

Beyond brand-building

Web communities are one of the hottest trends in the field of marketing today. You only have to look at the growing number of conference sessions discussing community-driven platforms to realize that the era of the Web community is clearly upon us.

Many companies who were early advocates of communities used them for marketing purposes, centering their use on creating strong brand advocates and exploring brand-related communications. Many – if not most – communities still exist today with this same purpose in mind. However, like any rapidly evolving product, Web communities are growing in number and diversifying in their range of applications.

In particular, it is becoming clear that a new generation of Web communities is emerging. These “next-gen” communities have evolved from brand-building tools into innovative market research environments. However, this evolution in application has brought with it many new challenges and expectations.

Of course, to meet these higher expectations, this kind of next-generation Web community needs to be more than an inviting and engaging space on the Internet to build brand equity among a group of consumers who have interest in a particular product. In addition, this new breed of Web community requires:

- a platform infrastructure that permits unlimited flexibility to employ qualitative and quantitative research techniques within the community; and
 - an analytical approach that mines the massive amount of information in the community and translates it into usable insights.
- In short, clients have begun to demand that – similar to any other research tool – Web communities deliver a solid ROI and demonstrate the capability to provide insights that drive real organizational

change.

The creation of a research environment that has the potential to deliver these types of results has been an exciting challenge, and I’d like to share some insights we’ve gained along the way.

Ongoing dialogue

For those of you who aren’t aware, a Web community is a carefully

How Web communities can change the way we do research



By Gregory S. Heist

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selected group of consumers who agree to participate in an ongoing dialogue with a particular corporation. All community interaction takes place on a custom-designed Web site. During the life of the community – which may last anywhere from six months to a year or more – community members respond to questions posed by the corporation on a weekly basis. These discussions, which may take the form of qualitative “dialogues” or even quantitative surveys, are augmented by the ability of community members to talk to one another about topics that are of interest to them as well.

The popularity and power of Web communities initially came from several key benefits. They:

- engage customers in a space where they are most comfortable, allowing clients to interact with them on a deeper level;
- uncover “exciters” and “eureka moments,” resulting in customer-derived innovations;
- establish brand advocates who are emotionally invested in a company’s success;
- offer real-time results, enabling clients to explore ideas that normal time constraints prohibit;
- create a forum where natural dialogue allows customers to initiate topics important to them.

Limitations

While it is true that traditional market research provides tremendous insights into the attitudes and opinions of customers, it also comes with its own attendant limitations.

First, traditional market research is a time-consuming undertaking. Even relatively simple studies can take three months to complete. More complex research might take upwards of six months or more from initiation to delivery of results. Of course, while there are situations where there is sufficient lead time to warrant waiting that long, in today’s competitive environment, having this kind of lead time is an increasingly rare luxury.

Additionally, doing good research

is a fairly expensive undertaking. With budgets continually under scrutiny, only the most important projects can justify the cost of research. Of course, this means that a multitude of smaller – but in many cases just as important – decisions simply can’t be researched. As a result, a company might get some big decisions right yet continue to fail because a larger number of poor decisions are made without fundamentally understanding what customers really want.

Add to this the limitation that, historically, a traditional market research study is a point-in-time event. You might conduct a large quantitative study or conduct six focus groups and then never talk with these customers again. Under such a paradigm, the appealing and valuable idea of longitudinal learning from customers is effectively impossible.

Additionally, Web communities help companies create a customer-centric organization by putting employees into direct contact with consumers from the comfort of their own desks.

Since communities provide advantages in speed, flexibility and 24/7 access to consumers, they let the organization be agile in its decision-making and prudent in its spending.

Holistic view

The next-generation Web community model can give companies a truly holistic view of the customer. Communities allow companies to see consumers as they truly are: complex, demanding, contradictory, living, breathing human beings. Rather than seeing them through the lens of focus group reports and bar charts, communities allow companies to observe consumers speaking to one another in a very natural way about their wants and needs, and about what’s on their collective radar. This begins to break down the barriers between the company and its consumers, since both the company and the consumer become more real to one another through the process of on-

going discussion and the sharing of ideas and insights.

By adding a research focus to the Web community environment, this holistic perspective deepens as the community becomes a way to:

- map the psyche of consumer segments;
- conduct virtual ethnography;
- brainstorm new ideas;
- co-create and test new products;
- observe natural consumer behavior; and
- rally the company around a customer-centric perspective.

Beyond that, communities provide even greater value when the insights gained can be quickly shifted from the community space to the traditional market research space. This tight integration with more mainstream research approaches ensures that the community is both feeding new research initiatives and is being fueled by insights gained from traditional research projects (Figure 1).

Additionally, beyond the sharing of insights between the two spaces, we also see the emergence of the sharing of methods between the two spaces. While a community shouldn’t be considered a silver bullet, there’s no question that there are compelling ways of using communities for concept development, virtual ethnography, consumer psyche profiling and the like.

This type of cross-pollination takes another step toward a new research paradigm, one that integrates Web communities and traditional research. This new paradigm offers the potential to:

- increase the efficiency of research by quickly finding the most appropriate forum for exploration of new insights;
- reduce costs by using the community to follow up on questions left unanswered from ad hoc research studies;
- improve the way consumer insights and implications are shared across organizational silos.

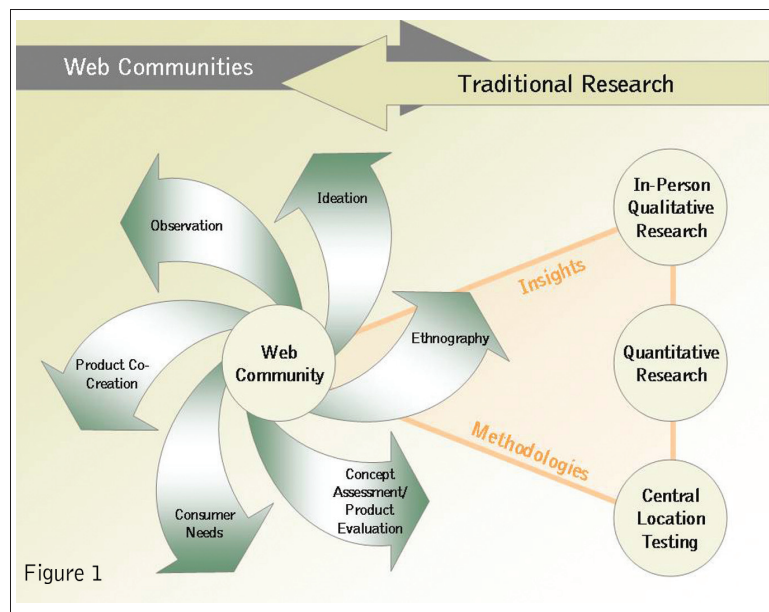
Massive amount of feedback

Sometimes, when a prospective client looks at the massive amount of dialogue and consumer feedback gleaned from a community, it's not uncommon for them to say, "How will I ever make sense of all of this information?" The question is a valid one, since, without a way of accurately distilling and synthesizing this wealth of information, a community will never be able to legitimately drive decisions and organizational change. Instead, the community will remain a marketing novelty, interesting in and of itself but ultimately detached from the teams and decision-makers that could use its rich insights to drive real change within the organization.

We have developed an approach we call Thematic Synthesis as a way to address this need. It is designed to provide a concise way of communicating and sharing the insights being generated within the community to a wider internal audience.

Since Thematic Synthesis is longitudinal in nature, it can create a knowledge base that:

- derives and communicates insights from the community;
- links these insights to the organization's broader marketing strategy;
- identifies areas for further exploration and investigation inside or outside the community;



- enables the organization to more easily use community-derived insights to fuel organizational change.

Endless possibilities

It's clear from our experience that this emerging model of next-gen Web communities is one with seemingly endless possibilities. It builds upon the inherent strength of traditional communities and transforms them into a fully functioning marketing research environment. In doing so, it offers the opportunity for employees deep

within an organization - whose exposure to consumers might previously have been limited to reading a marketing research report - the opportunity to encounter consumers face-to-face and to learn from them in a very rich and meaningful way.

Beyond that, by creating an infrastructure for synthesizing insights, building a knowledge base and sharing learnings, Web communities give companies a new way of using consumer insights to drive customer-centered decision-making. | Q