Profiting from Communities

Spiceworks is very good at managing business–to–business (B2B) communities online. It has to be; community is central to its business.

Spiceworks is a media company that acts like a technology company. Its namesake product is a sophisticated network management suite for small and medium businesses (SMB) that it gives away for free. The SMB market is coveted by technology firms, and many of them pay Spiceworks for the chance to interact with its audience of more than 1 million information technology (IT) professionals for programs ranging from market research to product design.

Spiceworks sells advertising space on its software console, which members use to monitor their networks. IT professionals share tips and tricks, review products, and upload video tutorials. As the community grows, so does the value of the social network as a resource to all involved. Members have posted more than 20,000 product reviews and created hundreds of discussion groups. Their technical questions are now routinely answered within minutes. More than 400 people recently self–organized a buyer's group to get better deals on backup software.

The Spiceworks community spreads beyond the web site. As of this writing, nearly 20 regional user groups called SpiceCorps have

sprung up around the North America and others are forming over-seas. An annual user conference attracts thousands. Conversations long ago expanded beyond troubleshooting and now encompass product reviews, career advice, and swap meets for software utilities. There's even a long-running thread called "What Is the Funniest Thing a User Has Asked You?" It started in October 2008 and has attracted more than 700 contributions 18 months later.

Essential Utility

Spiceworks represents the best of what B2B communities can accomplish. The community is built into every facet of its operations; the company even asks members to vote on proposed enhancements to its software. The social network is so essential to the company's business that member-generated content like the most popular posts and product reviews overflow onto the corporate home page. Spiceworks staffers have a vested interest in optimizing member engagement because the company profits from it. The bigger and more active its member base is, the more it can monetize the community through advertising and other sponsored programs. In the process, Spiceworks has learned much about what makes communities work.

It has learned, for example, that professional development is a huge motivator for community participation and that members will give generously of their time with no reward other than visibility among their peers. It has also learned about the "1:9:90 rule," which states that the vast majority of content is generated by a small percentage of its visitors. And it's learned the truth of Metcalfe's law: the value of a network increases as a square of the number of members.

Online communities are a bit of a paradox. They are both the oldest form of social media and also the newest. Forums and discussion groups date back to the late 1960s and have been a staple of customer support operations at technology companies for 30 years. Internet newsgroups, CompuServe, The Well, and other early communities had memberships in the hundreds of thousands a decade before the web browser was invented.

Those early online outposts looked little like Facebook or LinkedIn, though. The modern features that have made social networks the fastest-growing consumer phenomenon in history have created all kinds of new use scenarios, including some compelling B2B examples. When used effectively by B2B marketers, social networks can be the convention centers of social media. They are flexible gathering halls that can fill a wide variety of purposes, ranging from client services to product development to lead generation. But the key is to get members to want to participate.

Friends and Fame

The great innovation in online communities came in 1998, when Classmates.com introduced the concept of personal profiles and friends. Those metaphors are now a staple feature of every social network and provide powerful incentive for participation. Profiles are members' custom home pages. Everything the member contributes, from establishing contacts with others to joining groups to posting status updates, is captured in the profile. The more active the member is, the higher the visibility and the greater the value of the network to his or her personal success.

"Friends" or contacts are a virtual version of their real-world equivalent. When people decide to connect on a social network, they can exchange information publicly or privately. They form persistent connections based on trust. That's how relationships work in real life, too. Online connections on social networks are an efficient way to stay up to date with your professional contacts. Once connected, you can more effortlessly keep the contact information and employer status of everyone in your network current. A social network is like a rolodex, except it updates itself automatically.

In B2B communities, personal profiles are a way to register areas of expertise that others may find useful, and in the process, be seen as a thought leader in your business segment. For example, a member of LinkedIn can look up other members in the Dallas area who specialize in sales automation. The level of activity a member of a social network maintains also serves as a validation point. It's one thing for

people to say they're experts in something like direct marketing, but it's more powerful when they can prove it by solving real-world problems facing other direct marketers in full view of an online social networking community. That proof is stored in the person's profile, is discoverable after the fact, and serves as a sort of public badge of credibility for all to see.

Online friendships also translate fluidly into real-world connections. "Community isn't just about discussing products, but about getting to know each other and making friendships," says Nicholas Tolstoshev, a Spiceworks community manager.

Online contacts in B2B communities frequently arrange impromptu gatherings at trade shows and events. Successful community managers we spoke to invariably augment their online worlds with physical events to meet and thank their most active members and to cement those relationships in the physical world. Because it's so easy to make virtual connections on social networks, deepening those relationships with real-world encounters is a great way for B2B marketers to motivate their members to invest more time in their online customer communities.

Before the introduction of personal profiles, it was difficult for participants in online networks to build visibility. Particularly in western cultures, we now know that visibility is the single most powerful driver of participation. That's one reason social networks have soared in popularity. Many communities use a recognition system that ties a member's status to contributions. A few, like SAP, even celebrate their most active members at physical events.

SAP works with an elite group of about 85 "mentors" chosen by its community. These well-connected, active participants reflect the geographic, industry and even gender diversity of the company's desired customer base. Most mentors work at system integrators—firms that install and customize SAP software for clients—and are in touch with a wide variety of SAP customers. Others are independent consultants or customer employees, with a few pundits (bloggers and analysts) and SAP employees also in the mix.

That insight is invaluable to SAP developers. Mentors get exposure within the community, which benefits their companies. They also

have access to top officials at SAP, which gives them insights others don't have. SAP uses the input and perspective of the mentors to guide the company's actions on products, policies, and projects, so the mentors wield special influence. SAP even uses the mentors as information agents to help spread news to the company's customers. By demonstrating their domain expertise online, the mentors are rewarded with RFIs and RFPs from potential clients, who consult the SAP community to research their purchasing needs. Instead of an auto-updating rolodex, SAP gets a self-educating marketplace.

Spiceworks awards points to members who post well-regarded answers to other members' questions. Valued members of the community are invited to participate in conference calls with Spiceworks developers. Their contributions are rewarded with inside information. Community managers also publish occasional interviews with featured members, highlighting their contributions and career accomplishments. "Online status drives a huge amount of activity without our sending money out the door," says Tolstoshev. In B2B social networks, it's the ability to elevate your professional status that sustains momentum and drives interactions among peers.

National Instruments (NI) has the NI LabVIEW Champions program to recognize "leadership, expertise and unparalleled contributions to the technical and product communities." This ultra-elite group of about 25 contributors is treated to product previews, recognition on the NI web site, and a direct channel to the company's leadership, among other perks. They earn it: champions typically contribute several thousand support posts annually to support forums, lead local user groups, share hundreds of example code programs, or even run their own LabVIEW communities and blogs. There's one LabVIEW Champion who has even answered more than 15,000 support questions since 1999.

FohBoh.com, a social network for restaurant owners and food service professionals, highlights new contributions from its members on its home page and invites others to congratulate them on their contributions. TopCoder, a contract software developer that hosts programming competitions and licenses the best solutions to commercial customers, applies an elaborate algorithm to the code submitted by its members to determine the quality of their work. Lists of top contributors are

maintained for major competitions and quality ratings are reflected in individual profiles. Top coders win money and also visibility that leads to job promotions and lucrative new business contracts.

You can give to get on LinkedIn as well. The most prolific contributor to LinkedIn's "Answers" forum is Dave Maskin, a New York–based event marketing specialist who has answered an incredible 25,000 questions. Maskin refers to himself as "Mr. Lead Generator," indicating that by delivering value to his community, he generates a steady stream on new business opportunities.

Hosting Conversations

Back-and-forth discussions were the first "killer app" of B2B communities and continue to be the most popular activity. Forums are particularly useful in B2B scenarios because they enable customers to solve pressing problems quickly. Forums are the simplest type of social network, consisting of a single threaded discussion emanating from a root topic. For less competitive complex queries, text-based discussion forums perform exceptionally well in search results because of their precise labeling and keywords. Active communities can save considerable customer support costs. In their 2008 book *Groundswell,* Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff cited the example of a Dell customer who saved the company an estimated $1 million per year by answering technical questions that would otherwise require Dell resources. He educates Dell's customers for free.

For the purposes of this chapter, we define a "community" as a public or private online destination that includes, at the minimum, registration and member discussion. Many of the principles we discuss here work perfectly well on Facebook or LinkedIn groups, but most of our examples are from niche or branded sites.

Sometimes, it's the niche subject-matter that provides the spark. AuntMinnie.com is a 150,000-strong social network for radiology professionals. The turning point for member participation came when medical students who aspire to become radiologists began to flock to the site to exchange academic advice. "They didn't have a place on the Web to talk about training to be a radiologist," says the social network's editor-in-chief Brian Casey. "They had questions about

what schools other members liked and what others thought of schools they were considering attending. That drove participation." An added benefit is that those students will emerge from medical school already familiar with the online network.

Before starting a community, survey the landscape. You may find that active online communities already exist. That's increasingly likely these days because support communities are so easy to create on Facebook, LinkedIn, WetPaint, and other services, they have unleashed "the power of organizing without organizations," as Clay Shirky wrote in his breakthrough book *Here Comes Everybody*. If a niche social network in your business category already exists, you could work with the administrators of those forums to offer support in exchange for access to their members. It's best if you can have unfettered access to all the content and the member list, however, so your ultimate goal should be to support an independent, self-sustaining community, rather than one owned and operated by another product or service provider, if you can. Otherwise, using Facebook or some other low-maintenance option may be a reasonable option. You have a natural advantage because you are by default the most trusted source of official information about how to use and support your own products, and in the case of Facebook, the community is large enough to sustain momentum.[1]

Customer support communities have practical value across your business. They are a simple way to identify problems and new product opportunities. They save money on telephone support, build searchable libraries of solutions that your client support organization can use and turn customer service into public relations. They can help you spot enthusiastic customers who can assist in product development and word-of-mouth marketing. They can even be a recruiting source.

"We know some of our members so well that when we need feedback we call them directly," says Wyatt Kilmartin of RIDGID Branding, operator of the RidgidForum community for professional tradespeople. "They give us insight on our business that we're happy to use."

As RidgidForum grew in popularity and member value, the most active participants took responsibility for raising awareness by encouraging colleagues to join and even organizing a field trip to

visit RIDGID's Elyria, Ohio, headquarters. About 50 plumbers, electricians, HVAC specialists, and woodworkers traveled at their own expense to spend the day engaging in demos, competitions, and discussions hosted by the RIDGID Tool Company. RIDGID now considers these enthusiasts a valuable resource for all sorts of advice.

2 Million Friends

One of the most successful B2B social networks is SAP's Community Network, with more than 2 million members and 1 million monthly unique visitors. Each day, about 6,000 items are posted to more than 350 discussion forums. The site also features 5,000 bloggers, of which two thirds are the company's customers, partners, and other non-SAP member entities. In fact, only about 2 percent of the SAP community's members work for SAP.

The community has value to SAP on almost every level of its business. For one thing, it enhances SAP's appeal to prospects. "If we can make our customers more successful than our competitors' customers, then our competitors' customers are going to come to us," says Mark Yolton, senior vice president of the SAP Community Network. "With higher levels of success and satisfaction, our customers are going to buy more, upgrade faster, extend their capabilities, and so forth."

There's also practical value for SAP in making customers more efficient. "If customers can reduce some of the burden of day-to-day operations, adopt best practices and overcome challenges faster, they're going to have budget left over, and they can buy more stuff," Yolton adds. That "stuff" means more SAP software, services, tools, templates, and middleware, and more from SAP's ecosystem of software, services, and technology partners as well.

Members get value from the community on multiple levels. Yolton ticks off a few:

- **Speed**. The ability to get fast answers makes members more valuable to their companies.
- **Professional networking**. The community is the most efficient way for members to build a worldwide contact network that can pay off in many ways.

- **Recognition**. Prestige within a professional community is a ticket to promotions and salary increases.
- **Access**. Top contributors get the inside scoop on SAP activities in advance, giving them a professional edge.
- **Education**. Members are one another's best source of training, so the SAP marketplace self-educates.
- **Insight**. In much the same way that people use the activity stream in Twitter and Facebook to track news recommended by their peers, members can use the SAP online community to follow links shared by others who have similar interests. That, in turn, gives them an early view into emerging trends or cutting-edge solutions that have not yet gone mainstream.

Other Uses of Communities

Support is the low-hanging fruit of B2B online communities, but it's far from the only value they deliver. Communities organized around topics of professional interest can generate brand awareness, thought leadership, and leads if perceived as a genuinely useful resource to the industries they serve.

An outstanding example of this in the B2B world is the RSA Conference, which has been running annually since 1991 and is widely regarded as one of the world's premier information security events. The annual gatherings are managed by RSA Security, a unit of EMC Corporation, and bring together more than 1,000 security professionals every year in San Francisco and to similarly sized events in Europe and Japan. The events are supported year-round by online communities, blogs, podcasts, and other social media.

One of the reasons the RSA Conference has been so successful is that it's a neutral forum. Competitors share the stage with the sponsor, and the program is designed by a committee of industry experts, of whom only a few work for RSA. It would be easy for RSA to turn the event into a marketing platform, but the company knows that its thought leadership equity is far too valuable to squander on a sales pitch.

Professional development is another powerful motivator for customers to join communities, particularly in B2B markets. In Chapter 12, we told you how EmployeeScreen uses education to generate a constant lead stream. HR.com is a B2B social network that has turned that concept into a business.

The community of more than 200,000 human resources (HR) professionals hosts about 30 webcasts each month devoted to topics like recruitment strategies, goal management, legal issues, and workforce development. Each seminar draws an average of 400 human resources professionals to hear advice from sponsors, who pay thousands of dollars for the privilege of speaking to the audience. About 300 experts regularly provide content in exchange for leads.

Through a partnership with the Human Resource Certification Institute, HR.com gives members the chance to earn credits toward professional certifications. They also have access to a library of documents from the Society for Human Resource Management that carry a charge for non-members.

For the first four years of its existence, HR.com employed a traditional editorial model with a staff of editors and paid contributors. In 2005, the company became one of the first B2B communities to shift entirely to a social network model. Today, all the content is generated by members, sponsors, and partnerships with third-party providers. It doesn't matter if the material has already been posted elsewhere. What counts is that it's valuable to the members. "I suspect that a lot of our content is not unique, but that's okay with us," says McGrath.

The value isn't in the uniqueness of the information as much as its place in a collection of contextually relevant content. Members can seek one another out for advice and job opportunities, browse the webcast archive, and network in the active online communities. The more active the members are, the greater the value to everyone.

Community sponsors can also learn a lot just by listening. Monitoring sessions to identify pockets of activity and trending keywords can yield insight about where customer sentiment is headed. You can even test new ideas by launching discussion topics around them to see where the conversations form. Active topics can identify problem areas or new market opportunities. When AuntMinnie's Brian Casey is

looking for ideas for editorial content, "I can just drop someone a message," he says. "I have 150,000 experts at my fingertips at any time."

Crowdsourcing

One of the most exciting new uses of communities that B2B companies are discovering is their value in the product development and enhancement cycle. Nearly all of the community organizers we interviewed consult their members for ideas on how to improve their products or address new markets; a few have formalized the process in online exchanges called "innovation communities."

The poster child for this approach is Dell's IdeaStorm, a communal suggestion box that anyone can use to recommend improvements to the tech company's products and services. Launched in early 2007, IdeaStorm gathered more than 14,000 suggestions during its first three years, of which Dell implemented 400.

IdeaStorm is a sophisticated customer feedback loop that incorporates community voting and a ranking system. Dell also recognizes the 20 most valuable contributors by enshrining them in a "top 20" list and displaying their point totals as awarded by votes from their peers.

Your own approach can be simpler. Many B2B companies already maintain customer councils; adding an online version is as simple as tapping a few influential members on the shoulder and asking them to join an exclusive club. People love to contribute to the success of businesses in which they have a significant professional stake, and this is particularly true in B2B communities. Contributors' rewards need be nothing more than access and recognition.

A few words of advice: Acknowledge and follow up on the ideas your constituents contribute. That doesn't mean you have to implement them, but if contributors think their suggestions are going into a black hole, they will quickly stop participating. Acknowledgment and follow-up can be a chore, but they are essential to stimulating activity. Also, consult legal experts to be sure you have coverage when asking outsiders for ideas. Make sure today's contribution doesn't become tomorrow's intellectual property lawsuit.

Crowdsourcing product development ideas are catching on elsewhere. Other branded forums include Procter & Gamble's

Connect + Develop, Best Buy's IdeaX, and Starbucks' My Starbucks Idea. UserVoice is one of the emerging class of service providers that host innovation forums for customers that include Sun Microsystems and Nokia.

National Instruments, a developer of test and measurement automation software and hardware for use by design engineers and scientists, has an online forum called LabVIEW Idea Exchange where customers can submit ideas directly to the company's product developers. The firm also hosts private communities to seek focused feedback on specific products.

"It's helped R&D prioritize," says Deirdre Walsh, community and social media manager at National Instruments. "We used to have a lot of debates on which features to develop next. This streamlines the process." She adds that 14 new features in a recent new version of a National Instruments product were suggested by the community.

Salesforce.com's IdeaExchange is an online community where its customers can suggest new products and enhancements, interact with product managers and other customers, and preview upcoming product releases. Rather than trying to prescribe solutions, Salesforce .com listens for what customers want and provides those products first. New product development is based on actual market demand.

There are also commercial services that broker innovation exchanges between businesses with problems and contributors' solutions. The most successful of these is InnoCentive, a Massachusetts-based firm that hosts a social network it calls the Open Innovation Marketplace. Businesses, academic institutions, and organizations submit thorny problems to the network, where more than 200,000 registered problem solvers offer ideas in exchange for cash rewards. The company has successfully completed more than 1,000 engagements. Cash prizes can run to the tens of thousands of dollars, but money is one of the least important reasons innovators contribute, says chief executive officer (CEO) Dwayne Spradlin.

"Solvers want to work on problems that matter," Spradlin says. "They also want to be a top solver. Money is perhaps the third most important incentive." Organizations that seek crowdsourced solutions are also motivated by factors other than cost savings. "The vast majority of our customers come to us for better and faster innovation, not

cheaper innovation," Spradlin says. "They want to get products to market before the competition, but they don't know how to manufacture them quickly enough."

In 2007, the Oil Spill Recovery Institute used InnoCentive to seek a solution to a problem that had long bedeviled oil spill cleanups in frigid environments: the oil/water mix freezes to a viscous mass that sinks to the bottom of the water and is almost impossible to recover. The winning solution was submitted by John Davis, an engineer in the concrete industry. Davis suggested adapting a tool used in his industry that sets up a constant vibration to keep cement from hardening while it's being poured. The technique worked perfectly, winning Davis $20,000 and a trip to Alaska to assist in a cleanup.

"Most innovation comes from the margins," Spradlin says. "Somebody who's doing work in one field realizes that what they're doing can be applied somewhere else." A few years ago, it was difficult and expensive to find expertise outside of one's immediate network. Today, the market is booming. SmartSheet.com has assembled a list of more than 50 public crowdsourcing services, and that roster doesn't include the hundreds of private and semipublic communities.[2]

Community Essentials

In the process of interviewing more than a dozen community managers, we found ourselves frequently revisiting several issues. Here's the advice we got from the experts about what organizers should consider.

Public or private?

This is a big decision usually made at the front end (although not necessarily), and it should be driven by your strategy for the community. If marketing or customer support considerations are driving the decision—and scale and visibility are important—then public communities are the way to go.

The advantage of public communities is that they can grow quickly and, if successful, can generate a lot of search traffic. Search is an important consideration, because visitors to a community support

forum, for example, may be well-qualified prospects. For that reason, consider adding promotions contextually on highly trafficked forum pages. Large communities are terrific for listening, enhancing customer relationships, and testing ideas and messages. They can quickly become self-sustaining. Public communities are also a good platform for word-of-mouth marketing programs, promotions, and incentives.

But there are significant downsides, too. Membership in public communities tends to be of lower quality than that of private communities, and a lot of unused accounts can accumulate as visitors register once and don't come back. Lower-quality membership also tends to create lower-quality content, which tend to dissuade elite professionals from participating. There are also limitations on a business' ability to float or test new ideas because the network is effectively open for all to see, including competitors.

Private communities are popular in B2B settings because members value efficient, focused communication with professional peers. "Privately branded communities enable a company to zero in on a more targeted audience and engage in deeper conversations to create long-lasting relationships and drive measurable business results," wrote Christine Banning, vice president of marketing at SCORE, a nonprofit small business mentoring and training association, in a submission to *BtoB* magazine's 2010 Social Media Marketing Awards.

SCORE joined with PartnerUp, an online community for small businesses, to create a resource where members of both organizations could get answers to questions about running their companies. The collaboration drove membership from 100,000 to 165,000 in one year and increased the total audience for SCORE's newsletters to more than 200,000. By keeping the community private, SCORE made sure that members knew whom they were talking to. That improved the quality of interactions and also the value of SCORE to existing and prospective members.

Hybrid approaches are increasingly available through integration with popular public networks. For example, LinkedIn publishes a set of programming interfaces that lets members link their profiles and networks to third-party sites. American Express adopted the LinkedIn integration in its OPEN Forum network for small business owners to drive up participation without sacrificing the service's focused membership.

Private communities are usually smaller than public ones, but that's often a virtue. The point is to build a quality audience. Members may be granted access to privileged company plans or consulted for feedback on issues of high importance. A private community may even be a spur off a public gathering place with access limited to top customers or the most valued members of the public community.

The biggest downside of private communities is that they require a lot more effort to manage than public ones. Administrators may be required to take an active role in approving members, responding to questions, planting seeds for discussion, and weeding out off-topic subject matter. The smaller the community, the less likely it is to become self-sustaining, so be prepared to spend some time there. How much is difficult to estimate. AuntiMinnie's Casey spends 10 to 15 percent of his time administering just one of the site's more than 15 topics that collectively generate 200 to 300 comments per day. SAP has 30 to 50 people engaged in managing the communities, which total 2 million members. However, only three to five of those employees are full-time community managers. The rest contribute or serve the members on an as-needed basis. If you plan to share privileged information with members, be sure you have the IT tools in place to prevent unauthorized distribution, such as password-protected documents.

Know the 1:9:90 rule.

This nearly universal trait of public communities has baffled organizers for years. In almost every case, a small percentage of members contribute nearly all of the content, while the vast majority listen or do nothing. In reality, the population of contributors is more than 10 percent. In *Groundswell,* Bernoff and Li cite Forrester Research's Social Technographics profile that segments online adults into six categories: creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators, and inactives. They estimate that creators made up about 18 percent of the U.S.

population and critics, about 25 percent. That means that 57 percent of members of online communities in the United States don't actively participate.

These ratios seem to apply regardless of the focus of the community. For example, the profile of owners of Hewlett-Packard computers matches that of U.S. adults in almost every category, according to *Groundswell*. There are some significant variations correlated with age and location, however. For example, 41 percent of young males are creators, compared with just 8 percent of people older than age 52. Interestingly, Asian countries have a much higher percentage of creators, ranging from 22 percent in Japan to 38 percent in South Korea. By contrast, in most of Europe, the figure is 10 percent or less.

This phenomenon appears to be a matter of human nature, and there is very little you can do to change it in unrestricted communities. Our best advice is to cultivate the loyalty of the most active members and encourage them to be your eyes and ears in the lurking majority. You can energize passive members to some degree through incentives or simply by urging them to speak, but you're not going to change their nature.

The right content.

If it's easy to get to, content is still king. But useful content that anticipates and solves your potential customer's problem is what B2B marketers should be focused on creating. Any kind of information is technically content, but what drives people to register and participate is information which helps them do their work more effectively and efficiently.

Nearly every community organizer ultimately encounters conflict between the urge to market and the need to serve. Resist this temptation. B2B customers are some of the most cynical buyers in the world. Many are barraged by marketing pitches every day and have learned every dodge and trick in the book.

"Content feeds the social media beast," wrote sales automation company Marketo in its *Definitive Guide to Social Media* e-book. "Audit your existing marketing assets and identify the educational pieces; these perform much better in social media than traditional sales collateral."

Businesses today have an unprecedented opportunity to become trusted sources of advice. With traditional media in a precipitous decline, professionals are turning to one another for advice on where to find information. You can play in this game if you're willing to set aside your marketing agenda and simply help your customers be more successful. Give to get.

The best content creators for a B2B community are the people who build your products and your customers. Seek out enthusiasts who want to engage with your customers and give them a profile and a forum to spread their expertise. Look for experts at different layers of the organization. Your chief engineer or technology officer is going to appeal to a different type of purchasing stakeholder than your developers. Look for opportunities to spotlight these experts in special events, such as a blogger round table or tweet chat with your chief technology officer (CTO) or a daylong off-site brainstorm with your product engineers.

You'll probably be pleasantly surprised to find that topics sell better than speakers. This is a reversal of the star-driven paradigm of professional conferences. "There's no relationship between speakers and attendance" at the webinars produced by HR.com, according to founder Debbie McGrath. Her company used to pay thousands of dollars for prominent experts to anchor events but found that attendees responded no better to stars than to unknowns. The topic was what mattered.

If you don't have the resources to produce much original content, consider curating content produced by others. The web has become an albatross of spam blogs and twitbots. Serve your customers by editing and pointing to the best content with a link blog, in Linkedin Groups or on Twitter. Curators gather, vet, and highlight information from a variety of sources. Curation is a powerful new concept in an

information-saturated world. People don't have time to seek out all the information they need, so they gravitate to resources that aggregate content along special interest lines.

According to a May 2010 Pew Internet report by Kristen Purcell, aggregators are the second most popular news sites on the Internet, among those who have a favorite. In the consumer realm, Google News, Digg and Drudge Report are just three examples of successful aggregators. A B2B example is Sphinn.com, a web site that accepts links submitted by members and then rates the information of greatest interest to marketers.

A prior 2009 survey of 2,787 U.S. news consumers by the research firm Outsell found that news consumers are more likely to turn to an aggregator (31 percent) than to a newspaper site (8 percent) or other site (18 percent) for information. "A full 44% of visitors to Google News scan headlines without accessing newspapers' individual sites," Outsell wrote.[3] There is no reason to believe the information-consuming habits of busy businesspeople are any different.

The Economic Development Council of Western Massachusetts (EDC), a non-profit that supports businesses in several Massachusetts counties, posts 25-30 headlines and summaries of articles from regional publications and blogs to its news page each week. It has reaped the benefits of word-of-mouth marketing and better performance on search engines, which favor relevancy and frequency. Visits to WesternMassEDC.com were up 40 percent in the year after the experiment began, with nearly all of the growth coming from visits to the news page, which is now the site's second most popular entry page. Regional publishers actually court the organization to have their headlines featured on the site and the service has improved member affinity, according to Mike Graney, senior VP of business development. You can even make aggregation the core theme of your service. British electronics distributor Premier Farnell plc launched element14 in 2008 to serve as a kind of Facebook for the voracious information appetites of its audience of electronic design engineers.

Members can see and comment on each other's activities, participate in discussions, and share documents. The latter feature is a

distinctive service of element14, which has amassed a library of thousands of manuals, research papers, how-tos, and schematics. Any registered member can upload documents and rate the ones he or she has read.

The company's partners are a key constituency, because they can get their content assets in front of a highly desirable audience. The more Premier Farnell's suppliers participate, the better their reputation with the community. Partners can also apply to become featured experts who field tough questions from members and share the answers with everyone. However, being a business partner does not qualify anyone for inclusion. "They have to demonstrate significant expertise in their area," says Jeff Hamilton, director of design engineer marketing. "This is not about advertising."

Divide and conquer.

As your community grows, activity will tend to cluster around certain areas while other topics may peter out. Consider moving the active threads into their own area. This makes it easier for members to find others with similar interests and also for you to monitor the ebb and flow of activity by topic.

Creating topical discussion areas is a particularly valuable service to your most active members because it makes it easy for those valued participants to hang out in and contribute to their areas of expertise. Segmentation also indulges members' desire to be with their peers. Veteran engineering pros, for example, don't want to be bothered with questions from college sophomores.

Having the flexibility to prune and graft areas of special interest is an important consideration when choosing a platform for your community. At the very least, you should be able to aggregate discussions from multiple areas and consolidate them under a new heading. But the issues go beyond simply moving around threads. Certain interest groups within your community may merit special features, such as online events, downloads, chat rooms, or even transaction services.

For example, Serena Software supports online storefronts where its partners can sell applications or "mashups" built with the company's

software development tools. Partners get access to a set of services, such as sales support and accounting, that other community members doesn't see. The same might be true for your customers. Certain active groups may gravitate toward interactive events or document sharing, for example, while other groups don't care. You should be able to selectively target these features.

Relax.

Business professionals are people too, so make your community a place where they can build deeper professional relationships through entertainment and shared personal interests. Here are a few examples:

- HR.com devotes a portion of its home page to "HR Humor." Those links lead to cartoons, jokes, and thematic crossword puzzles submitted by members. There's also a clever video of kids describing why they aspire to do the dirty work of HR. The video has amassed more than half a million views.
- Kinaxis' Supply Chain Expert Community bills itself as a place where supply chain pros can "learn, laugh, share, connect." The site features comedy videos produced by Second City, a spoof of the *Late Late Show*, a video comedy series called "Married to the Job" and more. "In supply chain, laughter really is the best medicine," says Kirsten Watson, director of corporate marketing.
- SAP has a "coffee corner" in its community, which reflects the company's European heritage and cultural appreciation for the casual conversations that typically occur around an espresso machine. Hobbies, sports, families, and other topics are discussed, including a special section devoted to "ranting," where members can just let off steam about life's little frustrations.
- AuntMinnie.com has a section called "Off Topic," where members discuss everything from politics to the Super Bowl. Casey says that politics is actually one of the most popular subjects on the site.

NERD HEAVEN

National Instruments is a test and measurement automation company that's sometimes called "Home Depot for engineers." Social networks, wikis, and discussion forums support vibrant online discussions among its core engineering customers. Engineers are natural tinkerers, and National Instruments' culture reflects that. "People here are always buzzing about new technologies," says community and social media manager Deirdre Walsh.

A discussion-based community provides first-level technical support to more than 100,000 members. Customers can search a database of nearly 1 million messages that have been gathered over the past decade. The community answers about half of all support questions, saving National Instruments a significant amount of money. "It was essential to embrace social communities early because it was impossible for us to become experts in every area in which our customers were using our technologies. No industry represents more than 15 percent of our revenue, so it was essential for us to connect like-minded, domain experts," says Walsh.

In 2008, the company launched the NI Developer Zone Community, a rich collaborative environment that enables engineers at 25,000 companies to swap code, share documents, and upload video, among other things.

National Instruments has five major objectives for its communities:

1. **Ensure customer success through fast and accurate support**. Any question that isn't answered by the community within 24 hours escalates to an NI applications engineer. With the addition of code and document exchanges, customers can share their own innovations with one another.
2. **Get product feedback.** The LabVIEW Idea Exchange is an innovation forum where customers can submit ideas for enhancing the company's flagship LabVIEW software directly to developers. There are also private communities for focused feedback for other products, including a new one devoted to robotics that is also open to high school students.
3. **Increase awareness and loyalty.** There's a LabVIEW page on nearly every social network you can imagine, including MySpace, Squidoo, and Meetup. The social listening posts are used to track what Walsh calls "actionable conversations," or discussions that indicate opportunity or a problem that needs attention.

4. **Drive new and repeat business.** Issues that draw lots of interest may spawn their own communities. For example, National Instruments has online groups for each of its annual user conferences. Members can see key demonstrations and download a customized parts list to build the demo themselves. "It's a way to carry the conference along after the event," says Walsh.

The community is also used for prospecting. Trade show visitors who express interest in a product area are often invited to join the relevant online forum.

5. **Grow the size and health of the community.** With members from more than 25,000 companies and 1 million entries in its support forums, this goal seems to be taking care of itself.

THE CUSTOMERS ARE REVOLTING

David van Toor arrived at Sage Software in 2007 in the middle of a crisis. The new general manager of Sage's customer relationship management group was facing an open revolt by users of its ACT! small business software over an upgrade that had introduced unexpected problems to some customers. Van Toor opted to use a community to capture and guide the discussions. Here's what happened in his own words:

In 2006, we rewrote the product and called it an upgrade. That had the effect of not so much moving the cheese as changing the food group. It was very favorable for larger companies of 10–20 users, but it completely changed the user metaphor for the small client.

When I arrived in 2007, we were facing a lot of negative posts on message boards, the worst being Amazon, where raving negative fanatics were posting negative reviews. Prospects were getting form letters from our competitors pointing to these comments. Amazon was responsible for significant sales. I landed in the middle of that problem.

Our philosophy was that if people are going to complain, let them complain in our kitchen rather than over our fence. We created our own community. It turned out many of these customers just wanted to talk. We had to get into one-to-one conversations with 800,000 customers.

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The first thing I did was create an "Ask David" e-mail address on the website. I would review the posts and respond directly when appropriate. I'd also blog about some of the more common issues.

Support was all paid at the time and a large group of customers was largely unsupported. I wanted every customer to have some level of support based upon how much they wanted to pay, even if that was nothing. We carved off some support people to monitor the posts on the forum and to resolve them quickly. I posted on the blog what progress we were making.

We had an advisory board of 80 customers, and they were more than happy to spread the word. The organic growth was huge. There were hundreds of thousands of posts within a month. We had a lot of fans who wanted things to work out. When they heard there was a way they could talk to us, they came in droves.

Initially, half the responses were positive and half told me I was an idiot. We welcomed them all. Whenever we had a very negative post, we'd call the person directly. In most cases, we were able to convert that person into a positive user through a rational discussion that addressed their needs and let them know we were listening. There were 200–300 people we were able to convert from negative to positive, and that accounted for nearly all the outspoken complainers. Many more people who weren't so negative were converted through competent product support.

Sometimes people were unreasonable, but most of them just wanted to vent to someone who could do something. Giving a free upgrade or waiving a fee usually made a positive difference. In a world where customer service is public relations, it becomes a marketing expense. Mainly it was just a matter of being honest and giving credence to the fact that they had a problem. I listened to their concerns, gave credibility to them and didn't pass judgment on whether they were wrong or right. It was important to listen, be honest and not speak in a marketing voice.

There was one customer in Canada who'd had a horrible experience. We couldn't unravel the mess by phone, so we flew three engineers from Phoenix to work with him. We spent more on the trip than the customer spent with us, but it was

worth every cent. If we hadn't resolved his problems, he would continue to post his tirades and I would lose sales.

Some of our most negative customers became our strongest references. Others became our best product testers. We measured customer loyalty with Net Promoter Score. One year later, the increase in the score was twice what would be regarded as excellent. Our customer loyalty scores had improved 20% and the number of participants in our beta program tripled.

The community grew in importance inside the organization. Our beta program shifted from a traditional model to one that included the community. It was so efficient that we were able to add more features to the product than we could before because we got immediate feedback.

I think what stops a lot of companies from embracing online communities is the CEO saying, 'What's the ROI?' To that I say, 'What's the ROI of bringing your wife flowers on your anniversary?' Even if there's no positive ROI, there can be a negative one for not taking action.

People buy stuff from people. They gravitate to business relationships that mirror personal relationships. If the CEO responds to me in 10 minutes, I want to do business with a company like that.