

BY PIET LEVY//STAFF WRITER

ALL TOGETHER NOW

INVESTING IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY CAN PAY OFF WITH REAL-TIME RESULTS AND KEEN CONSUMER INSIGHTS

WHEN IT COMES to using online communities to do marketing research, even if you build it, they won't necessarily come.

Online communities are in vogue for marketers and businesses seeking consumer data and feedback on the quick. But to make them work for you, you're going to need solid infrastructure, standout attractions and, of course, money to get people to stop by and stay a while.

Gongos Research, an Auburn Hills, Mich.-based marketing research firm, and one of *Marketing News*' Honomichl's Top 50 in 2008, advocates a brand-centric approach to building and maintaining online communities. It worked

traditional research channels, such as gathering consumer reaction to its fourth quarter earnings, Heist says.

The time advantage also can help marketers redirect their resources when outside forces demand it. For example, Best Buy altered its purchase and sales strategy when Microsoft Vista launched because of early feedback it got from its Gongos-managed Intelligence Council community.

Although individual company spending on online communities could not be disclosed, Gongos' Heist estimates that a corporate community of 300 can cost between \$130,000 and

marketable research can be cultivated from the community to suit a corporate client's purposes.

"We build [communities] around a common passion and we get out of the way. If you can populate a community with passionate people, then the community remains strong and vibrant and true," Peacock says.

The communities have company-supported sponsorships, which can cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000 annually, depending on how many sponsors are in place for a particular community. Sponsors can essentially "play God," Peacock says, and are granted special access to all the discussions within a community, and



on its first commissioned community for General Motors about three and a half years ago. Since then, it's created similar communities at the behest of Best Buy and Domino's Pizza, and in December announced new communities for Blue Bunny Ice Cream and a major beverage manufacturer.

In creating a community, Gongos teams with the corporate client to create a name and overall design for the community. Recruitment is generally done via online panels or strategically placed banner ads. The GM account, which includes newer communities that court opinions in the United Kingdom and Germany, invites new members to join every three months. Now, the largest GM community size is around 5,000 people, says Greg Heist, director of research innovation for Gongos.

Once consumers are driven to the site, they're given an avatar and encouraged to fill out profile information so other members can get to know them. Points are divvied out on a monthly basis to reward community members for their participation in the community, and a weekly dialogue is created via a flash poll or survey.

GM uses its communities to get quick answers to questions that otherwise would be too costly and too time-consuming to ask via

\$175,000 for the first six months. To do the same work via traditional methods would cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000, he estimates.

"The reason why communities continue to get renewed year after year is because clients see that it's actually a cost-saving tool," Heist says.

Bradley Peacock, president of the Chicago-based market research firm Peacock Nine, says feedback from his company's communities have spared some clients from major expenses and possible missteps. For instance, a publishing company on the fence about buying a manuscript turned to a Peacock Nine-managed community to gauge consumer opinion. Within 18 hours, 200 people participated in a survey and read the manuscript's introductory chapter. The book concept sparked no interest from the respondents, so the publisher passed on the offer, saving \$38,000 in acquisition costs and \$100,000 in development costs.

Peacock Nine takes a different approach to building online communities for research purposes. For six years, the company has been creating communities based around pre-existing subcultures, such as NASCAR (DraftandDrag.com), religion (Other6.com) and environmentalism (WeBreatheGreen.com). For Peacock Nine,

have the ability to create their own discussions.

Regardless of the brand-centric or topic-centric approach taken, experts agree that it is essential to keep the community engaged beyond the brand or product being discussed. Heist says communities need to have an area he likes to call "the coffee house," where members can discuss whatever topics they please—even those not tied to the company behind the community. That way, the community can serve not only as a means for market research, Heist says, but as a "comfortable place for people to come to."

Despite a need to lend a community a comfortable feel, market researchers can't be too complacent behind the scenes. Clear goals and a long list of ideas to keep a community alive well past the launch are essential.

"The challenge can be because a community can be so open-ended, it can kind of become amorphous," Heist says. "It exists, but it isn't clear what we're trying to learn. The more you can bring some clarity to that [goal] is important. It helps you to focus and say, 'All right, how much did we learn from what we set out to accomplish, and what do we still not know, and what do we need to ask consumers to get those answers?'" **m**