on autoextremist.com. Although community politics are a reality, the solutions for dealing with them effectively often elude the brand.
Company engagements with supportive fan communities can sometimes turn political as well. Professor Henry Jenkins of the MIT Media Lab notes the emergence of a new type of fan that some term “media-actives” or “prosumers” in the age of Web 2.0. These fan groups form knowledge communities that work together to solve problems – what Jenkins calls collective intelligence. Networked fans such as The HP Alliance, a group of Harry Potter aficionados, create economic value by authoring new content, identifying alternative markets that provide training and recruitment for new talent, acting as grassroots intermediaries publicizing the brand, and spreading content to new media platforms. While companies can embrace fans who work together as collaborators, most take a protectionist stance, prohibiting copyright infringement of their marks.

The admonition to go ahead and play politics is not always easy, especially when the community turns itself on the brand. Dove found itself in this situation when a consumer-generated parody advertisement exposed schizophrenia in the corporate values. The You Tube piece, Onslaught: A Message from Dove, spliced together clips from Unilever’s Dove Real Beauty Campaign, which supports the tenet that all women regardless of age or physical characteristics are beautiful, and Unilever’s Axe deodorant ads, which are built on the presumed sexual (and sometimes predatory) fantasies of young males. In a press statement about the disconnect, Dove management stood behind a house of brands architecture that astutely separated the Dove and Axe brands. But this business school logic was lost on Dove community members, who felt betrayed by the stewards of the Dove brand. Although the uproar has quieted, trust with the community has no doubt been strained. Smart companies keep their ears to the ground to identify the political dynamics that threaten their communities. Marketers cannot afford to ignore what they do not want to hear.

As Henry Jenkins notes, although we are moving headlong towards a more participatory culture – one where audiences play more visible and active roles in shaping the production and circulation of content – there is a great deal to be resolved about the terms of our participation, especially in brand communities developed independent of company sponsorship. Regardless, community stewards can’t simply ignore politics; they must develop structures, plans, and programs to help them engage. No longer just preparation for a crisis that might happen, political strategizing is standard modus operandi for guiding the co-created community brand.

**Myth #5: Focus on opinion leaders to build a strong community**

*The Reality:* Strong communities take care of all their members; everyone in the community plays an important role.

*Discussion:* Opinion leaders and evangelists play important and well-documented roles in social networks. They spread brand information; they influence decisions; they help companies gain traction for new products at a fraction of traditional costs. But this does not mean that the most important community targets are the high-activity folks in the network. Although this may be sage advice for buzz campaigns, it is a misguided approach to community building. Gladwell’s *Tipping Point* is about social trends and how they propagate and spread, not communities and how they are formed and cultivated. Applying social network analysis to brand community development can actually backfire, since communities that rely on the energies of charismatic group leaders can be unstable and even harmful to the brand. The strongest communities recognize and nurture a broad set of roles that satisfy members and add community value.
They help people address tensions arising from roles in conflict, and enable members to change roles as their needs evolve.

**Detailed Argument:** Robust communities incorporate a wide variety of participant roles beyond the opinion-leaders and evangelists that marketers love to court. Communities comprise Performers and their adoring Audiences, Mentors and Learners, and Heroes and Celebrities. Some roles are critical for community evolution and preservation: Talent Scouts seek out new members; Providers host and care for others; Catalysts and Decision Makers move the community forward; and Ambassadors represent the community to the outside. Other roles ensure continuity in community traditions, as with the Storytellers who share group lore. Jump Associates, an innovation strategy consultancy in San Mateo, studied 15 communities of various types and sizes, from the Red Hat Society to Burning Man, and found support for 14 common community roles (see Exhibit 3).

In designing strategies to build or strengthen communities, marketers are well-advised to consider how each of these roles can be supported. In doing so, it is useful to consider the work of Hope Schau (University of Arizona) and Eric Arnould (University of Wyoming), which documents eleven value-creation practices observed across nine varied community types. These include Evangelizing, Customizing, Welcoming, Badging, Justifying, Commoditizing, Competing, and Empathizing. By mapping the commonly-observed roles to value-creation practices we begin to get a stronger sense of how the various roles contribute to the group. Marketers can develop support programs to address individual roles and practices, and conduct community audits to identify gaps. Harley-Davidson’s H.O.G. club, for example, has taken a methodical approach over years to create structures, systems and processes to ensure that the community supports a broad set of roles that both satisfy members and add value to the whole. H.O.G. codifies formal rituals for welcoming new members. They provide training for roles such as Chapter Historians and the Primary Officers who make decisions on behalf of their Chapter groups. And H.O.G. awards badges that acknowledge community-relevant milestones, such as becoming a 25-year member or completing the epic 2,200 mile border-to-border Posse Ride.

While successful brand communities offer members multiple ways to participate, very few recognize a deeper problem that members often face. As discussed earlier, community membership is used to meet a variety of personal and social needs. What the work of Jump Associates uncovered is that people often find their community need sets coming into conflict with each other over time, either due to life changes, or because a community-based solution to one need ends up being at odds with another. There are generally four types of need tensions people are trying to negotiate:

- Sustaining Passions vs. Managing Responsibilities
- Seeking Depth of Experience vs. Taking on New Challenges
- Crafting One’s Own Identity vs. Plugging Into Something Bigger
- Pursuing Everyday Fun vs. Setting Up for Future Success

There are also four different role strategies that people use to help resolve the tensions that they face:

- Picking the best role to meet their needs.
- Adopting new roles as priorities shift
- Picking new communities in which to play a desired role
- Switching back and forth between roles.

Savvy managers recognize that communities retain members by resolving need tensions and meeting changing needs over time. Managers can help community members take on new roles, switch
among roles, or explore new interests and roles—without ever leaving the community behind. The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth recognized this insight as applied to its female graduate MBAs. These women were experiencing critical role misalignments in the face of decisions to start families, which typically kicked the recent graduates off of their career paths for about five years’ time. The administration stepped in with their Back in Business program, providing basic refresher courses and networking opportunities to help the women navigate back and forth between motherhood and the career world. Tuck’s Bridge Program, which provides those with degrees in the sciences comfort with business concepts and skills, operates with a similar tension-resolution strategy, all to the benefit of the brand.

Community is about building something sustainable and lasting: it’s about cultivating cultural bedrock in which everyone can find a role. The strongest communities recognize and nurture multiple roles beyond those dedicated to buzz-making, and enable members to evolve, negotiate, and change their community roles over time. Strong communities appreciate the complete person, and refuse to segment her into fragmented, static roles.

Myth #6: Online social networks are the best way to build community

The Reality: Social networks are one community tool, but the tool is not the strategy.

Discussion: Forming an online community is often a knee-jerk reaction to the CEO’s demand for a web 2.0 strategy: online social networks get lots of buzz, and tapping into them makes it seem like the company’s marketing plans are on trend and in-tune with younger consumers. With today’s enabling technologies, it seems silly to pass up a community strategy based in the virtual world. But effective strategies always use the right tool for the right task: the tool doesn’t drive the strategy. And just because it’s easy doesn’t mean it’s right – for the community or for the brand. Online social networking is just one community tool, and is more limited in effect than is commonly understood. Not all online activity is social, and powerful social networks can exist offline. Brands with effective community strategies recognize the limitations of using online networks as a community-building tool.

Detailed Argument. Online communities can be powerful brand-building tools—when considered appropriately. If we accept that effective community building begins with the needs and lives of real people, then we must consider the role of online social networks through that lens. In which social networks do our community members already participate, and why? What interactions that now occur offline might be enhanced by an online experience, and what form should that experience take? From the perspective of community members, online solutions are well-suited to meeting specific types of needs: crowdsourcing yields richer solution sets for ambiguous problems; a wide network delivers unexpected connections to people and ideas; local expertise can be made global, and global expertise leveraged; pooled information leads to new insights and ideas; stories can be shared more widely and vividly via the web. By identifying which needs of community members can be better-served by online solutions, companies can tailor online community tools to support and integrate with a comprehensive community strategy. Unfortunately, the hype surrounding online networking often gets in the way of such a discriminating approach to online community engagement.

In practice, most company-sponsored online “communities” have little to do with members or their needs. More often than not, they are nothing more than far-flung focus groups established in the hope
that consumers will bond around the virtual suggestion box. There’s nothing wrong with asking customers for ideas or feedback about new products and services, but this shouldn’t be confused with building a community. Relations with existing community members can actually be damaged if they perceive so-called “online community” efforts as cheap and easy, self-serving brand promotions instead. Moreover, if community is all about the people, well, only so many facets of most people’s lives will logically “fit” online. Some community benefits require face-to-face interaction. Sometimes the anonymity of web-based encounters interferes with the formation of social bonds. The transience of web communities can thwart the search for permanence through connection, and the broad but shallow nature of most online experiences can dilute rather than strengthen the community overall.

Lest we forget, a huge chunk of life takes place offline. In fact, recent consumer research supports renewed respect for the physical places within which communities often form. Burning Man, for example, would not offer the same sense of community were it not for its desert home. Research by Mark Rosenbaum identifies the ways in which people form significant place attachments and demonstrates how this impacts their relationships with associated brands. Retail spaces outside the home and work which host regular, informal and anticipated gatherings of individuals can foster strong attachments that are deeply rewarding. These places serve people’s needs for socialization; they offer support and companionship; they even deliver against the emotional desire for a sense of home. People come to depend on the physical places that structure their routines, and in the extreme, the place becomes a part of their identities. According to Rosenbaum, third places offer brands an incremental 20% ROI from supporting a reliable space for affiliation in the physical world.

Georges-Edouard Dias, Team Leader for Internet and e-business at L’Oreal, is a thought-leader in aligning marketing activities with brand and customer realities when setting community strategy. Dias maps brands along two dimensions: (1) whether they are mainstream or niche (longtail) brands, and (2) whether they are brands of authority or brands of conversation (See Figure 1 below). Brands of authority help consumers actualize their needs and identities by lending expertise and assistance. Brands of conversation engage in a dialogue, engendering a sense of connection through which consumers communicate, share experiences, and interact.

Each cell on the L’Oreal portfolio map suggests a different approach to building community. With brands of authority, people are primarily looking for expert affiliation and advice. For mainstream L’Oreal, this means advertising-supported hub-affiliations with celebrities such as Andie MacDowell and Eva Longoria, and a presence as THE beauty authority in Second Life. For niche La Roche-Posay, it means nurturing the worldwide dermatologist community that grants the brand credibility, both online and face-to-face. Brands of conversation, on the other hand, require special attention to the social DNA of their customers. For mainstream Garnier, this means promoting a mission of collectively fighting for a better world, then enlisting well-known bloggers to generate ideas about what this can mean for individual action. For niche Kiehl’s, this means grassroots community-building focused on sponsorship of charitable events and local gatherings, in-store bulletin boards where customers share photos and stories, and a requirement that each employee volunteer in the communities that they serve.
While the tactics vary, the goal of L’Oreal’s community building strategies is always the same: to connect with the people who make up the brand community in ways that reaffirm and strengthen the brand essence and values. Not every brand in the L’Oreal portfolio must have an online presence, nor is social networking the default online approach. As L’Oreal demonstrates, successful companies adapt their community strategies to the capabilities and competencies of the organization, and select community-building tools that are right for the corporation, the consumer, the collaborators, the competition, and the brand.

Myth #7: Successful brand communities are tightly managed and controlled

The Reality: Control is an illusion; brand community success requires opening up and letting go.

Discussion: As much as we may wish otherwise, communities are not corporate assets that management can own and control. Communities are “of and by the people.” They are inherently dynamic, shaping and being shaped by the changing and often competing interests of their members. Communities, by their very nature, defy managerial control. But letting go of control does not equate to abdicating responsibility. Effective stewards actively nurture, facilitate, and enable brand communities by creating the conditions in which they can thrive. Companies are best thought of as participants in communities rather than as managers of them. You cannot manage what you do not own.

Detailed Argument. When it comes to brand community “management,” over-control seems the norm. From Coca-Cola pulling its beloved soda off the shelves in 1985, to Microsoft alternately stifling and supporting the internal blogger Robert Scoble, to AT&T censoring portions of an online Pearl Jam concert and Harry Potter creator J.K. Rowling suing a fan site for publishing a reader’s guide to her works, big brand stewards routinely drive away community members by putting corporate priorities first. In
the best case, such action means that the community is ignored or stifled. But more often, control leads to alienated splinter groups, which turn on the community brand.

John Deighton of the Harvard Business School holds a tough line on the ownership issue. Brand communities, he says, are fundamentally organic: a natural consequence of living in a new, exposed, and technologically-enabled world. Rather than trying to manage or create brand communities, marketers are best served by simply trying to learn from them, particularly as concerns the vitality and health of their brands.

We believe there is a middle ground, wherein brand communities are neither over-controlled nor left to their own devices. In this model, brand stewards view themselves as community co-creators: colleagues who act in tacit partnership with the community to help members reach their goals. Community members continually refresh the brand’s meaning through new applications and expressions. The brand steward’s job is to create conditions in which the community can thrive and flourish, and stay attuned to opportunities to meet community needs as they evolve.

Vans, famed maker of skateboarding shoes, has proven adept over the years at nurturing the brand community through support instead of control. From its earliest days, Vans promoted its shoes directly through grassroots outreach and cultivated lead users by offering them custom-designed models to meet their needs. Rather than paying for product placement in movies and TV shows, Vans pursued “product seeding” – cultivating key connectors within each of its sports communities to help co-design new products and demonstrate them in the real world. This low-cost marketing approach, born of necessity, over time was systematized into one of the most effective organic brand communities today. There was never a question that Vans’ customers owned the brand: the role of the company was to stay close enough to its customers to understand where they were headed, and then to support and amplify those directions best suited to strengthening the community. When privately-owned skateparks began closing, Vans took care of their fans by opening its own. To keep things fresh, Vans actively identifies and nurtures new fan connections – for example, inviting Marc Jacobs to design a specialty line after noticing models in his fashion show wearing Vans.

By staying close to its fans and following their evolving interests, Vans has found new and varied ways to grow the brand through the community. The Warped Tour, a traveling music festival appealing to teens and young adults, is perhaps the best-known example. Vans originally sponsored the tour as a way to connect its customer/fans with their music heroes at a nominal cost, garnering goodwill within the community. As the event became more a celebration of skateboarding/BMX culture, Vans expanded its sponsorship and eventually bought over the tour, now using it as a major outreach vehicle to cultivate new community members and maintain connections with the core. Recent Warped Tour innovations include an extensive online community supporting year-round fan connections and helping far-flung friends coordinate tour attendance, and air-conditioned parental daycare lounges at tour stops to make it easier for younger fans to attend. Throughout its history, Vans has taken the lead from its communities, allowing them to set direction for the brand.

Many marketers buy into this middle-ground theory, but are challenged when it comes to implementation. The trick is to engage with the community based on core design principles that allow the flexibility that communities need to thrive and grow. Scripts provide one very effective basis for such an approach. Jump Associates identified nine archetypal scripts that active, compelling communities tend to follow (see Exhibit 6), including the Tribe, the Fort and the Summer Camp. Managers can set parameters for community engagement by first reinforcing key elements of the community’s existing
script, then introducing elements of new scripts to enrich the experience. For example, the Harley-Davidson Brotherhood is firmly grounded in the script of the Tribe, where deep connections are formed through shared experience, ritual and tradition. The Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) built upon this pre-existing Tribe script by adding elements of the Fort: exclusivity, clear boundaries, and shared spaces, and then drew upon the Summer Camp script to design recurring gatherings for volunteers and members. The Harley-Davidson Museum looked to the Patio script in creating conditions for new community connections to form on its campus. The Bar script was incorporated into retail design at Harley dealerships, and the Tour Group script informed the design of factory-visit packages and motorcycle touring services. Layering additional scripts over the foundation of the Tribe allowed Harley-Davidson to build multiple community experiences appealing to different audiences, while retaining the brand cohesion that defined the community at its core.

Whether through scripts, design principles, empathy or other means, community marketers need to learn to open up and let go. Is community a gutsy business? Without a doubt. It is much easier to claim a desire to share control with consumers than it is to act squarely on the same. Just ask Dove managers how it felt when they gave advertising control to consumers only to see them disparage their coveted brands. The romance novels are right about this one: letting go is hard to do. Is the company ready to accept and act upon criticism? Can it not only tolerate but also navigate the politics of communities of the brand? Can the company really deliver on the idea of letting consumers shape the community brand experience?

Summary

By all accounts, community is a tough strategic game to play. It’s a serious relationship business: complex, messy, and often risky. It takes a significant commitment of people, dollars and time. And it takes fortitude: community strategies take time to pay off, and are easy to let slide when the going gets tough or budgets become tight. Is it worth it? Without question. Executed well, a community strategy delivers greater loyalty, lower marketing costs, and a constant influx of ideas to grow the brand and the business – the things that every manager craves. Community ties provide a formidable competitive advantage. They feed an innate hunger for connection in today’s fragmented social world. For those willing to embrace community as a comprehensive business strategy, commit for the long haul, and learn to how to engage instead of control, there’s nothing more potent. The question is: are you ready? Our “Community Readiness Inventory” (Exhibit 5) helps gauge whether you have what it takes.
Exhibit 1: A Compendium of Community Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reach beyond my network</th>
<th>Raise the quality of my interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish permanent roots</td>
<td>Pursue luxuries guilt-free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve moments of privacy</td>
<td>Sustain my passions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capture the present</td>
<td>Explore different parts of my identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get help to get stuff done</td>
<td>Express devotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivate my skills</td>
<td>Deepen bonds through shared ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay adventurous</td>
<td>Aspire to be my own keeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage Expectations</td>
<td>Use social rules to position myself in the larger picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek tools to support my unique DNA</td>
<td>Level out my connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 2: Forms of Affiliation: Pools, Webs and Hubs

**Pools**
People have loose associations with others in the community and strong associations with the shared activity, goals, or values. The activity, goals, or belief is key to this affiliation.

*Examples:*
- Apple evangelists
- Right-wing Republicans
- Ironman triathletes

**Webs**
People have strong one to one relationships with others in the community who have a similar set of needs. The other people are key to this affiliation.

*Examples:*
- Facebook
- Cancer Survivors Network
- Hash House Harriers

**Hubs**
People have strong connections to a central person in the community and weaker associations to others in the community. The central person is key to this affiliation.

*Examples:*
- Hannah Montana
- Oprah
- Deepak Chopra
### Exhibit 3: Common Community Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receives and validates performances.</td>
<td>Hosts or takes care of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes mentorship and seeks improvement.</td>
<td>Teaches others and shares expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back-up</td>
<td>Decision Maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a safety net to others.</td>
<td>Makes key choices affecting community function and form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Talent Scout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as both peer and motivator.</td>
<td>Recruits and invites new people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller</td>
<td>Performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carries the culture within the community.</td>
<td>Takes the spotlight and makes themselves visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero</td>
<td>Ambassador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a role model to others.</td>
<td>Represents the community to the outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>Celebrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduces others to new people or things.</td>
<td>Well-known figures of the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exhibit 4: A Sampling of Community Scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Script</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Tribe</td>
<td>Deep connections through ritual and tradition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fort</td>
<td>An exclusive place for insiders to be safe and feel protected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing Circle</td>
<td>An interest-based gathering where people share experiences, provide support, and socialize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Patio</td>
<td>A semi-private place that facilitates in-depth, meaningful connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bar</td>
<td>A public space that grants reliable though shallow social connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tour Group</td>
<td>Opportunities to participate in new experiences while staying inside a comfort zone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Space</td>
<td>A place for performers to seek an audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barn Raising</td>
<td>An effective way to “get stuff done” while socializing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Camp</td>
<td>Periodic experiences that reaffirm connections.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exhibit 5: The Community Readiness Audit

1) Does community serve the strategic goals of the larger organization?

2) Is the business model aligned around a community strategy, and do core competencies support this model?

3) Is there company-wide commitment to community strategy?
   - Is there C-Level support for community strategy?
   - Is there executive oversight for community strategy?
   - Do brand community champions exist across the organization?
   - Is “community” a strategy that lives beyond the marketing department walls?
   - Is the company prepared to commit to community strategy for the long-term?

4) Does company culture support community strategy:
   - Does everyone in the company possess an intimate and empathic understanding of the firm’s customers and the role of the community brand in their lives?
   - Does the company put the needs of people first?
   - Are all decisions made with consideration for their impact on customers?
   - Does the company enable direct contact between staff and customers?
   - Are community ideals codified in the company’s Mission, Vision, and Values?
   - Does the company accept and embrace the risk/reward trade-offs that come from engagement of community brands?
   - Is the culture “open-hearted” enough to invite co-ownership of the brand?

5) Do brand values support community ideas and ideals: are brand values consistent with the notion of community?

6) Does organizational design enable the community strategy?

7) Are incentive systems, financial resources, and human resources aligned with community requirements?

8) Does the company have a strategy for creating value for the community and capturing this value for the firm?

9) Is the organization clear on the responsibility and approach for dealing with community-precipitated crises, inconvenient truths, and other politically-charged events?

10) Has the company developed a system for understanding the role, health and function of the brand community?