

Robyn Tippins | Miranda Marquit

COMPOSITION BOOK

Community 101

How to grow an
online community

*Foreword
by
Dave Taylor*



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Book Excerpt

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Foreword by Dave Taylor



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Foreword by Dave Taylor

Robyn starts this book by talking about a community she helped created in 1998. I can remember a decade prior to that the virtual community my friends—old and new—had created through something called Usenet.

Usenet wasn't glamorous and at that point our computer systems displayed only text. No graphics, no buttons, no fancy windows, just a screen of text and a set of complex commands you typed in to work with the system. And yet I remember the friends I made, some of whom I still count as friends today.

That's because a community, in reality, is about people and how those people interact with each other and learn to appreciate each other's similarities and differences, and also about how we all learn to empathize with and care about one another.

Robyn and Miranda know very well that a community is all about people, and that the secrets to building a healthy online community revolve around how you interact with the people in that community, not the technology, color schemes, skins or typefaces available—and that's what this book is all about.

In this book the authors talk about ROI, return on investment, for companies creating communities, but I suggest that you shouldn't quantify it in terms of money, customer retention or sales, but instead focus on two basic factors: market segment visibility and customer happiness. Happy customers are evangelists, as Apple Computer demonstrates quarter after quarter.

The authors also offer five basic rules for creating a successful online community: tell it like it is, work towards positive change, be visible and active, keep

tweaking and tuning the site and community guidelines and remember the 'do unto others' golden rule. They're spot on...because the rules of creating a successful virtual community are the same as for any other kind of community: listen along with your talking, and be honest, engaging and polite.

Now, implementing these rules consistently and encouraging your community members to embody them too? That's not so easy after all, and that's exactly why you need to say 'enough foreword, let's get on with it!'

And so I'll wrap up with my golden rule: stop writing when you've made your point! :-)

Enjoy the rest of this book and I'm sure I'll see you online in one community or another.

Dave Taylor
Boulder, Colorado

Dave Taylor, author of film reviews at DaveOnFilm.com, is a member of more virtual communities than he can count. Operator of the popular site AskDaveTaylor.com, he counts his friends by the thousands. By the time you read this book, Dave will be celebrating thirty years online.

Introduction

It's difficult to believe, but a debate exists about whether or not online, or 'virtual,' communities are 'real.' To delve into that discussion, search for 'virtual community' on Wikipedia,¹ and you'll see that just like every topic under the sun, people will debate just about anything online. On this discussion in particular, many do not think there are strong enough ties in most virtual communities to recognize them as real communities. There are others, though, who disagree and insist that virtual communities are every bit as close-knit and cohesive as real-life communities.

Robyn says:

"I've been involved in virtual communities since 1995, and have formed some very strong connections to the men and women I've met over the years. These are the people I ask when I need advice on how to deal with work and family, and, thanks to their support and advice, I'm a better person. Some of the communities I've interacted with over the years exist solely online, and many of these have become so important to real life that some of the members began to meet offline, even when we had to travel across several state lines to do so.

One of my favorite early online communities was started to chronicle the months of my first pregnancy. The 'FebMoms' club, on iVillage, was a part of an online women's

1. Wikipedia: "Virtual Community," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_community

community back in 1998. I interacted with roughly 30 moms on a daily basis, usually via email, but often in the online forums as well. We shared the daily joys and pains of pregnancy. From intimate discourses on body changes to how we were going to decorate our nurseries, we lived our lives together, and the women became my best friends. Our camaraderie was based on this shared experience, and it would have been nearly impossible to find, locally, 30 women who all shared the same birth month. This community could only be found online.

We saw several members drop out when their pregnancies ended both naturally, or with medical help. We supported each other through miscarriages, abortions, or still-births, and rejoiced at each healthy birth. Our group continued into the first year of our babies' lives, commiserating the trouble regaining our pre-baby bodies; discussing the difficulties of post-partum sex; railing against the issues we each had with ob-gyns, pediatricians, labor coaches and daycare workers; arguing the perpetual debate of breast vs. bottle and working moms vs. stay-at-home-moms, and generally we both hated and enjoyed each other's company. For me, no offline community could have given me more enjoyment and more frustration. These moms were as much a community as my church, my extended family and my neighbors. I both hated and loved these moms, every bit as I dually hate and love the offline communities I enjoy. Real community? I think so!"

<p>Join the Community</p> 	<p>Antidepressant Lawsuit If you took Paroxetine while Pregnant ~ contact us, we can help! Paxil-Attorney.com</p>	<p>1 Tip to Shed 9lbs Weekly Erase Pounds of Stomach Fat C This 1 Weird Old Diet Rule www.healthcastle.com</p>
<p>login or create an account</p>	<p>Your Community</p>	
<p>Learn More About Prenatals!</p>	 <p>GET CONNECTED with other parents and parents-to-be right now! Join the conversations, share triumphs, special moments, vent and support one another. Find parent and birth groups or hook up with other parents with similar special interests! Make yourself heard with others who understand what you're going through! Don't miss our featured boards below, join our twitter and facebook fan pages, too! And to make the whole journey even better, you can bring Pregnancy.org with you everywhere! Download our toolbar today!</p>	
<p>Prenatal Vitamins</p> 	<p>What's Happening in Your Community</p> <p>DID YOU KNOW? We have podcasts?</p> <p>Join your peers on the bulletin boards!</p> <p>Click here for upcoming chats with authors, experts and celebrities!</p>	
<p>Prenatal Vitamins Prenatal supplements consist of a variety of vitamins and minerals. During pregnancy, a woman's daily intake... Read more</p> <p>Sponsored by  Bayer</p>		

Regardless of your perspective on this debate, as a company, in a world which increasingly does business online, and where customers can be found all over the world via the web, learning to build an online community becomes as vital to your bottom line as optimizing your website for search engines or ensuring that your PR department gets your messaging out to the right outlets. It's now a necessity in business to have a social strategy, so sit up and pay attention!

The More Things Change...

The more technology changes the way we live and interact, the more things stay the same. In many ways, online communities are similar to the communities of our predecessors. People have always been drawn together by common interests, like geography (local communities) or identity (families, union workers, political groups). It's much the same online. The Huffington Post is built up of a community that revolves around the politics of progressive, democratic Americans (identity).

Craigslist is hyper local, with people from cities across the world, interacting with their own local communities (geography). We still come together based on geography and identity, much the same as we did, way back when.

The way we act when we come together hasn't really changed either. People have always vigorously debated with those who don't agree with them. As before, reputation among the members of the community is key. Debate is still one way of solving problems and winning over those who disagree. Debate also makes us feel superior, more tightly binds members of communities, and solidifies our own opinions.

We base our decisions about these debates on the reputations of those arguing. In offline communities, a debate about county taxes will ensure we give more credence to the County Administrator than we do to the out-of-work actor who lives two states away. But more than just relevance, reputation matters. We trust the opinion of Dr. Oz when the question is medically related, even more than we trust our local doctor, because Dr. Oz's reputation is bigger and better. Likewise, in online communities, we look at the number of posts someone has written, how much everyone else respects or reviles those posts, or the relevance of their expertise to the debate, and we come up with an internal score to judge their level of expertise in the community. New-comers, online and offline, must prove themselves worthy of our trust.

Online outcasts are as common a commodity as community outcasts in the real world. We stay away from the shady guy who hangs around preschools. We base our offline assumptions of reputation on how people look, talk, act, or smell and even if they appear to have confidence. Robyn likes to say that the world is just like high school, no matter where you are. There are niche groups (jocks, nerds, brains) in every community. The difference on the web is that these groups can shut out the other groups and better carry on their conversations without the same fear of persecution. This is not to say that there aren't horrible people online, just as there are horrible people offline. The same person we call a troll online, is probably a miserable, undesirable person offline as well. And trolls didn't just happen when online communities came about. Trolls were there all those years ago, even though we called them by different names.

Even the way we treat each other is the same. In offline communities, even before the Internet, people spoke more nicely to your face than behind your back. Buttering up a journalist, now and then, was a great way to get favorable coverage for your company. All of that is almost completely unchanged in online communities, except now you're much more likely to get caught gaming the system.

Online communities bring age-old human interactions to the web. The number of sites devoted to specific interests is growing, allowing nearly anyone to find a community to belong to. While there are only a handful of bloggers in our hometown, we can log on and find thousands to discuss the daily woes of being your own boss, supporting yourself merely through advertising with a good dose of effort and talent. Online, people band together for support, human emotional contact and protection—just as they do in real life, but you're far more likely to find carbon-copies of yourself around the globe than to hope that they exist in the limited pool of people in your small town.

Application to Your Business

Reputation represents one of the most important carry-overs from the offline to the online world. Your reputation on the web is always tested. Are you ethical? Are you a responsible member of the community? How long have you been a member? Do you lurk, or do you frequently post? Do people trust you? Are your actions online consistent with your actions offline? Do you offer credible and reliable information?

Just as how your standing in the corporate or political world, or how consumers view you, affects your offline business ventures, your online success depends on how members of your web community view you and your brand.

Debate is a mainstay of community that carries over into cyberspace. We debate in the real world, considering the merits of positions, ideas, products and information. And we love to endlessly discuss things when someone has screwed the pooch.

Almost all of us have been in the position of engaging in lengthy discourse, of very little real import, simply because someone on the Internet was (gasp!) wrong. Debate is of vast importance online. And

it's fun. From discussions on theology to whether Splenda will kill you, members of virtual communities will debate for hours, days even, and usually end up without a conclusion. This debate, though, brings people together. It enriches your community and deepens bonds. As in real life, we fight with people and then we make up. This exchange of raw emotions creates a schism which, when mended, bonds participants more deeply than if they only exchanged pleasantries all day long. We fight with our kids, spouses, siblings and parents. We do not fight with our PTA rep, the cashier at Target, or others who are not truly important to our lives. When you can love someone enough to rail at them, you know that you are truly bonded. Debate makes the heart grow fonder, I suppose.

While this means you can improve your company's position by joining the debate offline, it also means the Internet offers opportunities to spark debate in the virtual world. As you might expect, debate draws people (virality). Consumers pay attention to debates in their communities. They are drawn to new communities when they see an exciting, relevant discussion. This truth gains greater importance and more voice online, where anyone can contribute to the dialogue, and usually does so, both on Facebook and Twitter, and with their blog.

Beware, though: Just as you can make mistakes in the real world that will turn you and your company into a sort of social pariah, it is possible to find yourself labeled an undesirable in the online realm. It's not only possible, but it's also probable, if you don't handle yourself well. The key to avoiding that fate rests in your ability to effectively build and nurture an online community.

New Ways of Forming Communities Mean New Rules

Of course, nothing stays exactly the same, and online communities are no exception. They differ from offline communities in key ways. Geography is less important in web communities. Physical presence is not a requirement for community participation. Geographic identity is much more liberal in an online community.

Geography matters much less than it once did, though with apps like Gowalla and Foursquare, that's changing. Before the widespread popularity of the web, community definition was limited largely by physical location. Your community was your neighborhood, your school and your city. In the old days, it was quite difficult to leave your community, especially in the times before easy and affordable motorized travel. But online, if you want to leave your virtual community, you can simply delete your account. Of course, in some communities this is easier said than done, but it's a conclusion that can be obtained without massive upheaval of your offline life. This is a much easier solution than moving to another geographic area.

Likewise, physical presence is no longer required to participate in a community. You do not have to head to the town square with your soap box if you want to voice your opinion. Just log on to a community discussion board and tell people *exactly* what you think. Going to your monthly book club meeting no longer means you must travel to someone's house, find a sitter and bake a sugary confection. Book discussions online allow you to attend from the comfort of your own home, in robe and pajamas, long after the kids are in bed. Geography is not a barrier.

Identity is its own complex topic. Way back when, your identity was inextricably connected to your family, your co-workers and your friends. Whether your parents were demons or saints, that identity inevitably passed on to you. Was your mom a doctor or the town whore? Did your dad spend years at Oxford or in jail? Were your grandparents respected members of the clergy or wandering carnies? With an online community, you have a more fluid identity that you can change as you grow. Robyn has been widely identified as a mom, music buff, mountain climber, avid romance novel devourer and speaker on social media, and jumps from circle to circle with very little difficulty. Identity can encompass all your complexity and intricacies.

Still, reputation is a factor. In Robyn's example, if those niches were polar opposites. Say she was once roundly opposed to something and is now all for it—she'd have some explaining to do. Because, while you can change and grow, just as you can offline, the web has a way of bringing things up again and you will have to answer for anything you've said or done that doesn't jive with what you are currently saying. And, while you can recreate yourself, if you are fairly well known, this

process will be much more difficult. You can have multiple identities, and hide your offline identity from the online world, but as the web matures, this is becoming much more difficult, and that is a good thing.

Online identity is more flexible than the offline identity, but the online identity is becoming more fixed. It's a case where the new rule is actually being replaced by the old rule. As social networks become more important, and as online communities grow in popularity and become more real, your online identity is losing some of its fluidity. Everyone you know online associates you with a specific screen name, and that avatar personifies your identity.

What happens to your reputation when you change your identity? Will you delete all your accounts with that screen name? Will you delete the blog associated with that persona? As that connection from blog, to Twitter ID, to LinkedIn profile, to Facebook account, to OpenID domain, to the myriad other social media profiles you have, gets even more blurred and becomes more of a direct link to the real you, removing yourself will become more complicated. That's why it's important to carefully consider your online identity, and strive for consistency.

Why Online Community Matters

As the web develops, online community will only become more important. Social networking through online community membership is established normalcy today, and we don't expect that to change considerably in the near future. This is especially important for businesses to take into consideration. Customers want interaction with companies, and social media allows this to happen, whether on your own site or on any number of third-party sites. Unless your company is an unknown entity, a conversation will happen, involving your company or service. The only real question is whether your own voice will be part of the discussion.

Consider this: Facebook reports over 400 million active users.² MySpace boasts well over 113 million monthly active users.³ Yahoo! and Google are tapping into their own social graphs, with Yahoo! Updates and Google Buzz. Even if you take into account multiple identities and inactive accounts, a large audience can be reached via social networking. Ask the Arctic Monkeys: Without MySpace, they might never have reached such a wide audience. OKGo! may never have had their amazing success without the viral treadmill dances they posted on YouTube. Social networking is paving the way for new opportunities—but only if businesses learn to build community effectively and appropriately.

Social media is the natural evolution to the web, but it is so much more than viral marketing. Companies could feasibly be made—or unmade—based on how well they execute their online community strategy. Web 2.0 represented a huge step in user interaction on the Internet. As the next iteration of the net evolves, social networking is going to become even more important. We're already seeing consumers demand more in terms of business interaction, accountability and ease of use, online. If your company doesn't start building a community now, someone else will, and you may be left out of your own discussion.

2. Facebook member statistics,
<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

3. Sarah Tabil and Adam Satariano, "MySpace Appoints Former Facebook Executive as Chief," Bloomberg, <http://bit.ly/b21Xz0> (www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601103&sid=arxIMc7Zx0zU&refer=us).

1 What It Means to Build Community

Now we have a solid grasp of what online communities *are*. It's time to tackle what it *means* to build community. In both online and offline communities, it's evident that there are different types of groups, and different approaches to the way leaders in each community behave. There are some communities where the participants are active, and the subject matter is infinite. On the other hand, there are communities where the subject matter is finite, and any off-topic chatter is discouraged. And, there are others where people belong simply for the sake of belonging—think Facebook Fan pages—and no matter the subject matter, they may not take part in debate and may be there simply to digest information. There is overlap among these types of communities as well.

A book club often has a set structure and a finite topic. Members may frown upon discussions about personal matters or religion. In this community, each member is expected to share his or her thoughts about the book, and 'lurking' is discouraged. Another common community is a parent/teacher organization. While the topics may vary, the overall aim remains the same. Lurkers are encouraged to soak up information, though, and there are clear leaders who spend a large

amount of their time being active in the group. Topics in both groups change on a regular basis, but the theme of the group never does. Participation may vary, but the fact that participation by some members is always present, does not.

Online communities are similar. You might notice that some websites are fairly static. They post information, but they do not actively support two-way conversations. They may surface relevant pictures, but they do not offer ways to encourage community participation in either uploading their own relevant pictures, or by offering ways to comment on, or even remove, pictures. Other online portals seem to be really alive. They encourage discussion and look for input from community members. In many ways, these variances are similar to the difference between attending a speech and attending a panel discussion, and the resulting effects on community members reflect these dissimilarities.

Speeches are distinctly different from panel discussions that offer a question/answer portion. The speech may be fiery—and even interesting. It may be accompanied by visuals or music. But beyond showing up and maybe doing a little networking afterwards, there's not a great deal for the listener to do. Audience participation is passive. You may take notes, you may even blog about it later, but the speaker will likely never know how you feel about what he's said. This is a classic example of one-way communication.

A panel discussion, on the other hand, requires active participation. There are more players, which means you get the points of view of several people. You can ask questions and share your opinions as part of the audience. You benefit from the questions that other audience members ask. You become part of a discussion that you must actively engage in, even if you don't ask a question yourself. The spotlight is on you and your peers almost as much as it is on the speakers. It can involve a variety of experiences and interactive moments. Networking and education happens in both experiences, but in communities that are alive, the give and take is sometimes so rewarding that it takes both the topic and your participation to the next level.

If you could choose to participate in an activity that featured panel discussions, with Q/A, over an activity, like a speech, that meant you sat in a chair and only digested information, which would you choose? Do you think the people you are trying to reach are any different? People

thrive on knowing that they are being heard and that they are offering you, and those around you, value with their input. Are you giving speeches to the members of your community, or are you giving them an opportunity to respond?

If you are not giving them a chance to talk back, your community will gradually shrink as members defect to communities that make efforts to value their input.

Moving Beyond the Static

Not too long ago, web pages were mostly built in a static state. They didn't change very often. You'd post information, and it stayed on your site for months. Attention business owners: the web has evolved! Gone are the days when a static page could suffice as your web presence. In this world, community members demand so much more. Many businesses are listening, investing thousands of dollars to upgrade their static homes on the web, remodeling them into thriving places where community can take root.

If your goal is to increase traffic to your pages, your site must have changed since a user's last visit. There is very little reason for a mother to visit her daughter's soccer team site if there is rarely any new information on it. Likewise, your site is not worth your customer's time if everything on it is outdated and of little value.

An easy way to make sure there is always something of value and interest to your visitors is to use dynamic content. RSS feeds can deliver images, video, text and audio to your site automatically. Internet users expect this. From the beginning, when a customer visits your site, and other similar sites, they expect to find store locations, hours and a page detailing the company. In addition to this basic information, visitors to your site now require information on current sales, the opportunity to make an appointment (if available), coupons, testimonials from other customers, suggestions on how to use your products and services, links to companion sites, tutorials and maybe even previews to upcoming events. People expect your site to be just as important to them and to you as your stores. They expect an online experience that is as relevant as the offline one.

Frequent updates are mandatory. This is a primary reason behind the explosion of blogging as an important community-building tool. Blogs make it easy to update content, as well as add a variety of media to a website. Blogs are readymade for community interaction, providing a way for members to post comments and share their ideas, with or without your constant policing.

Many businesses also integrate chats, online workshops, webinars, and forums to increase interaction on their websites. You can encourage community members to submit their own video tutorials, or create podcasts, based on the product you sell or the industry in which you participate. Part of building a community is encouraging member participation. Consider that companies who do not encourage feedback (both good and bad) are stifling their customers. They are placing a muzzle on what could be complimentary or constructive feedback, and that's never good for business. Additionally, by refusing to listen to negative feedback, companies miss out on the opportunity to learn what they can do to better serve community members. Dan and Chip Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*, are big fans of the 'customer thank you.' In an article for *Fast Company* magazine, the authors cite a study—conducted by Sonja Lyubomirsky, a researcher at the University of California Riverside—that looked at strategies to make yourself happier. According to the study, the first was expressing gratitude. The Heath brothers explain that a customer's thanks 'creates a halo of happiness.'⁴ Feedback, positive or negative, will help your community members feel as though they are just as invested in the community's success as you are, essentially part of a family. Emotionally invested community members can become both loyal customers and enthusiastic fans.

More than ROI

One of the staples of business thinking for decades has been return on investment (ROI). Businesses want to feel as though they are getting a real bang for their buck, and they should. ROI is never something to ignore, but with community efforts, the way we calculate it must be adjusted. It should come as no surprise that ROI is a key factor that

4. Dan Heath and Chip Heath, "Made to Stick," *Fast Company* (October 2008): 95–96.

stakeholders use to sell community building efforts to decision makers in the corporate world. After all, it takes time, effort and money to redesign your website so that it is conducive to community. Spending must also take into account the cost of management of this community, which usually requires new headcount for the day-to-day task of policing and messaging. By far, effort is the most expensive part of community redesigns. The technology is not very expensive—it's often free—but the task of doing the work of community can be extremely time-consuming, especially in the beginning.

ROI is vital in determining the success of marketing efforts, but the ROI on a community site is often difficult to ascertain, especially in the early stages. Building community online requires you to think beyond the bottom line, including how much traffic your community is driving to your business web address. Looking beyond ROI forces you to see your customers as more than just numbers and statistics. You come to see them as community members and potential community members. But numbers matter, and they should always matter. 'We count people because people count' is a mantra we've all heard and it's no less important today with our communities spread across multiple sites and interested in multiple topics. The key is to strike a balance between ruthlessly driving traffic and building a community of members that feels unique and appreciated.

But it's not impossible to measure ROI. Dell has done so with their innovative Twitter marketing. In June of 2009, Dell announced that they had reached over \$3M in sales that were directly related to traffic from Twitter.⁵ But, just as important as direct revenue increases, is the amount of money you might save if you use online channels to serve your customers. Think how much it costs you to help someone use your product via Facebook, versus the cost of technical help via a call center. Consider the savings of using Twitter to promote a campaign, rather than an expensive PR firm. The cost-saving uses of social media shouldn't be discounted, and we can't only look at making money, but saving it as well, when we measure ROI.

5. Marshall Kirkpatrick, "Social Media ROI: Dell's \$3m on Twitter and Four Better Examples," Read Write Web (June 12, 2009). Available online: <http://bit.ly/d2BHQQR> (www.readwriteweb.com/archives/social_media_roi_dells_3m_on_twitter_and_four_bett.php).

When measuring the ROI of using social media, we suggest quantifying a goal. Quantify the benefit of reaching the goal. Consider the costs, both in employee time and money (because time is money), and ascertain what it will take to hit that goal. If the costs of reaching that goal are worth it, then jump in and do what you need to do. If the time and money spent does not seem to be worth it upon initial analysis, consider this: your competitors are doing it. Quantify your goals in another way. Will you lose business if you do not make the changes necessary to build a thriving online community? If your business looks to be in danger, make sure you calculate this into your figures. Calculate the negative PR that could result if you avoid changes. What's it going to cost you if you don't? If the ROI of the goal isn't clear, then make sure you include the possible costs of doing nothing.

Community efforts should be a welcome addition to your PR strategy, not a viral addition to your advertising efforts. If your primary aim is merely to drive traffic to your current site, chances are that your community will fail miserably. Creating a MySpace page so that people can friend your new shampoo is not community-building. Lumping this advertising cost into the cost assessment of your community plan is budget mismanagement. Advertising is vital, but don't lump advertising into community budgets, because it's not the same. Viral marketing may very well be important to your company, but this is a part of advertising, and shouldn't be confused with community building. Community building is a long-term effort. If you are having trouble deciding how to allocate your resources, consider the length of the campaign. Community is for the long run, and should be around as long as you are. Advertising campaigns have a finite beginning and end.

In the new world, a place where people are creating connections online and looking to *belong* to a community, it isn't enough to treat your customers like customers, unless your only aim is to sell them something. This is a valuable goal, but a sale is a singular event. In the new world, what you're looking for is 'fans.' Fans come back to you over and over, and they thank you for taking their money. Your customers and your community may be part of your target market, or niche market, or any other kind of market, but it's important to remember that community members aren't only your customers. They're your fans; your community.

Focusing Your Efforts on the Community

Building a community means focusing your efforts on delivering a place that provides value to your community members. Today's web is about users being in control of their Internet experiences. Ten years ago, developing a web presence was more like hanging up a shingle, and even the best efforts were really no more than an online business card. Now there are so many shingles and cards out there that successful companies have to differentiate their businesses. In order to be noticed, your site must provide something that is really useful and worthy of a user's time. Break out of the 1990s mentality and be prepared for the next iteration of the web, which we're already seeing comes with real personalization, real customization, and real value-add to a user's day.

This means you need to take the time to figure out what your community members want, and then you need to give it to them. It's no different than the days of old when we held focus groups, iterated on a product to meet the demands of the group, and held another focus group to see if our product would pass muster. The major difference now, is that learning what today's users want is so much easier, and cheaper. All you have to do is listen.

One of the more interesting sectors in this area is retail fashion. Some of these websites offer rich media that includes different views of products, ratings and reviews, options for sharing via Twitter or Facebook, and even the ability to try on outfits for an idea of what they might look like on someone who has your weight, height, hair color and skin tone. Lands' End was a pioneer in this effort, a decade ago, when they became the first company to use the MyVirtualModel program. According to a 2001 press release from MyVirtualModel, the makers of the technology behind the project, the Lands' End conversion rate increased by 26% and Average Order Value (AOV) increased by 13% during the period between November 2000 and April 2001!⁶ Those numbers are significant, and that's not even taking into account the probable drop in returns!

6. "New Data from Lands' End Shows Value of My Virtual Model™ Technology." MyVirtualModel (press release), Montreal, CA: September 25, 2001.

Why was it so successful for Lands' End? Well, what's the worst part about shopping online? You don't know if what you buy will fit, and even if it does, you can't really tell how it will look once you've put it on. Will this bathing suit make my arms look fat? Will this skirt make my legs look short? These are real factors that impact the sales decision, and Lands' End knew that if they gave their customers some help in that department, it would benefit them as well. Lands' End anticipated customer needs and, in the process, removed a major barrier to sales. Know what customers want and give it to them!

The ability to create wish lists and share them with others is an easy way to do something similar, and it's a feature we see on the most successful retail websites. Some stores take the experience further by allowing customers to rate items, bookmark them, flag the unscrupulous, read the product blog, and share reviews of products they've purchased. Amazon.com has derived much of its success from fostering these community activities.

Case Study: CafePress.com



The CafePress.com website is a great example of a community-minded retailer. The idea behind CafePress is that you can go in and buy products, create products, and sell your own creations, as well. The site features the ability to look at products from different views, and in different colors.

CafePress incorporates several community features into its website:

- Forums
- Chats
- Workshops
- Blog
- Evaluation Panel
- Learning Center
- Planned Events (some of them offline as well as online)

CafePress users are not only members of the CafePress community, but also members of distinct communities within the ecosystem. Each designer has the opportunity to build his own fans, and CafePress supports designers' community-building efforts. While many sites have at least some level of online community building tools, CafePress goes the extra mile to build offline community. Sellers can hold events offline, and surface those events via CafePress. So a seller may hold a local meet-and-greet, and CafePress may hold a larger, site-wide meet-and-greet at a later date, giving fans more opportunities to interact with sellers and like-minded fans.

Their attention to offline community building creates a sense of solidarity and a high level of branding opportunity, as customers openly label themselves as *CafePress customers*. Further, these offline events allow community members to connect on an even deeper level—ultimately resulting in greater loyalty to the community, and the brand. Once you've been to a few CafePress events, you begin to understand what all the hoopla is about. This is real

fan-building. Where do you think attendees are going to go to buy their next fun T-shirt, or, even better, where will they look when they're ready to design a shirt for their small business?

Five Things You Can Do to Build Community

It's vital that you understand that your community members will initially give their loyalty to the *community*, and not to your business, your brand, or even to your website. Community members are connected to the community. If you piss them off, they may pack up and leave—and take their friends with them. We cannot overstate the importance of understanding this concept if you plan to build an effective community.

Customers may decide to leave (and they'll do it with very few qualms). Community members, however, are emotionally invested in their communities. They take part in discussions and befriend other community members. They have put time and effort into belonging to the community and they may think twice before packing up their toys and going home.

Customers may help each other by rating a few items, and writing a review or two. Community members, though, take involvement to the next level. They have discussions and debates; they strive for the most ratings, the best reputation, and the accolades you provide for involvement. They share stories and forge lasting ties; they share favorite items with each other and commiserate on related discussions. As a business, you must understand this and promote your website, or even your Facebook page, as a place for community members to build deeper connections to each other. And also, you must reward genuine effort.

In the following chapters, we will take a look at five things that you can do to foster community on your website:

1. Use straight talk.
Tell it like it is.

2. Use your community members for positive change.
Invent ways for your community to be more involved and use their information to improve your product and website.
3. Visibility.
Get out there. Be seen.
4. Tweak.
Be willing to change things to better suit the needs of your community.
5. Remember the Golden Rule.
Think about how you want to be treated—then treat your community members the same way.

About the Author



Robyn Tippins is a community advocate with over 10 years experience in the social media space. From her early days marketing her own small business using forums and email lists, to blogging, podcasting, vlogging and video game immersion, she's often used social networking to engage and communicate. In her current role, Robyn oversees the community aspect of the external developers on the Yahoo! Developer Network.

Robyn has blogged for blog networks and corporations, podcasted for small and large businesses, worked closely with social networking sites, and advised Fortune 500 companies on social media and community. Her early podcasts featured some of the web's most interesting and

well-known Web 2.0 experts in fields such as VoIP, Technology, Open Source, Marketing, Social Networking, Video Games and Blogging.

She finds her greatest joys in moments away from her computer, spending time with her husband and four children, ages 4 to 11. She and her family reside in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California.



Miranda Marquit is a professional blogger and freelance writer working from home. She has five years experience in the blogging and social media space, mainly providing content and support for corporate blogs. Miranda understands the importance of blogging and social media in online marketing and community building, and enjoys interacting and networking via the Internet.

In addition to professional blogging, Miranda is a freelance writer with a Journalism degree. Her work has appeared in national magazines and on news Web sites. She is also a columnist for her local newspaper. Miranda enjoys reading, music, travel, and the outdoors. Her favorite activities involve using her hobbies as a way to spend time with her husband and their six-year-old son. Miranda lives with her family in Logan, Utah.

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"For anyone interested in building online communities, *Community 101* is a must-read guide. Robyn and Miranda have written a truly helpful resource for people who are trying to grow meaningful relationships with their virtual communities. The authors have a passion for approaching online communities with authenticity, respect, and empathy, applying the Golden Rule time after time. I look forward to re-reading *Community 101* many times over as I strive to build lasting communities both online and offline."

Julie Shin Choi, Entrepreneur and Community Builder

"Building an online community is a two-part challenge: 1) knowing the rules, and 2) applying them at internet (translation: warp) speed. In simple terms, Robyn and Miranda lay out all the rules and tell you exactly what to do with them. Every community manager's desk should have a dog-eared, heavily highlighted copy of this clear-cut primer."

Easton Ellsworth, President and Co-Founder, SocialKen

"I am a vocal proponent that everything online is an extension of what people do offline; only the tools are different. This book converts everything we know about offline communities and provides a practical, step-by-step guide to building a strong, effective online community. Three thumbs up!"

David Leonhardt, President, The Happy Guy Marketing

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