How Creating an Online Community Can Build Your Brand

A community is a group of people with a shared interest.

Online communities have become such an integral part of many companies, leading other businesses to wonder if establishing a community would help support their goals.

The short answer is "yes." Just the act of creating a community tells your customers you care about them, you're invested in their success, and you're there to help.

Many factors go into creating a successful community. A recent webinar from involve.ai, [How to Boost Brand Loyalty with an Online Community](#), offered insights from experts Joe Huber, founder of Huber Consulting Group, Nadia Vieira, senior global program manager at LinkedIn, and Brigid Colver, senior community manager at involve.ai, who have all been active in establishing and running communities. The following is a summary of that discussion.

Before You Start a Community

What is the purpose of creating a community? It's all about shared value. A thriving community brings value to the customer and value to the business.

To start, identify and talk to stakeholders, including current customers and the audience you're hoping to engage.

Then, identify your goals, so you can build a community that supports those goals from the beginning. Don't skip the goal-setting step because by establishing milestones, you are defining the shared values. Otherwise, you're just running a race with no finish line since you have no what success looks like.

Community Building

Defining the value the community will bring to the business and your customers helps you identify the type of community you are working towards. Do you want a community that's feedback-oriented, highlighting the voice of the customer? One that helps customers to self-serve at scale, where they can get answers to their questions?

Or are you working towards creating a community that's more focused on building brand awareness, helping your business become more visible so you can reach people who are not currently customers?

Will the community be open to everyone, or will it be a closed community where only people with access to a particular product or a license can join?

Q&A: SaaS Communities

Q: Are SaaS companies building customer success community capabilities directly into their products?

A: In the last few years, many SaaS companies have created customer-support communities to supplement their sales, customer support, and customer success teams and add value for users. This also adds uniqueness to the SaaS offerings, creating a place where members who use the same products or platforms can be with like-minded people and share best practices. These types of communities can save customers time by allowing them to almost instantly find solutions instead of opening a ticket or calling support and waiting for hours.

While companies are creating more communities, they're not building them into the SaaS platform itself.

Getting Leadership Buy-in

Getting buy-in from company leadership to create a community can be challenging. If you're charged with that task, the answer harkens back to explaining what the shared value of the community will be and how it helps the business achieve its goals.

There cannot be a mismatch between your goals for the community and the companies overarching goals. Your strategies must be aligned with everyone working towards the same end goal.

A strong selling point is identifying any current gaps existing in the customer experience and explaining how the community can fill those gaps. Or how it will focus on soothing customer pain points. This signals to company leadership that you've done your research and are coming from a place of strength.

It's important to have metrics that objectively help prove your point and explain how you will measure results in the future. Identify which of your company's competitors have communities or if other tangential businesses have them. Is there a trend toward communities in your industry?

Customer Service vs. Community

Product teams are getting more interested in and comfortable with communities because they understand the benefits of getting feedback from customers. Increasingly they've become open to braiding community and product together—without building it directly into the platform.

Communities are not the same as customer service platforms. Instead, think of community as a customer success platform or center where people can find everything they need to know about a specific topic.

Communities can also serve as a knowledge base, an ideation platform, a space for finding best practices, and a forum for conversation. The future of communities lies in tying everything into customer education and customer success. But communities and customer service can deliver desired outcomes by working together in operational cadence.

Public vs. Private Communities

You may encounter a debate about whether your community should be public and open to all or private and restricted to customers. Again, it would help if you had input from the stakeholders. There is no "best" answer to this question; it depends on your goals.

There are hybrid versions, too, where the community is open to all but contains gated content that provides "hyper-value" to customers. This can also serve as a revenue driver, enticing users to become customers because they want access to everything in the community.

Why be public?

At involve.ai, the community is entirely public, but there is a registration date requirement to keep the bots away. We made that decision because one of our goals is to support a new category we're creating called customer intelligence because we want everyone to participate in those conversations.

We think there is value in people who are not involve.ai customers our reviewing our information.

Why be private?

Some companies choose to keep their communities completely private because they don't want their "secret sauce" to be seen by competitors or have a specific customer success focus.

There's no correct answer—it depends on your goals.
- *If your community goal is to drive customer health and empowerment, helping your customers grow by using your platform, then a private community may be your best option.*
- *If your goal is lead generation, you may be better served by having a semi-private or completely open community.*

Your public vs. private decision is not necessarily final. It's not difficult to turn a private community into a semi-private or completely open one.

Q & A: Community or Product?

Q: Is Community More Important than Product?

A: Even the most valuable community is not more important than your product. Your product is the reason people do business with you—it's the core of why people are there.

The end goal of a community is to drive more product adoption. There will be relationships that start within the community that gravitate outside the community because these people have one thing in common—the product. Consider this a victory because it means people love your product so much.

Creating a Win-Win Situation

Sharing community consensus and opinions with other teams in your company is a great way to provide product feedback, particularly to the product team. You can also have your product team talk to your members and get direct feedback.

Customers appreciate that interaction as well because it makes them feel like they're getting exclusive information about something that no one else knows about. This win-win scenario creates loyal community members and helps cement customer relationships.

Key to Success

Creating a thriving community means you're constantly testing and iterating. And it's most dependent on shared value—between the community and the rest of the company and the community and your customers.