Chapter XIV

How Can We Enhance Member Participation in Virtual Communities?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to find the factors that enhance member participation in virtual communities. Although there are many factors influencing member participation, this study limits its independent variables to those of managing strategy and information system quality. In addition to finding their direct impacts, this study identifies indirect effects through two mediating variables such as member visit and sense of community. The results of this study revealed that there was no significant direct path from managing strategy to participation. However, the path from sense of community to participation was strongly supported by the results. This then implies that a manager of a community has to emphasize the sense of community, membership in particular, in order to enhance participation. In addition, the results showed that sense of community could be enhanced by an appropriate managing strategy, while the number of visits could be increased by the information system's quality.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of the Internet has created a lot of new phenomena, some never before imagined. One such example is that of the "virtual community". Communities were once thought of in terms of geographical boundaries such as a township or neighbor-

hood. Now, however, we have the concept of virtual communities. People can interact based upon common interests and goals regardless of their location. Martin (1999) pointed out the virtual community as one of seven factors that would change the way of business in the 21st century, while Sculley and Woods (1999) argued that the virtual community would be the key factor for the success of the B2B e-Marketplace. In fact, communities are considered to be one of the three most important factors, along with content and commerce, which compose Internet business. In the United States, 'iVillage' (http://www.ivillage.com) has a typical business model that uses virtual communities as the primary source of revenue. This site achieved, on average, 365 million monthly page views during the second quarter of 2003, and its membership grew to approximately 11 million users during the same period. Meanwhile, Daum Communication of Korea (http://cafe.daum.net) has 21 million members and 17.3 billion page views per month as of March 2003. During the year 2000, the most successful site in Korea was 'I Love School' (http://www.iloveschool.co.kr), which attracted 9 million members and achieved 2 billion page views per month by June 2001. The site succeeded by furnishing all the schools in Korea with virtual communities. In October 2000, Daum and 'I Love School' were ranked fourth and sixth respectively by Alexa (http://www.alexa.com). And the iVillage was ranked 18th by Jupiter Media Metrix in July 2001.

Then why is the virtual community highlighted in this Internet era? There are three explanations. First, the virtual community could be the new market for a business; thus large numbers of companies could develop this for the purpose of commerce (Hagel III & Armstrong, 1997). Second, the virtual community could be used for enhancing customer loyalty for a specific brand (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000; McWilliam, 2000). The third and most important reason is the basic human need for personal relationships (Rheingold, 1992). Whatever the explanation, the Yankee Group reports that US companies invested more than $300 million in community software, implementation and management in 1999 (Meehan, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to find the factors that enhance member participation in virtual communities. In the beginning stages, virtual communities were evaluated by how many members they acquired. But as more and more virtual communities arose on the Internet and people joined multiple communities, the numbers of hyper-affiliates — people who are passionate about their communities — became more important (Cothrel, 2000). Meanwhile, each community's revenue source had changed from online advertisement to shopping and brokerage commissions. Thus it is believed that participation should be enhanced for the community to become more successful.

There are two different approaches that address virtual community participation strategy. One is to approach it from a social perspective and the other from a socio-technical perspective (Koh & Kim, 2003). The socio-technical perspective emphasizes both sociability and usability, and the fit between them. We believe that the socio-technical approach (Pasmore, 1995) is useful to address virtual community as a dynamic process (Preece, 2000). So, this study limits its independent variables to managing strategy and information system quality, which are thought to be important factors in a community operator's perspective (Kim, 2000). In addition to finding their direct impacts, this study identifies indirect effects through two mediating variables, member visit and sense of community.

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