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2008

Engaging Communities for the Company and the Brand

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Abstract

[Excerpt] This year's MSI conference, "Engaging Communities for the Company and the Brand," sought to explore the notion of brand communities. Cosponsored with Boston University's School of Management and chaired by Susan Fournier of Boston University, the presentations explored several key themes, including: the creation of brand communities as organic versus corporate entities, the impact of brand communities on marketing strategy, and the power of brand communities in changing and reshaping the brand itself. The following summary highlights the key findings from each presentation and offers directions for future research surrounding unanswered questions and ideas. In addition, we have provided an extensive list of references to give you suggestions for further reading.

Keywords

brand communities, marketing strategy, organic entities, corporate entities

Disciplines

Marketing

Comments

Conference Summary

Engaging Communities for the Company and the Brand

Prepared by Rishtee Batra and Ben Lawrence

Edited by Susan Fournier and Russell S. Winer

December 6–7, 2007

Boston, Massachusetts

Co-sponsored by the Boston University School of Management

Engaging Communities for the Company and the Brand

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While communities have existed for centuries, some say our hunger for social connection is amplified in today's fragmented world. This conference explored cross-disciplinary thinking on the nature and process of community, and leading-edge practice in engaging communities for the benefit of the company and the brand.

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Introduction

This year's MSI conference, "Engaging Communities for the Company and the Brand," sought to explore the notion of brand communities. Cosponsored with Boston University's School of Management and chaired by Susan Fournier of Boston University, the presentations explored several key themes, including: the creation of brand communities as organic versus corporate entities, the impact of brand communities on marketing strategy, and the power of brand communities in changing and reshaping the brand itself. The following summary highlights the key findings from each presentation and offers directions for future research surrounding unanswered questions and ideas. In addition, we have provided an extensive list of references to give you suggestions for further reading.

—Russell S. Winer

Engaging Community for the Harley-Davidson Brand
Susan Fournier, Boston University, and Lara Lee, Jump Associates

The conference was kicked off by a joint presentation focusing on community strategies for what is arguably the quintessential community brand: Harley-Davidson. Susan Fournier, who has served as a consultant to Harley-Davidson for 15 years, began by highlighting the key markers that render Harley-Davidson the quintessential community brand: a shared ethos and values system, a sense of moral responsibility among riders, and rites and rituals expressing belonging to the brand culture. The Harley-Davidson brand, Fournier argued, is not just about attracting a community of riders: the brand at its essence embodies the notion of community. Recounting a mantra at Harley, Fournier stated, "The brotherhood lives in the brand . . . they are not just buying a bike but buying into a brotherhood that unites riders worldwide." H.O.G. (Harley Owners Group) was formed over 25 years ago with the explicit mission of building owner-to-owner

connections that inspire and fulfill dreams of the H-D brotherhood experience. With over 1.1 million members worldwide and a 39-person organization, H.O.G. has helped fuel double-digit growth for Harley-Davidson.

Fournier presented four interdependent strategies engaged by H.O.G. to support its community brand.

Event Strategy. This strategy builds off the foundational insight that what is most critical in building community is giving riders the opportunity to connect with each other to create and share experiences with the product and the brand. The H.O.G. team taps into organic motorcycling events worldwide (e.g., Sturgis, Daytona Bike Week) and hosts a robust portfolio of national and state events. In 2007 H.O.G. hosted 154 events in 20 different countries, 45 of which were state rallies entirely designed, executed, and funded by club volunteers.

Relationship Building Strategy. The H.O.G. community is comprised of 1.1 million member relationships, each of which, theoretically, needs to be cultivated to build strength in the community brand. H.O.G. engages a regional team of nine managers who work tirelessly to support member relationships. Spending an average of 280 days on the road, the regional team attends chapter events, hosts town meetings, interfaces with dealers, assists in the execution of state rallies, and provides supportive marketing programs that allow H.O.G. chapters to thrive. H.O.G.'s "close to the customer" strategy expands throughout the organization, where the cultivation of intimate "familial ties" stands as a recognized mission overall.

Brand Building Strategy. The third strategy involves enabling and promulgating the symbol systems, rites, and rituals that collectively identify the community group and provide the social and cultural capital that serves as the brand's foundation. Patches, pins, and t-shirts provide tangible markers of brand experiences and values. Stories are also critical in enabling the

H.O.G. mythology and fueling the legacy of the brand. H.O.G. produces a magazine *HOGTALES* to capture and distribute the rituals, stories, experiences, and knowledge that comprise the community culture. H.O.G. runs contests to encourage the codification and sharing of memories among rider groups and embraces rituals that can solicit the stories that become embedded into the culture. H.O.G. also orchestrates the experience of touching the broader culture of the H-D brand, as for example with manufacturing plant tours.

Enabling the Cultural Capital System Supporting the Community of the Brand. Borrowing insight from McAlexander and Schouten's seminal (1995) work on the Harley brand community, this strategy recognizes that communities are sociological entities with an explicit structure and organization. H.O.G.'s structure is hierarchical, based on group status and accumulated cultural capital, with both a hard core and soft core that work in a reciprocating fashion to reinforce and bolster the system. Hard-core users grant legitimacy and authenticity to the brand and community while the soft core reciprocates with the respect and recognition that the hard core requires to obtain identity value from the brand. H.O.G.'s strategy is to feed the hard core and help individuals negotiate the journey of ascending the status structure and building social and cultural capital overall.

A brand at the crossroads

Wall Street continues to exert significant pressures on Harley-Davidson for growth, and the brand community presents itself as a prime candidate for incremental value creation and capture. How can Harley manage corporate growth objectives while maintaining the philosophy and goals that ground H.O.G.? H.O.G. provides a proven success model for the creation of shareholder value, and the risks of tampering with this complex community system are great. Still, H.O.G. means different things to different people, and these different meaning platforms are unique to customer segments. Might these different meanings require funda-

mentally different operationalizations of community, some of them potentially outside the structure of H.O.G.?

To address this question, Harley-Davidson's Enthusiast Services group, headed at the time by Vice President Lara Lee, engaged Jump Associates to identify new models, methods, and opportunities for building the brand community through value-added services. Based on a hybrid approach of ethnographic study, narrative analysis, social theory, and design application, three levels of community insight with implication for strategy were revealed.

Community Roles. Community strategy must judiciously address the different roles that are adopted by community members. Jump's research suggested that an individual's community experience is wrought with tensions, and that community roles are purposely engaged to help manage these tensions. Four tensions were identified: sustaining passions while managing responsibilities; seeking depth of experience versus taking on new challenges; crafting your own identity versus plugging into an existing group identity; and pursuing everyday fun versus setting up for future success. To navigate these tensions, people pick the best roles for their needs, adopt new roles as priorities shift, pick new communities to play new roles, and switch back and forth between roles over time.

Community Metaphors. Jump's research uncovered a diverse space of community forms, each representing a different model or structure of community enactment. While H.O.G. currently delivers against the "Club," "Protective Fort," and "Summer Camp" community models, there exist other as-yet-untapped opportunities to develop new community metaphors for the brand, such as the "Sewing Circle," the "Barn Raising," and the "Front Porch."

Models of Affiliation. Community affiliations tend to take one of three forms: pools, webs, or hubs. In pools, individuals have loose connections with each other but strong connection with a shared activity, goal, or value (e.g., political parties). In webs, individuals have strong one-to-one connections (e.g., social networks). In hubs, individuals have a strong connection with a central figure and loose associations with each other (e.g., celebrity fan clubs). The pool is the traditional model of brand community, with individuals affiliating through shared meanings of the brand. Neither pools nor hubs are as strong as webs. Pools can become very large, but have permeable boundaries, making it easier to exit and enter (which can stress the exclusivity and authenticity of the group). Hubs rely on affiliation with a central figure, so while a hub may bring new members into a community, it can also easily break apart or relocate and take members away. Project results included guidelines for applying different models of affiliation to create multifaceted community-building strategies.

Implications for managers

- Companies must engage combinations of community models to provide a balanced community strategy portfolio for the brand. Community-building challenges and opportunities inevitably evolve over time. Companies should be wary that early strategy decisions may lock a firm into a community strategy that creates momentum and becomes difficult to change.

- Community-building strategy must be enabled by and supportive of business models and strategy. Community strategies should be shaped by organizational values and brand constraints. Corporations must support community in terms of both structures and resources. There does not exist a one-size-fits-all community strategy model, nor is community strategy right for all brands.

- At the end of the day, community is about the people, not the brand. While the brand may (and should) provide a unifying force bringing people together, it is the people in the community that are elemental.

With a Brand at Its Center: Why Brand Community Was, Is, and Will Forever Be Resonant

Thomas C. O'Guinn, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Thomas O'Guinn presented an overview of the history of the sociological view of branding in general and brand community specifically, and the role of brand community in the field of marketing. He stressed the idea that community is a core human property that can be leveraged by marketing. O'Guinn reviewed the tenets of brand community (i.e., consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and responsibility to the community), important community research findings, and notable marketing applications, and frustrations with the concept. He concluded by identifying some pressing research needs and suggested expanding our thinking and practice beyond communities to the "social brand" in general. The brand community is a subset, or one example, of this wider idea.

The rise of brand communities

O'Guinn reminds us that humans need affiliation and belonging; they are first and foremost social creatures. Thus, the formation of all sorts of communities does not surprise us. One of those occurs at the intersection of consumer culture and this essential human formation: community. What is novel is the way in which community connections are formed and what lies at the core of these communities: brands. *Brand* communities possess the essential elements of all communities, but are formed by admirers of a brand. They exist in both face-to-face forms (e.g., clubs and local user groups), or more frequently in cyberspace where social networks abound.

O'Guinn argues that brand communities were evident as early as the late 1940s, with the Tupperware clubs that sprawled across the United States. The founder of Tupperware realized that as women experienced the loss of jobs in post-war times and began migrating to suburbs, they lost opportunities to interact with one another. Tupperware took advantage of women's unmet needs for affiliation by introducing the concept of face-to-face communication around the brand. It was not the product that led to Tupperware's success, but the opportunity it provided women to engage with one another.

Several changes have taken place in the last several decades to fuel growth in such communities: the collapse of more traditional social and taste hierarchies, the globalization of brands, and the empowerment of consumers. We find a world where now, more than ever, brands exist as social organizers: a mechanism for connecting people and helping them fulfill identity projects in the social world. Brand relationships have evolved from a consumer-brand dyad to a triadic relationship where consumers' brand meanings rely not only upon their own interpretation of the brand but also upon their interactions with other brand enthusiasts.

Implications for managers

- It is imperative that managers appreciate the intricacies of brand communities so that they can be leveraged properly.

- Brand communities must be managed, not ignored.

- In a time of increasing consumer empowerment, we are just beginning to realize the impact that brand communities have on the brand. The ownership of brands is becoming increasingly contested. Managers must actively consider the struggle between users and creators in maintaining brand identity.

- Brand communities are not just a collection of fanatical lead users, but a group of "ordinary" brand users as well. Management must attend to this silent majority in developing community for the brand.

- At present, the best brand communities are those that (1) are created and managed with a very light marketer touch and with a

strong sense of consumer empowerment or (2) arise organically from the bottom up and are joined by the voice of the marketer as a welcome guest.

- Brand communities typically welcome the presence of the marketer as long as it understands it is a guest and behaves as one.

- Companies that understand and practice this can successfully leverage these now commonplace and widespread brand communities.

ROI on Third-Place Communities
Mark Rosenbaum, Northern Illinois University

Mark Rosenbaum discussed a series of studies that illustrated the benefits that consumers obtain from receiving social support in service establishments such as diners, video arcades, and gyms. This presentation examined the different types of third-place communities that evolve in the marketplace, the way in which these evolve, and the impact of third places on firm performance. Third-place communities afford not only functional and social benefits, but also emotional health benefits to members. Focal firms are rewarded with a deep commitment that goes beyond traditional metrics of satisfaction and loyalty.

Typology of third-place communities
While the home typically represents the first place, and work the second place, consumers are increasingly gathering in third-place communities where they are afforded opportunities to connect with one another. While marketplaces frequently serve as third-place communities, the drivers of third-community experiences differ and can broadly be classified as follows:

- Places-as-practical. These third-place communities serve largely functional purposes through the service of product or service needs. The choice of community here is driven by objective measures

including product and service attributes, location, and price.

- Places-as-gathering. Here, third-place communities offer more than just functional benefits: they fulfill people's needs for companionship by providing an atmosphere in which consumers embrace their social needs.

- Places-as-home. In this type of third-place community, the consumer and the place become synonymous, with the visit to the third-place nearing a "religious" experience. These third places represent outlets where consumers can fulfill all of their emotional support needs.

Implications for managers
Just as they do with product brands, consumers can become attached to retail establishments that service their community needs. This so-called place attachment means that consumers sense a dependency and a commitment to the place. They desire to assimilate the service brand into one's identity and to make near-daily patronage part of their lifestyle. As third-place communities increase connectedness, they become beneficial not only to consumers but also to the focal firms.

Benefits differ for the various third-place community forms. In places-as-practical, retailers find increased satisfaction and cognitive loyalty. Moving one step further, in places-as-gathering, we see loyalty not only to the establishment/product/service, but to the larger community. Finally, in places-as-home, retailers move beyond selling a product or service to selling soulful experiences and are rewarded by not only satisfaction and loyalty but also customer voluntary performance (CVP). In engaging in CVP, the consumer helps the firm deliver higher quality service: a form of thanking the third place for being a source of emotional support. CVP behaviors include various forms of customer citizenship, including providing useful feedback to the retailer, cooperating to help maintain the retail

environment, spreading positive word-of-mouth, and behaving like employees by helping other customers.

Why Grassroots Communities May Create Better Brands Than Managers Do
Johann Füller and Marius K. Luedicke, University of Innsbruck

Brand community theory commonly premises that companies manage the process of brand creation and thereby facilitate the social construction of communities around their brands. This presentation inquired into a twofold-reversed case in which people build a lifestyle community of interest, create brands to enable that lifestyle, and then develop marketable products under that brand name. The authors used the case of Outdoorseiten.net to explore this reversed value creation flow. Originally established as an online community of 4,900 outdoor enthusiasts, Outdoorseiten.net eventually gave rise to the Outdoorseiten.net brand, providing an array of branded outdoor sport products for enthusiasts. Füller presented evidence on the structure, motivations, and business consequences of this interest-driven community and offered suggestions for dealing with grassroots communities and their brands.

Why do people engage in community brands?
Community members exercise a need for maintaining authenticity and creativity by establishing home-grown brands. Through the extensive network of united consumers, community brand members seek to establish a space in which they can evade the "brand mill" and commercial mainstream. Communities engage in creating brands when specialized needs exist that corporate brands cannot fulfill. Moreover, this process of brand-building serves diverse social needs. Aside from filling product-related voids, members satisfy social needs through what they describe as a fun and engaging process that allows them to connect with others like themselves. This organic brand-building activity is not perceived as a core motivating objective of the community: it emerges slowly and inconspicuously as individual members realize that their efforts can be combined to create a community brand.

Community brands can be identified across a wide array of product offerings, e.g., Casemodder.de and Skibuilders.com. Community brands serve functional and social needs for members in a time of consumer emancipation, offering an opportunity for increased consumer control and power in the participatory economy.

Implications for managers
There exist several opportunities for corporations to intersect with community-based brands.

- Although community brands represent the effort of community members to cultivate brands and products that deliver on the community's needs, the community is less interested in the production and fulfillment part of these desires than it is in innovation, collaboration, and marketing. Opportunity awaits corporations who absorb peripheral production and fulfillment responsibilities.

- Communities are not generally interested in developing products from "scratch." Outdoorseiten.net members, for instance, contacted expert tent manufacturer Weichsel to produce a tent for the group bearing an Outdoorseiten.net brand logo. For pragmatic reasons, some communities still rely on the existing expertise of companies to fulfill production requirements.

- Communities with brands harbor a great deal of knowledge that corporations might use for their own product development purposes. Companies can use community online discourses to monitor trends and gain deeper insight into the needs of their consumer groups.

Mapping DNA to Community Strategy
Georges-Edouard Dias, L'Oréal

Using examples from the L'Oréal brand portfolio across different countries, Dias discussed how the company's community strategies are aligned to different brand images and positionings. Rather than brands merging into the same form of community sharing, the Marketing 2.0 environment, where consumers influence marketing, offers a space where brands tell the truth to their customers about who they are. This presentation shared some of the best practices that L'Oréal undertakes in managing community engagement for its brands.

Many brands, many community strategies
L'Oréal finds it useful to organize its portfolio of brands along two dimensions, as illustrated in the chart below: (1) whether they are mainstream or niche (long tail) brands, and (2) whether they are brands of authority or brands of conversation. Brands of authority, such as L'Oréal and La Roche Posay, help consumers actualize their beauty needs by lending expertise and assistance. Brands of conversation, such as Kiehl's and Garnier, are part of a global conversation; these are brands that engender a felt sense of community through which consumers communicate, share experiences, connect, and interact.

Dias emphasized that it is critical to align marketing activities with brand and customer realities when setting strategy for a given offering. The cells in the matrix below suggest different strategic approaches for building community and brand. Traditional tools, such as the use of spokespeople as well as heavy TV and print advertising, are well-suited for brands of authority. However, brands of conversation, such as Kiehl's, require that marketers pay special attention to the social DNA of their customers. Community-building exercises such as corporate sponsored blogs, charitable events, and local community strategies are effective in the promotion of conversation brands. For brands of conversation, consumers' needs also extend beyond functional benefits.

Customers want to know that their brands of conversation align with other aspects of social identity, and that brand consumption promotes the fulfillment of identity projects overall. To support this, every Kiehl's outlet organizes a bulletin board where customers are encouraged to share photos and stories of their personal and product-related experiences that allow them to connect not only with the brand on a personal level but also with other consumers. Similarly, Kiehl's requires employees to volunteer in the local community, creating a bond between company and customer that extends

Brand Essence

	Brand of Authority	Brands of Conversation
Mainstream	L'ORÉAL PARIS	GARNIER
Long Tail	LA ROCHE-POSAY LABORATOIRE PHARMACEUTIQUE	Kiehl's SINCE 1851

Target Market

beyond the product to render customers as advocates for the firm.

Implications for managers

When managing the marketing activities of a large portfolio of brands, it is imperative that each marketing activity takes into consideration the nature of each individual brand. Managers must stay true to the soul of the brand and communicate its message in a way that is consistent with consumers' brand understanding. That is, they must gain an understanding of the social needs and desires of the customer and how the brand is situated in the larger social fabric.

Building Guidant's B2B Brand Community, One Repaired Heart at a Time

James Neupert, Abbott Vascular
(formerly Guidant)

While a great deal has been written about brand community in B2C applications, scant research concerns B2B brand communities. This paradox denies a growing body of journalistic and anecdotal evidence of the very significant opportunities for, and vitality of, brand communities in B2B practice. This presentation examined one such community—the Guidant brand community—and drew out what has made it so successful and important to the corporation and stakeholders of the firm. The Guidant brand community is a true co-creation grounded in a sincere dedication to physician customers' goals, a relationship-centric corporate culture with the backing of extensive and dedicated resources for building communal purpose in the brand.

The Guidant community

Guidant (acquired by Abbott Vascular and Boston Scientific), a maker of heart stents, defibrillators, pacemakers, and devices to improve the outcomes for heart failure patients, defined its mission as providing innovative therapeutic medical solutions of distinctive value for customers, patients, and healthcare systems.

Guidant had to understand the deep and significant relationships that form among these various community members and find ways to support and strengthen these ties. Guidant envisioned a community comprised of independent yet interlocking one-to-one relationships between these stakeholder groups, thereby building community through the cumulative connections between doctor-company and doctor+company-patient over time.

Company–Doctor Relationships. Focused on a relatively small group of 7500 key physicians, Guidant worked to understand clinical needs, develop new products, refine and improve current products, and create lifesaving therapies. Following development of new products, Guidant engaged programs to train interventional cardiologists on how to use their products. A highly specialized and trained sales force had the technical skills to interact with physicians, and the expertise that allows productive and engaging relationships to form.

Doctor+Company–Patient Relationships. By engaging patients in their care, Guidant opened up communication links between itself and the consumer, mainly via its clinical customers. To support these relationships, Guidant stimulated a variety of post-operation support groups that extended the understanding of its technology and brand as lived in individual consumers' lives. The company also connected the employees who manufactured the stents, defibs, and other devices with the patients who benefited from them. On Patient Appreciation Day, for example, patients told their medical stories and met up with those who designed and manufactured the medical devices that saved their lives.

Implications for managers

By leveraging its brand community, Guidant was able to develop innovative products that met customer needs while at the same time creating a network to deliver products to the end user. The Guidant brand transcends the utility of its complex technological equipment: it has become, in essence, a "storied brand." The

brand tells a story about a life that was saved or a life that was extended; of a father who saw his daughter marry, or a grandfather witnessing the birth of a grandchild. It is through the retelling of these stories that the relationships within the community—including those between physicians, consumers, and employees—are strengthened and built.

Attractors, Enablers, and Value Creation in Brand Communities

Hope Jensen Schau, University of Arizona (with Albert M. Muñiz Jr., DePaul University, and Eric J. Arnould, University of Wyoming)

Drawing on 25 years of collective research in 20 different brand communities the authors glean insights into the pros, cons, and conundrums associated with marketers' involvement in and leverage of company-sponsored and organic brand communities. Arguing that the strongest brand communities form organically, and most thrive without support or even recognition from marketers, the authors suggested that marketers need only provide the following: a (virtual) place to gather, mechanisms that allow the storage and sharing of information, and a powerful yet open brand meaning system around which communities can customize "their" brand.

Brand community practices
It is important to understand the practices that collectively comprise the physiology of the community brand. Physiology comprises "know-that" (procedures), "know-how" (understandings), and "emotional engagements." Practices allow individuals to distinguish themselves through adroit performance and to demonstrate competencies to others. Eleven value-creating practices, practical performances, and activities that individuals engage in while consuming the community brand are documented and include:

- Badging—creating brand symbols and artifacts

- Commoditizing—an act distancing or approaching consumers from/to the marketplace

- Competing—talking about experiences or expertise with the brand with competitive intent

- Customizing—modifying the product to realize product ideals

- Documenting—describing one's journey with the brand

- Empathizing—making other members feel they understand their struggle

- Evangelizing—talking about and proselytizing the brand

- Grooming—cleaning, caring for, and maintaining the product

- Justifying—explaining why the product, modifications, and activities are worth the money and time

- Milestoning—recounting salient episodes in brand community relationships

- Welcoming—rituals of reception into the community

Implications for managers
To encourage community creation firms should:

- Allow customers to develop a broad spectrum of value-creating practices. Focusing on practices reveals not only consumer desires but also how best to satisfy those desires. A practice frequently follows the identification of thwarted desires. For example: combining StriVectin with make-up; identifying all area Starbucks using your Garmin; a channel to identify one's independent musical vision via Jones Independent Music.

- Condone the most successful consumer-created ideas by releasing official branded versions of the content.

- Provide a space in which consumers can share discursive knowledge (know-that), embedded knowledge (know-how), and emotional commitments and projects, thus giving space to allow for different practices to emerge and for consumers to create and modify at will. This contrasts sharply with the current system of allowing for customization via a toolkit or open source approach.

You Can't Change "My" Brand: How Communities Renegotiate Brand Meaning
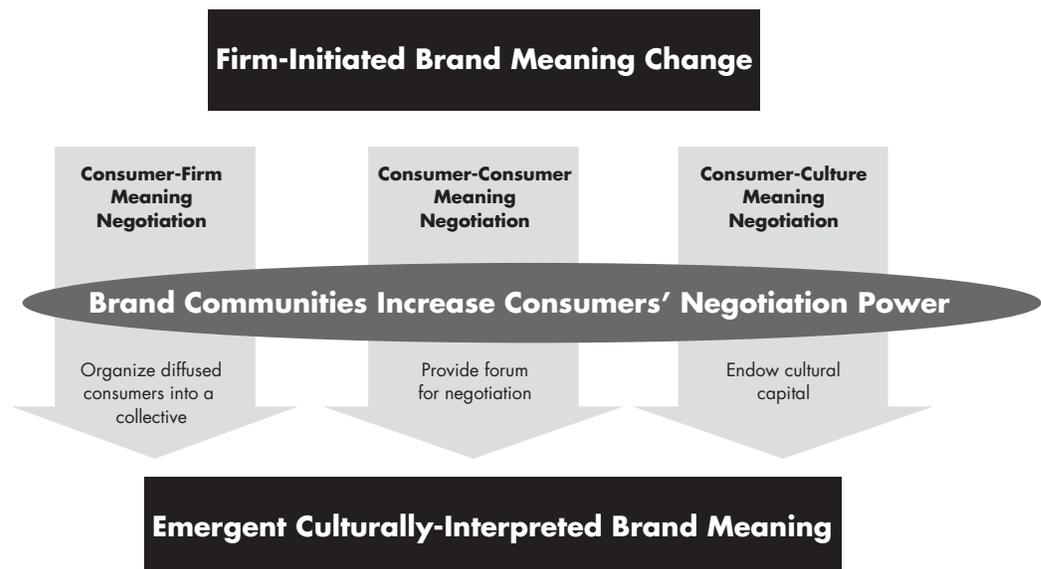### Jill Avery, Simmons College

Thus far, the role of brand communities in marketing has been limited to a managerial examination of how the information and power in such communities can be harnessed to the benefit of a firm. This presentation uncovers the power of brand communities in negotiating, and often changing, the fundamental meaning of a brand, which, when consumer and firm interests conflict, can make brand communities detrimental to the firm. Using the example of the Porsche brand and its introduction of the Cayenne SUV model, as captured in four years

of discussion in the online brand community Rennlist.com, this presentation highlights the processes by which brand meaning is (re)created within the community. Porsche owners were enraged that the brand would introduce the Cayenne: a product that challenged the very essence of what it means to be a Porsche owner and enthusiast. Suddenly, the manly "James Bond" appeal of the Porsche brand was diluted by the addition of inauthentic, "soccer mom" meanings for the brand. Unwilling to accept this fundamental identity meaning change, the community responded in a way that affected not only community structure, but the fundamental equity and architecture supporting the brand.

Meaning renegotiation within the brand community

The brand community serves a critical role by organizing diffuse consumers into a collective and by providing a social forum in which to facilitate the cultural process of meaning (re)negotiation. Further, the media often looks toward brand communities in search of a voice to represent the consumer in the press. The community can also serve as a source of ideas and opinions as consumers engage their own individualized negotiations with the firm. Avery's model illustrates three processes involved as consumers negotiate firm-prompted changes:

Firm-Initiated Brand Meaning Change

Consumer-Firm Meaning Negotiation	Consumer-Consumer Meaning Negotiation	Consumer-Culture Meaning Negotiation

Brand Communities Increase Consumers' Negotiation Power

Organize diffused consumers into a collective	Provide forum for negotiation	Endow cultural capital

Emergent Culturally-Interpreted Brand Meaning

The Porsche brand community was shown to author three brand discourses: a "poseurs" discourse, a "real Porsche" discourse, and a "Porsche-Is-Dead" discourse. At the heart of each of these three discourses was the issue of legitimacy, which was central to interpretation of the launch event for the brand. After protracted discourse, die-hard Porsche enthusiasts denied legitimacy credentials to Cayenne owners, to the Cayenne brand extension itself, and to the post-Cayenne Porsche brand and fragmented the brand community in response. These discourses were negotiated by brand community members, institutionalized within the group, and amplified outside the group to the press, thereby changing the firm's desired brand meaning. They denied the marketer's intended branded house strategy and inhibited the flow of meanings from the master umbrella brand to the Cayenne sub-brand.

Implications for managers

Avery's talk emphasized how high-status consumers participate in, and often take charge of, the meaning creation processes for the brand. However, this is not to say that managers cannot engage in this process themselves. Avery offers the following insights for marketers as they become engaged in the negotiation processes surrounding their community brands:

1. Know the brand community. Consumers must be viewed as part of a social collective that allows them to influence and engage with each other. Marketers must understand the rituals and traditions of the community, the stories that are resonant within the community, and how much cultural capital the community has with outside groups. They must be intimately aware of community structure and possible micro-communities of the brand.

2. As best possible, marketers must try and insert themselves into brand negotiations. They should provide the pro-firm voice in the discourse and minimize actions that feed the anti-firm discussion. Marketers must cultivate high-status sponsors and debunk rumors by actively promoting facts

and using their capital with the media. Marketers must get their side of the story into circulation lest community stories swamp it. They should take care not to feed the anti-brand coalition.

3. Marketers must rescue marginalized out-groups. When groups like the Cayenne users are stigmatized, marketers should think about how to reach out to these groups and impose structural barriers that minimize out-grouping. They can create micro-communities of support for these user groups.

How Fans Create Value in a Convergence Culture
Henry Jenkins, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

As we try to understand the emergence of contemporary forms of participatory culture, Henry Jenkins noted that fan communities have almost a century-long history of user-generated content, social networks, collective intelligence, and remix culture: practices that they developed even when the technological infrastructure made such activities difficult and when the commercial climate was overtly hostile to what they were doing. This presentation explored what happens to fan culture in the era of "Web 2.0" and how a deeper understanding of the fan tradition may help to clarify some of the ongoing debates surrounding the relations between commercial content producers and consumers in fan communities. Everyone—media producers, networks, brands, and consumers—recognizes that we are moving toward a more participatory culture, one where audiences play more visible and active roles in shaping the production and circulation of content, but there is a great deal to be resolved about the terms of our participation in fan communities.

New type of consumer

Jenkins noted the emergence of a new type of fan that some term "loyals," "media-actives," or "prosumers" in the age of Web 2.0. In this increasingly networked society, fan groups form

knowledge communities that work together to solve problems—a term called collective intelligence. These consumers challenge traditional market forces as they are socially connected, noisy and public, resistant to market forces, think globally, and are less loyal to specific networks or media. Fans create economic value by authoring new content, identifying alternative markets that provide training and recruitment for new talent, acting as grassroots intermediaries publicizing the brand, and spreading content to new media platforms. Companies can embrace fans who work together as collaborators, or take a protectionist stance by prohibiting copyright infringement overall.

Examples of proactive fan groups include:

■ *Matrix* fans reenacting movie scenes in public spaces in Japan.

■ Harry Potter fans: created the HP Alliance, a group founded on the examples of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, to spread love and fight the Dark Arts in the real world.

■ *Star Trek* and *Serenity* fans: *Star Trek* fan cinema is being produced in cooperation with the producers who hope that they may use it as a training/recruiting ground for future talent. *Serenity* fans collaborated in publicizing the release of the film and then got slapped with infringement claims which they rejected with an invoice for billable hours.

Implications for managers
■ Companies need to move away from brand stickiness to the concept of spreadability by encouraging the creation of new content that plays on multiple media platforms. Spreadability increases the value of the brand through fan activity.

■ Companies should focus not on the device, but on the story. They should devote energies to improving, energizing, and enabling the community versus the product.

■ Companies must give freedom to consumers to create content thus relinquishing some control of the brand. It is not about losing control; it is simply about getting in the game.

■ In order to tap the collective intelligence of fan communities companies must respect the traditions and histories of these communities and recognize the value that symbiotic relationships can create for the brand. They should not renege on promises for consumer freedom. They should be wary about making money from fan labor. They should respect hybrid amateur/professionals. They should challenge traditional concepts of copyright.

Understanding the Political Dynamics of Impassioned Brand Communities
Craig Thompson, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In recent years, a new marketing mantra has come into vogue: the brand community. In this tale, consumers have a deep and profound need for communal solidarity and increasingly use brands as the means to attain these collective experiences. Craig Thompson argued that our operative conceptions of brand community often oversimplify the contextual complexity that characterizes community at its core. He supported this claim through a series of case studies that highlight the essential relationships between driving political interests and the cultivation of impassioned brand communities. These cases highlighted that marketers need to develop deeper, contextualized knowledge about the politics-of-consumption interests that motivate consumers to become impassioned members of communities for their brands.

Abandoning the myth of the magic formula
Thompson challenges a common tendency in the marketing management literature to promote a specific set of general principles as a magic formula for creating strong brand

communities. This formulaic orientation, however, does not encourage marketing managers to systematically address the broader cultural meanings and socio-cultural factors that shape consumer-brand relationships. If management is blind to the larger societal, political, and economic trends that are operative, these will undoubtedly cripple or even kill your brand. Thompson argues that what leads to cult brands and thus strong brand communities is their resonance with broader political projects that become relevant to consumers' everyday lives. In other words, devoted brand communities should be regarded as the result of creating impassioned consumers rather than the cause of consumers' passion for a given brand.

Implications for managers

Warning companies about the seductive allure of cookbook solutions, Thompson advises firms to identify political brands and to utilize adaptive brand management to revamp brand stories such that they react to the changing social and political environment. He presented several heuristics to identify political brands and their potential resonance value.

- Understand the story of the brand and its legacy in popular culture

- Understand the socio-cultural positions of core customer segments

- Understand significant cultural and socio-economic trends that affect core customer segments; what are the preferences in other domains of popular culture

- Identify points of convergence between the brand legacy and broader socio-cultural issues

- Create a brand story that consumers will want to incorporate into their everyday life politics

Marketer's Friend Request: Accept or Ignore?
Laurie Steuri, The Procter & Gamble Company

This presentation provided an in-depth review of one of Procter and Gamble's successful brand properties: beinggirl.com. Beinggirl.com is a unique brand community focused on one shared life event: the start of puberty and menstruation. Building on P&G's rich history of putting consumers first, beinggirl.com has allowed the company to learn how to build relationships in the age of social media. Laurie Steuri shared early insights from the journey, including opportunities and challenges ahead.

beinggirl.com
Feminine care products are associated with high brand loyalty, but companies have had difficulty establishing true relationships with consumers due to the sensitive and often embarrassing nature of the product class. Enabling a passion point for their consumers within a safe environment, beinggirl.com offers a multifaceted experience incorporating product information, cause marketing, and entertainment. With sites in over 40 countries and millions of visits a month, beinggirl.com is building strong brand connections with consumers. "Ask Iris" is the most popular feature of the website, allowing consumers to ask sensitive questions and receive straight answers from experts within P&G.

Adding a new dimension to the community strategy, P&G introduced "Protecting Futures," a social cause marketing program in partnership with the UNA-USA HERO Campaign dedicated to building schools for and providing menstrual products to girls in Africa. Protecting Futures reinterpreted the community brand in the context of African girls' problems (i.e., missing school during menstruation and falling significantly behind) thus building community resonance into the brand. "Webisodes" of the youth ambassadors who helped build the

schools have become popular sources of entertainment and admiration on the site. Developed over many years with complete commitment from corporate, beinggirl.com has enabled a community of users to engage with P&G products in a novel way that provides benefit to both consumers and the firm.

Implications for managers

- Facilitate and encourage communities that exist organically via rites of passage or as a result of changes in life stage.

- Companies must understand the mission and goals of the community and start with these objectives, not with the technology that can make community possible.

- Find the sweet spot between what the consumer is impassioned about and what the brand stands for to serve as the community foundation. In the case of the Always brand, this meaning is based on protection and confidence in female roles.

- The community enactment must be authentic in consumers' eyes. For P&G, this meant that branded presence was essentially minimized, with the focus maintained on the life experience at hand.

Generating Breakthrough Insights via "High Participation" Communities
Mollie Garberg, Communispace, and Aditi Sen, Frito-Lay, Inc.

Communispace develops, facilitates, and manages private, company-sponsored online communities that engage consumers or prospects of a chosen brand, representing a select lifestyle group. Average tenure is typically one year; participants are offered small incentives to actively engage in a branded, password-protected site and contribute weekly to advance the company's learning across the organization. Private communities provide dynamic research opportunities and unfiltered consumer insight for cross-functional teams and are used for the purpose of generating market intelligence and co-innovation of new products and services. Frito-Lay worked with Communispace to develop two "high participation" community websites, including one of mothers called "Mom's Connect" and another for 40-plus Boomers without children. This presentation demonstrated how Frito-Lay thinks about and uses "high participation" online communities to deliver value to the firm.

Implications for managers
Garberg and Sen highlighted several conclusions drawn from their experiences:

- Private, branded communities provide rich and intensive feedback into the consumer mindset that shapes and guides company strategies and executions.

- Communispace websites can expand beyond their initial research purpose. Frito-Lay initially planned these communities to provide insight for pre-market research, but due to the rich insight expanded the use of communities to in-market research.

- Though controversy and skepticism surround the notion of an artificially-created brand community, Frito-Lay provides evidence of "community" through consumer-initiated community activities. In addition to participating in company-solicited marketing research, members engage each other spontaneously, post pictures of family members, share intimate personal details, and bond through shared experiences related to the sponsoring company and beyond. Developing relationships and building trust is a primary characteristic driving the level of engagement members have with each other and with Frito-Lay. Members of Moms Connect frequently go beyond expectations for community activities and are self-directed, for example, developing a newsletter highlighting favorite recipes and providing information on birthdays and special personal events.

- Given the rapidly shifting rules and roles of engagement in the current consumer landscape, companies need to adopt innovative approaches to connect with and deeply understand their consumers over the short and longer term. The Communispace model provides a tool and experience to manage consumer relationships in this dynamic environment.

Brand Communities: Insights and Directions for Future Research

James McAlexander, Oregon State University, John Deighton, Harvard Business School, and John Sherry, University of Notre Dame

In this final session of the conference, three prominent scholars offered reflections and insights regarding the material presented and the future development of knowledge concerning brand communities.

James McAlexander and his colleague John Schouten were the first marketing scholars to explore the notion of brand communities, as presented in their seminal (1995) research on the Harley-Davidson brand, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers." McAlexander has also served as a long-standing consultant to Harley-Davidson and services other community-based lifestyle brands through his firm Ethos, an ethnographically-inspired strategic brand marketing firm. McAlexander's closing comments emphasized the theme of brand communities as complex living and breathing entities, about which we still have a great deal to learn.

- Communities are often treated as static, when in reality they are vibrant and dynamic. We must begin to think of the life cycle of communities and how they change over time. It is very likely that evolutionary changes within a community create stresses and opportunities that could be important to stakeholders, whether actively facilitating brand community or passively observing.

- Communities are not homogenous. We must investigate different segments within communities and the ways in which they relate with one another and with the broader social environment.

- Consumers possess multiple identities and as such are part of diverse communities. We must understand the ways in which multiple memberships reinforce and challenge each other.

- We must not lose sight of the brand and the product when studying brand communities. While much of the work surrounding brand communities focuses on the customer and understanding the social underpinnings of their networks, we must also remind ourselves to ask how these communities ultimately impact the firm and influence what might be appropriate marketing actions.

John Deighton built on his experience in developing applied business case studies and his service as the editor of leading marketing and consumer research journals to offer four propositions that follow if we accept that brand communities are constructions of the consumer not the marketer:

- Strong brands owe their strength to their ability to engage cultural themes, and consumers often form communities around these thematic outcroppings. Dove is such a brand, and its transition from a functional brand to symbolic brand to a brand with cultural resonance has served it well. The Dove Real Beauty campaign went against beauty industry conventions to strike a chord in the culture, uniting women around the self-esteem story throughout the world but also attracting skepticism and dissent, often by men. The implication: if you want a strong brand community, build a strong, attracting brand.

- Discourse in brand communities takes on a life of its own, sometimes engaging

different roles and enacting different meanings than those intended by marketers. Parody and satire are two forms by which communities play with meaning, sometimes gently and sometimes savagely. Brands come to mean what community members say they mean.

■ Community engagement is a gutsy business. Marketers must ask if they are ready to relinquish control over and accept negative community discourse about their brands. They cannot censor what they do not want to hear.

■ Brand communities are perhaps largely organic: a consequence of living in a new, exposed and technologically-enabled world. Rather than trying to create or manage brand communities, marketers may be best served by simply trying to learn from them, particularly as indicators of the health of a brand.

John Sherry provided a holistic anthropological perspective on brand community, stressing the need for an integrative cultural ecology of branding:

■ Branding as a discipline and practice is shifting from a "between the ears" cognitive perspective to a "between the peers" social and cultural perspective. Through our investigation of brand communities, we are ultimately engaging in a discussion of material culture, so let us not forget about the cultural aspect of our communities of brands.

■ Marketing theory and practice would stand to improve by developing a cultural ecology of marketing that considers all marketing activities as a culture-building system and examines the many points of intersection between community and the brand.

■ We must not forget that brand communities are but one of many sources of information concerning consumer interaction with our brands. We need to triangulate the data

we obtain from communities and other sources to create a more holistic picture of the cultural life of our brands.

Ideas for future research

■ What is community and how can we define the various manifestations of brand community? A possible typology of brand communities might include organic vs. co-created, brand vs. lifestyle, company leveraged vs. company participated, imagined communities vs. the core, and user groups. Classifying how consumers or companies are involved in the community might allow for such categorization.

■ How can the concepts of webs, pools, and hubs be leveraged to enrich our understanding of brand community?

■ A core idea in community is focus of ownership and control, but how exactly does the firm allow the consumer to own the community, community content, and ultimately the brand? What is the marketer's role in facilitating this ownership, if any? Who is responsible for defining the DNA of the brand?

■ How do communities increase brand value, exactly? What is the business case for developing brand communities? Can we develop metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of brand communities?

■ What are the boundary conditions for brand communities? What types of product categories, brands, and factors result in a fertile environment of community formation?

■ Do consumers really care about community brands and how they facilitate identity projects, or is the brand community more about the people than the brand?

■ If strong community brands are developed at least in part by provocative and resonant stories, how can marketers encourage or facilitate the creation and cultural utilization of storied brands?

- How should managers deal with the active and sometimes contentious discourse that comprises the experience of brand community? Does vigorous discourse signal vitality of the system or is it a threat to community health overall?

- Is community a scale-bound concept? Do communities naturally fragment, thus contributing to the demise of the unifying system as a whole? Can firms support relationships with potentially millions of consumers of the brand?

- When do the costs of community "management" outweigh the benefits obtained?

- What is the shape of the curve plotting the scope of a given consumer's community involvement with the receipt of community rewards? Despite the reality of multi-faceted identities and roles, is the notion of "community overload" a relevant one? How can managers gauge the incremental value that their communities obtain?

- Brand communities are often seen as markers of emancipation from corporations, in the sense that community members take matters into their own hands. Is this sense of emancipation illusory? Are we, as consumers, perhaps free from the corporation but still indentured slaves to brands?

- How can managers quantify the risks of brand community, as an input to strategies and plans?

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