Chapter 21

Building Web Communities:
An Example Methodology

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the chapter is to provide an example of community definition and community building methodology using a step-by-step approach. The presented community specification and building methodology allows refining a broad community purpose into specific measurable goals, selects the social media tools that are best matched with the company needs and results in a platform specification that can be relatively simply transformed into software specifications or platform requirements.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a tool which enables individuals from all over the world to connect, work and play together in ways that were not possible before. Individuals now have the power to become content producers and global thought leaders without the help of big corporations or mainstream media. These changes are also challenging the traditional perception of enterprises. Consumers can now talk to each other on a global scale and they demand more from companies. On the other hand, global and distributed companies are also using online tools for collaboration and innovation. It is

becoming increasingly important for companies to learn about the changing media landscape and embrace the new wave of online social technologies to (re)connect with their customers or make internal collaboration more efficient.

Among other things, companies should pay attention to the phenomena of web communities and how web communities can influence their business. Many companies want to have their own web communities based around their product or service, but a lot of them fail to define the right goals and strategy for a web community and consequently fail to build a lively web community with a clear business value - even if they have the right product or service to build a community around. In this chapter we will take a look at the

most important elements of web communities and how we can combine these elements in a value-added methodology for defining and building web communities. We will also present our step-by-step community building approach using an example community definition process.

DEFINING WEB COMMUNITIES

Communities were traditionally formed through interaction with other individuals living in the same location. Grouping has enabled people to deal with their environment in a more effective way. Modern communication networks and broadly available transportation has made it easier for people to stay or get in touch over longer distances (Wellman et al, 2002). Therefore, communities can nowadays be defined as "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity" (ibidem). This can be achieved both in local neighborhoods and on the Internet using various web technologies. When communities are formed on the Internet, we can call them web communities, online communities or even virtual communities. Web communities can also have an "offline" component. Howard Rheingold, one of the pioneers in the field of web communities, defined a web community as "a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (Preece, 2001a).

People instinctively form web communities every day. They can be centered around such things as a common purpose, interest, practice or circumstance (Clarke, 2009). They want to exchange information about how to file their tax report (community of purpose), talk about their favorite music (community of interest), connect with other individuals doing the same job (communities of practice) or talk about the problems they have with their teenage children (community of circumstance). Other shared attributes of an online community can include emotional connections, shared activities, resources and conventions, and interpersonal support (Lazar and Preece, 1998).

Community building is a complex interdisciplinary process that does not have many established models. Too often the models focus on the software used by web communities and forget that software is just a tool that enables a community to communicate and interact over space and time. Software or any other technology by itself doesn't form communities or guarantee a successful online community (De Souza and Preece, 2004). Early examples of web communities like The WELL (http://www.well.com/), which started as a simple bulletin-board system (BBS), show that web communities often don't require advanced software to spring into live. Instead, successful web communities are determined by social factors (such as people, purpose and policies), although well-designed software functionality and usability can improve the success of a community (ibidem). Much more important is getting together the right people, who have something in common and are willing to invest their time and effort into their community (which is of course also true for off-line communities). Therefore the focus of this chapter is on the people-side of the community building process.

Communities are often created with a bottom-up approach, we can also call these communities member-initiated (Porter, 2004). People naturally come together with a common interest, and the community is managed by members (ibidem). In the business world, we often have the desire to "build" a community top-down. We can call these community organization-sponsored, and the members of these communities are somehow connected to the business and goals of the organization (ibidem). A company might want to expand a real world community of customers on the web or wants to give customers or employees the opportunity to network in an online environment with hopes that they might form a web community and strengthen their relationships with one another and

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