

A Metia report

Building Active Communities:

The Challenge for B2B Marketers



metia

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Introduction

The notions of business and community are intertwined, and always have been. Every business belongs to and creates communities as its employees, customers, and other stakeholders interact.

As with many parts of society, the arrival of the Internet sparked change for communities. Modern technology means that geography and physical proximity are no longer the primary drivers of business or community. The Internet has enabled truly global enterprise, connecting individuals worldwide who share motivations, interests, or challenges through social media – without the need to be near each other.



Com·mu·ni·ty

/kə' myōōnədə/

1. A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.
 2. A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.
-

The explosion in social technologies has not been entirely positive. It has created a fallacy and broad misuse of the term 'community'. Most online communities, aren't. Particularly those in business. What might look like a community to a business often doesn't feel like one to its members.

As the popularity of social media grew, the online "community" became a marketing zeitgeist. Many investments failed to generate returns and brands learnt the truth that social media fans and followers do not necessarily hold the same value. Communities are only communities if members actually engage with each other, and a fair exchange of value is vital for this to happen.

In this report, we'll explore the steps B2B marketers must take to foster a genuine community. We'll learn that community building is a long-term commitment, that ownership is not an imperative, and that a bona fide brand community will only develop when both a business and its customers benefit.



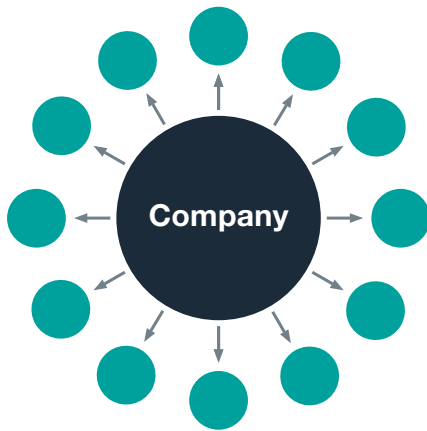
“Quit counting fans, follows and blog subscribers like bottle caps. Think, instead, about what you’re hoping to achieve with and through the community that actually cares about what you’re doing.”

Amber Naslund, LinkedIn

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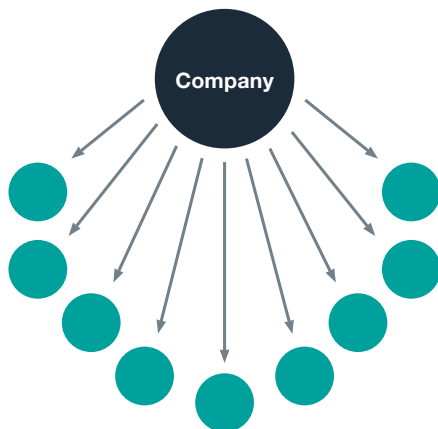
The four phases of online community growth

Many brands invest in community building, but few deliver the value required for a genuine community to flourish. By exploring how online brand communities develop, we can better understand the journey a marketing team must take to deliver on its goal.



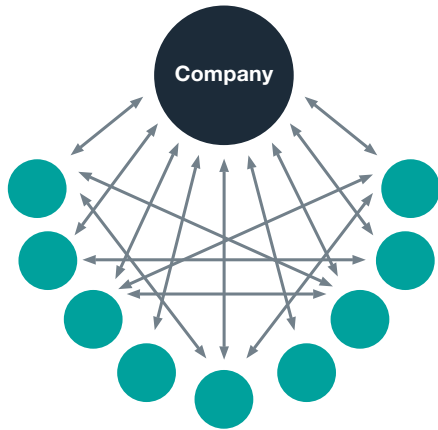
Phase 1: Broadcasting from the center

This is the typical starting point for companies creating communities, broadcasting from the center, with relatively low feedback and limited interaction between members (if any).



Phase 2: Early engagement

The company is less central to the community, and there is more user feedback – though interaction is still only between the company and individual members.

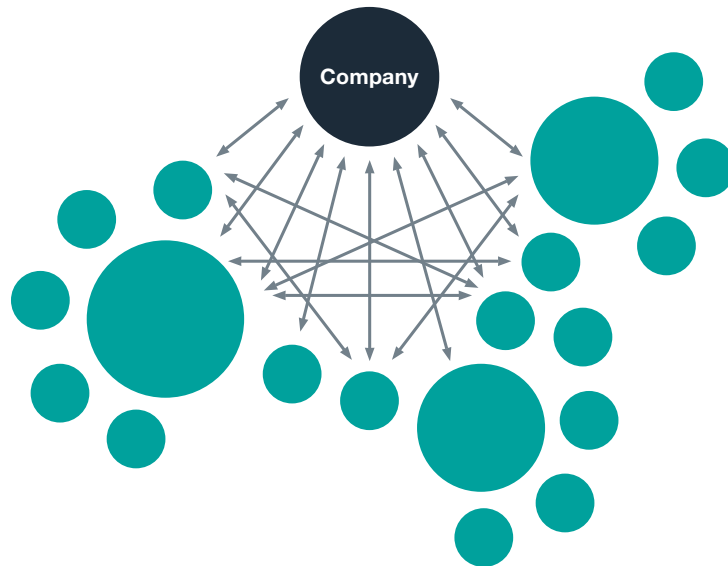


Phase 3:
An emerging community

Here we see the first signs of genuine community, as members start to interact with each other. The company's role is still significant.

Phase 4:
A mature, decentralized community

"Power" members grow to equal, or sometimes greater, significance than the company and recruit new members from their own networks. At this point, the community becomes more self-sufficient. This is the end goal for most B2B communities.



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Should you start a community?

A brand community can only be successful if it serves two audiences: its members and the business that creates it. Before investing in community building, it's essential to articulate the benefits you are trying to deliver to each group – and to get management buy-in for the long haul.

Delivering value to your members

A community's members are its most important stakeholders. Have a clear plan on the value you intend to offer to stimulate engagement. This could include skills development, networking opportunities, and access to information.

You must also consider what commonalities you will build your community around, for example:



Action – a group of people who want to change something



Circumstance – a group who find themselves experiencing a similar situation



Interest – a group who share a common passion in their lives



Place – a group bound by a common location



Practice – a group who participate in the same activity

A hybrid community is also possible for example, a community for online marketers in London, or web developers who want to launch a new industry standard.

Delivering value to the business

From a brand's perspective, a community should be a means to an end – not an end in itself. Without strong commercial objectives, a community is unlikely to contribute to the business and will often be viewed by management as a cost center that can be sacrificed to improve the bottom line.

Maximize your chances of success by aligning your community's objectives to that of your business. Common objectives include:

- Gaining customer insight/understanding customer behavior
- Generating leads for your sales team
- Improving customer engagement, retention and loyalty
- Encouraging advocacy
- Reducing support costs

As with all marketing activity, agreeing clear objectives at the start of your project is key to delivering value – there can be no shortcuts.

Invest for the long haul

While some of the tools and technology for community management may be free, running a community is not. At a minimum, you must be prepared for a significant time investment.

It's essential to build your business case, and gain commitment for the long-term – not just the next quarter – as communities take a while to develop and grow. Don't let the business become distracted by membership numbers as a short-term measure; instead focus on the long-term impact you are aiming to deliver over many years. It's also important to remember that a successful community takes on a life of its own.

As engagement increases, the center of gravity will shift from your business to the community's members. The role of your business as an organizer will diminish, and it could become difficult to close – or even change – a community without triggering a negative reaction from members. This should be embraced as a positive, but it highlights the importance of up-front planning, and is something leadership must be comfortable with before any investments are made.



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Planning your community logistics

Plan the logistics of your community before you begin. Your choices at this stage will play a key role in defining success, so take measured decisions based on your knowledge of the audience.

Choosing where to start

Remember that community ownership isn't an imperative. Whether initially to listen, test content and engage, or as an on-going strategy, involvement in existing communities can reap benefits with less commitment than building infrastructure yourself – and with a smaller investment.

To identify the best places to start, conduct research on your target audience. Leverage personal relationships with your customers and prospects to build a picture of the online destinations they frequent and trust. Technology plays a role here. Social listening and consumer intelligence tools can help you quantify your findings with data – and uncover new destinations and communities to investigate.

Building a standalone destination may ultimately be right for your business, but only consider this route when you have a long-term commitment, including sufficient resources to generate and sustain a growing membership over time.

Building your community team

While your ultimate goal may be for a community to sustain itself, this is a long-term goal. In the short- to medium-term a dedicated community manager is usually essential. This person will be the hub of activity. They will live and breathe the community. They must be credible in both the community they serve and the business that employs them.

Community management is not solely undertaken by the community manager, however. While executive sponsorship is a requirement for success, executive involvement in the community is even better. Active executives provide an incentive for your audience to engage and reduce the pressure on the community manager. They also build trust because executive participation signals that the community is far more than a marketing initiative, but rather a genuine commitment to engage with valued stakeholders.

As the community develops, management can increasingly be undertaken by members. Trust is key. Identify the individuals you think could play a role. Build a personal relationship and set clear expectations on what each side will deliver. Only move forward when it's clear that deeper involvement will provide mutual benefits.

The roles of a community manager



A common mistake for brands building a community team is to treat community management as a simple extension of a social media strategy. While social channel expertise is desirable, it is not enough to ensure success. Remember that your community manager must be credible to your target audience, so genuine expertise in the target sector is required.



Where will your members come from?

In B2B, it's often the small numbers that matter. If you're targeting a high value audience within a niche sector, most likely you're not looking to attract tens of thousands of members.

Ideally, you want a core audience of highly relevant and highly engaged individuals, who see genuine value in the community and become quickly immersed. Quality always beats quantity and smaller communities tend to be more interactive. Alan Alper, who leads thought leadership at Cognizant Technology Solutions, puts it nicely: "Focus on "quality-of-member and level-of-engagement, not raw numbers." Keep an eye on your ultimate objective, and don't be distracted by vanity metrics such as follower counts.

Small is beautiful

Turn this to your advantage by ensuring the first members of your community are known to you (e.g. customers, partners, employees). Invite them personally. Make it exclusive. Use the early members to define the community's focus, objectives and content and encourage them to recruit others. As the community grows, take the time to build relationships with the most active members – as influencers aren't always obvious.



"Focus on quality-of-member and level-of-engagement, not raw numbers."

"We pruned a third of our list to weed out people who are members but hadn't engaged in at least a year."

"We came to the conclusion that if someone didn't come back after seeing at least 12 e-newsletters and countless alerts on everything from new content and conversations in groups to which they subscribe, they weren't interested in being a member."

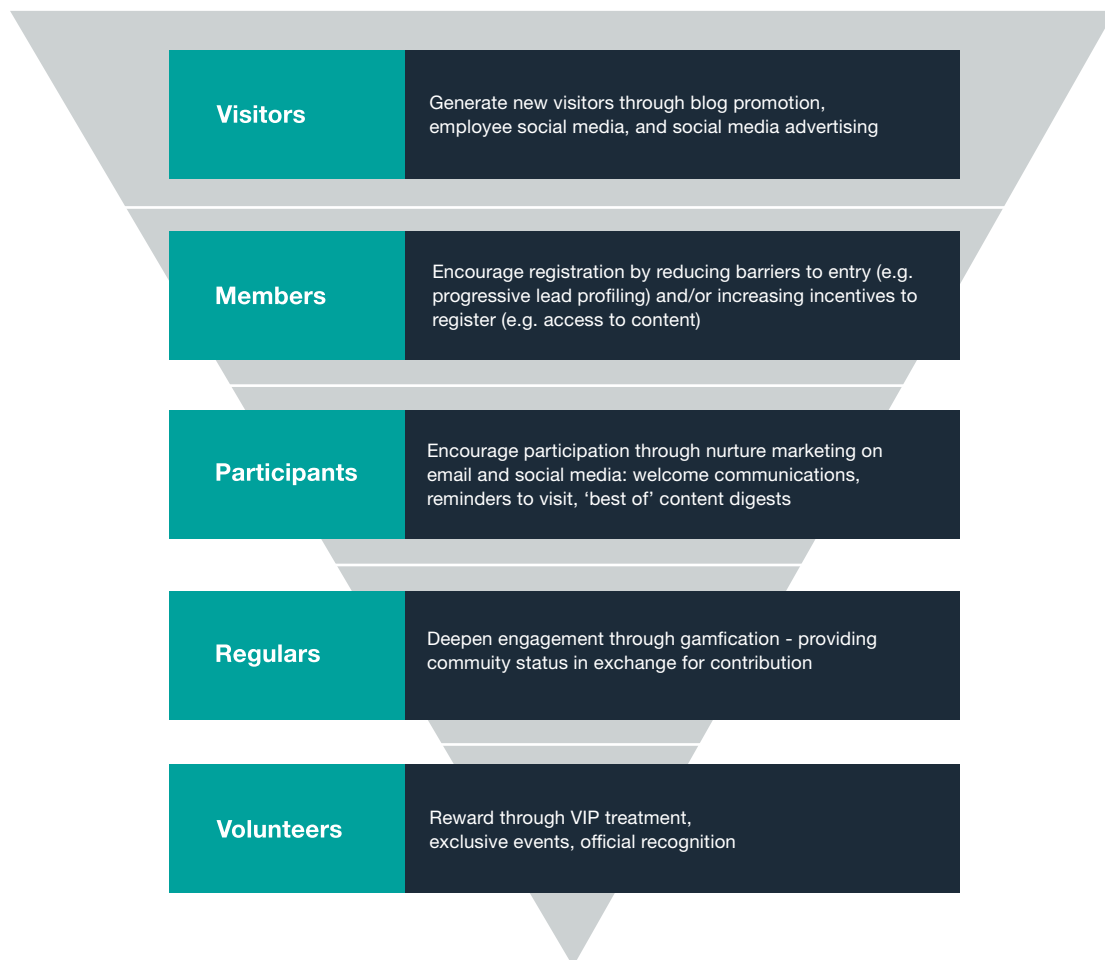
Alan Alper, Cognizant

You should also actively manage membership. Don't be afraid to shed inactive members. Here's Alan Alper again, discussing Cognizant's online community: "We came to the conclusion that if someone didn't come back after seeing at least 12 e-newsletters and countless alerts on everything from new content and conversations in groups to which they subscribe, they weren't interested in being a member." In short: take the hint. Your members will thank you too, as a small but highly engaged audience is far more likely to add value than a large audience showing little interest in what you're doing.

The member pathway

As your community scales, acquiring members will require you to look beyond the horizon. Using a mix of owned, earned, and paid media, you can obtain visitors - then elegantly drive them to deeper engagement through the value of the community.

As a first step, build an understanding of your ideal membership pathway. Map how you will attract users, and how you will help them progress through the community. Make sure the steps are logical, and not too big (see our example below). Use smart incentives and well-timed communications to nudge people through the stages.



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What will you say?

At Metia, we champion the notion of a Fair Exchange of Value. Modern audiences cannot be duped into dialogue. They are aware of each micro-transaction that takes place during every interaction, whether it is giving up a few seconds to investigate the contents of an email or committing more time to participate in a dialogue online.

Building a genuine community depends upon your ability to consistently deliver such value to your audience – and while your ultimate goal may be a community that drives itself, the onus will be on you to begin with.



Your content must be consistently strong if you are to attract and retain active members.

When establishing a community, you get what you put in – especially when it comes to content. Never compromise on your commitment to deliver value to your members. Your content must be consistently strong if you are to attract and retain active members.

Content strategy

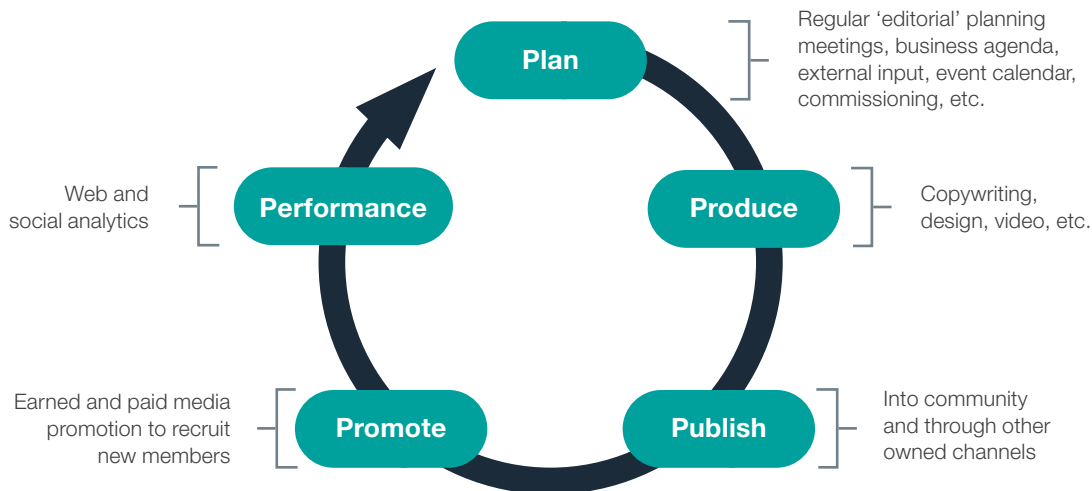
The best content for a community is content about the community. Initiate discussions on topics you know are of interest to members and prompt them to participate. Let members lead where possible and then amplify and participate in their content.

If engagement is low – which can happen in the early days of a community – analyze third-party data, such as conversations on social media. The more you understand the behavior and motivations of your audience, the easier it will be to create content that resonates.

Maintain a view beyond the horizon. Your content shouldn't just serve existing members, but act as a tool to recruit more. Create content that works across mediums – be it online forums, email marketing, or paid media – to help with this process.

Establishing a process and rhythm

A regular stream of content is required to keep an online community alive, and in the early days, almost all content will need to be created by you. It's important to understand exactly what goes into developing community content so you don't miss a step.



Bringing the online offline

Even if your community primarily exists online, don't forget the value of face-to-face contact with members. Indeed, academic research suggests offline activity can supercharge online community engagement. A 2011 report by Dr. Brett W. Young et al found that offline events increased page views for an online sports community by 60% and community participation by 27%.¹

Offline events help to strengthen relationships between members, fast-tracking your journey to a decentralized community. They also help identify members who could benefit your organization through deeper collaboration.

1. Investigating the impact of offline events on group development in an online sports community - Brett Young, Hirotoishi Takeda, Michael J Cuellar

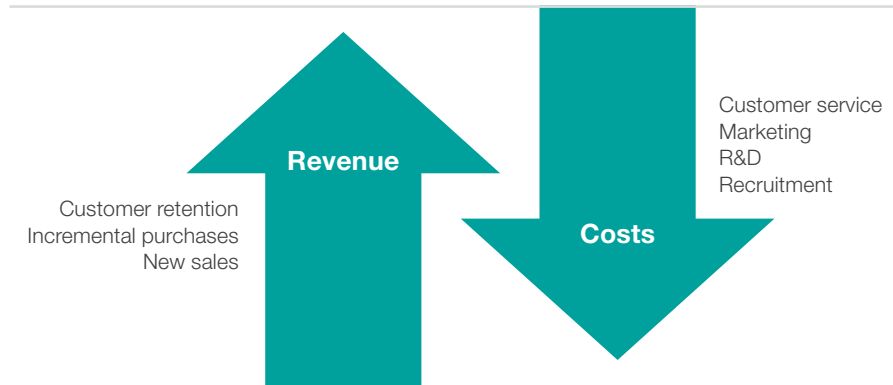


How to measure success

Too often in the past, attention was paid only to analytics after a community had been set up – too late to impact any launch activity, usually to the detriment of the business. That is no longer acceptable and return on investment (ROI) should be measured in the same way as any other business activity.

As part of your business case for launching a community, define the outcomes you want to achieve. Communities can ultimately deliver commercial benefits in two ways; by increasing revenue or decreasing costs. Set clear commercial metrics that highlight the impact you want your community to have on the bottom line.

The commercial benefits of communities



Due to the nature of communities these commercial metrics should be long-term goals. In the meantime, establish a series of key performance indicators (KPIs) that demonstrate how users are interacting with the community, and measuring progression through the member pipeline.

These KPIs could include:



Average time spent in the community



Engagement with content



How many members are actively participating each week



Members making valuable business contacts



Whether the debates are positive/constructive or negative/destructive



How many of the discussions are generated by you, and how many by the community



The community is recruiting new members itself



Offline events and face-to-face meetings



Conversations generated with your sales teams

While it's best practice to collect all available data (particularly at the outset of an online community) it's important to retain focus. Don't be distracted by the multitude of metrics available. Resist outrageous vanity metrics that pander to bragging in favor of those that best demonstrate short- and medium-term progress, while keeping a laser focus on your ultimate commercial goals.

Summary

B2B communities are complex to build, manage, and sustain. The role of marketing in this process is to inform, educate, and stimulate action consistently over the long term. Marketers that treat communities as a short-term tactic, or as a bolt-on to their social media strategy often fall short.

As we've seen, executive sponsorship – and ideally involvement – is critical to success. Before you begin, make sure your business has the appetite and resource required to do the job properly.

Keep these seven key points front of mind when developing your strategy to ensure you are prepared for the journey:

- 1** **Research your audience – understand where they already are, what commonalities they share and what value could be delivered through a community**
- 2** **Test content and get involved in existing communities**
- 3** **Commit for the long term**
- 4** **Dedicate resource**
- 5** **Invest in content**
- 6** **Consider both online and offline tactics**
- 7** **Use the data and insight your community provides**

If you're a little worried, slightly confused – or simply too busy – seek outside help from experts.

About Metia

Metia Group is a global marketing agency with offices in London, Seattle, Austin, and Singapore. We employ some 140 marketing professionals; each is expert in a particular area of specialization.

Our clients include big corporations and ambitious businesses. We provide them with structured marketing programs that reach across geographies, scale massively, can be deployed systematically, and are measured relentlessly.

Metia has specialist services designed to support our clients in the areas of Insight, Demand, Content and Advocacy. These services are based upon deep expertise, proven methodologies, and are enabled by unique tools and systems.

In addition to working with technology and digital native businesses, Metia works with global banks, community banks, credit unions, neo-banks and fintechs across North America, Europe and Asia, helping them to design new customer experiences, build brands that resonate online and connect with new audiences.

To learn more about our capabilities and discuss how we could help you reach and engage your target audiences with focused, measurable campaigns, please contact us at info@metia.com.

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