

The Paradox of Brand Community "Management"



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Brand communities, while "hot" and fundamental in the relationship interactive marketing age, are often seriously misunderstood. Located at the pinnacle of the loyalty continuum, true communities possess social structure and exhibit socialization processes. These sociological facts must be thoroughly understood by any manager who claims community goals for his or her brand. Harley-Davidson – frequently admired for its ability to generate an almost religious loyalty to its brand – has developed a deep appreciation of the power of brand communities that personally link consumers together and is eager to manage them successfully. The present article, evolved from the Harvard Business School study case on the Harley-Davidson "Posse Ride", deals with the management challenges and tensions that may arise when building brand communities.

Harley Owners Group (HOG) and the Posse Ride

In 1983 Vaughan Beals, member of the management board, decided with some other colleagues to found the Harley Owners Group (HOG), a factory-sponsored motorcycle enthusiast club. HOG's intention was to foster customer loyalty, enhance the Harley-Davidson lifestyle experience, deepen brand relationships, and, primarily, bring the company closer to its consumers. The club is open to all Harley-Davidson owners and a free one-year membership is included with the purchase of every new motorcycle. As of year end 2004, international HOG membership was close to one million riders who gathered to meet other riders, develop social ties, participate in community service, and, most importantly per the HOG mantra, "to ride and have fun". HOG provides its members with ongoing information and leadership training, as well as a vibrant portfolio of national and local rallies and other brand events. The flagship rolling rally was introduced in 1997 in the form of the first "Posse Ride". Characterized by spontaneity and a sense of momentousness, roughly 250 hard-core Harley enthusiasts gathered for the first Posse and rode more than 2000 miles together, coast-to-coast from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine. Now cult-like in its attraction, Posse Rides have been creating bonds among Harley fans every year since.

1. The Notion of Brand Community

Communities are complex and dynamic socio-cultural entities. They possess different temporal dimensions, ranging from stable and enduring to temporary and periodic (McAlexander/Schouten/Koenig 2002, p. 40). First and foremost, the notion of community implies relationships within a group who shares a common connection, in this case with the brand and the aggregated consumption activity. Brand communities share an ethos and a set of values leading to a sense of moral responsibility and duty towards one another as well as towards the brand (Muniz/O'Guinn 2001). They exhibit hierarchies of membership status and processes for advancement within this social structure. Shared rituals and traditions, the use of common language, and the presence of signs and symbols signifying group membership

and status provide the cultural glue. Strong in- and out-group boundaries (a consciousness of kind) are the basis of a true brand community. The intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another often causes a critical demarcation between users of one brand and users of other brands in response (Muniz/O'Guinn 2001, p. 413). Harley-Davidson community members, for example, typically eschew "Japanese Rice Burners", while those in the Apple community explicitly and vocally detest IBM. The emotional bonds that emerge in a brand community become a crucial element in consumers' personal identification with the brand and its surrounding environment. As a consequence, brand community members are often characterized by symbolic consumption behaviors proving their emotional attachment and commitment to the brand.

As the above description makes clear, the concept of brand community is quite different from and, in a sense, much bigger than the notion of lifestyle brands or value segments. A common choice of a branded lifestyle (for example, Ralph Lauren) does not make a true community, which requests from its community members a clear devotion to the brand and its social system that is sincere and for the right reason (Muniz/O'Guinn 2001, p. 419). As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 413) say, "... community became more than a place. It became a common understanding of a shared identity". Community thrives only at the intersection of high centrality of the brand and consumption activity and strong social ties. Without the strong social ties, community dissolves into simple brand loyalty; without centrality of the brand and consumption activity, community manifests itself in "minglers" and "brand tourists".

Brand communities are indeed special and rare, and, consequently, not every manager has the right or ability to claim brand community goals. The socio-cultural essence required of true community highlights certain enabling factors for community development: an experience-driven, social center of gravity for the brand, in which brand value is

demonstrated by the product or service "in use"; highly visible (versus private) consumption activity; and recognized cultural capital in the "brand as badge". And, perhaps most importantly, communities take an inordinate amount of work, requiring commitments of time and resources that not many companies are prepared or willing to make.

Brand communities are not just about consumer bonds. For companies they are explicitly commercial and crucial for the establishment of brand equity by inhering a strong and sustainable differentiation potential that supports the creation and preservation of competitive advantage long-term based on a strong brand (Aaker/Joachimsthaler 2000, p. 88).

2. Fundamental Management Challenges

Because of its role in strengthening brand equity and consumer loyalty, brand community management must be considered a long-term strategic task within the brand management process (Aaker/Joachimsthaler 2000: internal cover). In this sense, an ongoing and temporally-sensitive evaluation, not only of community benefits but also of potential risks that arise in their capture, becomes fundamental. Consumer loyalty is a complex relational process that evolves, builds, and develops dynamically over time: a process driven by

meaningful customer-centric experiences that allow consumers to develop the necessary connections and strong bonds of satisfaction and commitment (Mc Alexander/Kim/Roberts 2003). Strong community relationships are actually built on four different levels: between the consumer and the product, between the consumer and the brand, between the consumer and the firm, and, of course, between consumer and consumer. "The more each relationship is internalized as part of the customer's life experience, the more the customer is integrated into the brand community and the more loyal the customer is in consuming the brand" (McAlexander/Schouten/Koenig 2002, p. 48). The Harley-Davidson "Posse Ride" offers an excellent example of a community building tactic that effectively strengthens and cements bonds on all four of these levels (Figure 1).

One of the main challenges when managing brand communities that arises from this multi-faceted relational context is the creation of an adequate relationship marketing environment on all levels that fits the brand, the branded product or service as well as the image perceived by the consumer (Kapferer 1997, p. 94). The different levels also need to be managed separately as well as in reliance to one another to fully exploit the power of community bonds. According to Fournier (1998), brand relationship quality, based on the reciprocity principle on which all relation-

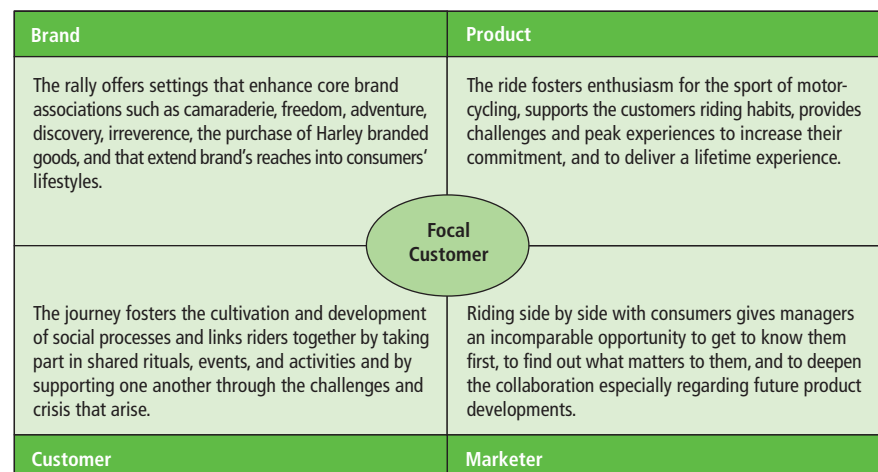


Fig. 1: Customer-centric Model of Brand Community applied to the HOG Posse Ride (Source: according to McAlexander/Schouten/Koenig 2002, p. 39)

ships are grounded, evolves through meaningful brand/company and consumer actions. Everything the company or brand does in the context of the community setting therefore has the potential to define and refine the community relationship. Quite unlike the controlled context offered within a 30-second television advertisement, brand community enactment presents a rather chaotic and complex meaning-making picture, wherein hyper-vigilance is required regarding meanings desired and meanings-made. The unique and distinctive evolutionary character of brand community relationship development also requires management flexibility and mutability while simultaneously striving for continuity and consistency in the overall brand positioning and communication. Cultivating a long lasting symbiotic relationship within the community is a crucial yet complicated and delicate management task (Schouten/McAlexander 1995, p. 57).

Another important challenge involved in brand community management stems from their genesis and ownership status. Brand communities are created and hence owned by the consumers and cultures that comprise them. Communities come into existence as consumers collectively identify with symbolic goods and activities whose brand meanings fulfill their needs. The role of the marketer in the community is therefore that of an enabler: a function that can be more or less visible, powerful and manifested. Because devoted fans and loyal consumers invest much more of themselves in their consumption in community settings, they also exhibit higher expectations and a clearer understanding on when, how, and whether they want to be addressed by the marketer at all (Kozinets 2001, p. 85). Management must take special care to ensure that they do not touch or tamper with community social structure in domineering, overwhelming, or unexpected ways when trying to protect their relationship investments. They must be hyper-critical of interventions that disrupt the authenticity of the social system at play. The paradox here is that the more distinct or strong the mea-

nings underlying the culture and hence the greater the interest the marketer has in managing it, the greater the interest the consumer has in maintaining ownership. Thus brand managers are often forced into the high-risk situation where they must hand the brand community over into the hands of the customers who feel strongly related to it (Muniz/O'Guinn 2001, p. 415). In its extreme, "brand community management" becomes an oxymoronic term.

3. Reducing Tensions when "Managing" Brand Communities

Brand-oriented companies have an obvious interest in influencing and developing brand communities characterized by overwhelming loyalty rates and strong relationship bonds that function as exit barriers for customers (McAlexander/Schouten/Koenig 2002, p. 50). Concurrently, the strong emotional and behavioral attachments exhibited by brand community members drive high expectations regarding the experiences that they anticipate. Management is thus confronted with several tensions, the careful balance of which is critical to successful involvement in the community setting. The following outline of management tensions inherent in brand community development is based upon findings from the Harley-Davidson "Posse Ride," though application of these principles to other geographically and non-geographically bound communities should prove sound.

Fragmentation vs. Unity

Brand communities unite people that have a common interest in a product and brand, but possibly not more than that. Community members often reveal distinct socio-economic, geographical, gender, and age differences suggesting potential community fragmentation, especially when physically participating in an event. The question that arises is whether or not these differences have an implication in the notion of a unified brand community. The Posse Ride, for example, provides a way to meet people

who share a common bond of uniqueness within the social rider hierarchy. However, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company has evolved over these recent years into a more global and mainstream player with a much broader customer group spanning a range of different sub-cultures. If the company aims to foster brand community, it should legitimately encourage one large community instead of several small ones, and minimize group differences in order to stress common interests among riders. A major challenge thus presents itself in integrating several disparate but equally important groups, such as, for example, outlaws and mainstream consumers, or authentic riders and so-called "Yuppie weekend warriors". On the one hand, events, forums, and other community-enabling mechanisms allow the company to broaden its consumer base and thereby enlarge the community; but, on the other hand, this very expansion portends fundamental changes that may ultimately diminish the appeal of community belonging itself. At what point does management acknowledge the fragmentation of its brand culture? When do the parts matter more than the whole? Astute community management requires reflection of the culturally-situated character of the community membership so consumers do not turn against the brand. Critical also is recognition of the fact that some sub-cultures give the brand its mystique, legitimacy, and authenticity (e.g., the outlaws) while others give the company its profitability in recognition of these meanings-made (Schouten/McAlexander 1995, p. 59). Care must be taken to balance these meaning creation and reinforcement processes among the multiple players in the system as well.

Structure vs. Chaos

Community managers are also faced with an ongoing question of imposing structure, embracing chaos, or cycling sporadically between both. While management structure may logically seem to imply better value capture, the irony is that the more management tries to structure the community development process, the less a community it

becomes. On the side of the argument in favor of structure, however, consumers need certain guidelines so that they do not get lost within the social context being established. Acutely aware of this, HOG managers favor a “loose structure” conducive to spontaneity and co-creation, and a relaxed, “hands-off” style. They are adamant about avoiding corporate interventions that might cause routine or predictability and impair the spirit of adventure that characterizes the Posse experience. But this hands-off attitude can be misinterpreted. Some Posse Riders feel that HOG management is unavailable, invisible, or simply not attentive enough to the diverse needs of the crowd. Since the consumer-firm bond stands as an important community relationship goal, management is continually confronted with this difficult balancing decision.

Empathy vs. Intimacy

Events, online forums, and other community platforms bring consumers and managers together in a friendly and unconventional setting and provide ongoing opportunities for serendipitous listening, learning, and exchange. This engagement in dialogue offers enormous added value to the consumer as well as to the company (Gobé 2001, p. 262). Community therefore uniquely enables close-to-the-customer interaction: a much sought-after opportunity in today’s overwhelming marketing world. Thus confronted with an invaluable amount of ethnographic qualitative data, the challenge for community managers becomes one of developing true intimacy with consumers, versus simple empathy concerning their affairs. Intimacy and empathy are of course both valuable. The empathy approach assumes that if managers can think and act as if they were consumers, then their marketing and product decisions will be better informed. Intimacy, however, as it characteristically exists within the context of friendship, is ever more powerful than that. In the reciprocating friendship relation, each partner shares a deep and complete knowledge of the other. Intimacy thus forms the basis for trust, which propels relationship develop-

ment. But, as we all know, not everyone is equally capable in cultivating intimate friendship bonds, nor can all those capable deliver on the reciprocation that true intimacy entails. Community managers must think through exactly how they want to become close to their customers, and who within the organization is capable of performing which closeness roles. A community randomly and opportunistically populated with firm employees seeking simply to become close-to-their-customers in essence sets itself up to fail.

Marketing vs. Authenticity

Most of the issues noted above can be summarized in the marketing versus authenticity tension which incorporates the tightrope walk that management faces in its community development task. Most characteristically, this question manifests itself in issues of credibility: How can management be deeply loyal to both consumer and company goals? Can the manager simultaneously perform as community advocate and champion of company goals? In the community management game, can you play defense and offense at the same time? Successful brand communities will always attract the attentions of management seeking to leverage them more fully so as to capture more value for the firm. And, it is in this, the ultimate paradox, that success breeds failure, for the community that is tampered with is quickly destroyed. We have said that communities are largely the property of the consumers and cultures that create them. The marketer’s role in the community is much more limited and subtle than one would desire or expect. In this context community managers should focus on ways in which their activities can facilitate and enable the culture, while avoiding interventions that might destroy its core. In the words of HOG Senior Vice President Michael Keefe: “My job is to hold the flame, and not put it out ... in essence, to not screw it up”. As a consequence, marketers should:

- Enable the social life of the brand
- Facilitate socialization of new users so that the community may further develop

- Accelerate acculturation of community members into the social status system
- Provide tools and markers for identity expression and advancement within the social system: facilitate accrual of status and cultural capital in the system
- Fuel the brand mystique that serves the foundation on which community is built
- Respect and understand the brand heritage and support core brand meaning throughout the community marketing mix
- Say “no” to branding opportunities that dilute brand meanings and erode community foundations of the brand
- Provide opportunities for community interaction: put consumers in close contact with each other, put consumers in close contact with the firm
- Adopt a close-to-the-consumer strategy capable of granting the true intimacy that community bonds entail
- Balance the tensions of community growth versus maintenance, as community boundaries are expanded, and core users are compromised
- Evaluate the community against relationship-relevant metrics

As mentioned above, brand community demands an unusual amount of patience, hard work, and devotion on the part of the company. Unfortunately, many companies desirous of community benefits have been unwilling to invest the necessary and involved labor to gain them. These companies impose surface-level tools that suggest effective community management. Some hire agencies to conduct sensitive community building functions, or even outsource the entire community building process. Others delude themselves into thinking that community can be bought through fun experiences and events. Operating with a driving goal of profit maximization rather than relationship-building toward that ultimate end, these “best practices” jeopardize the very concept of the brand community for other, more dedicated and enlightened managers. As soon as marketers start to see commu-

nity as a “commercial property that exists only to be exploited” (Kozinets 2001, p. 82), customers begin their turn away from the brand. But, “brand community members define success quite differently than does the marketer” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 419). Managers must walk the fine line between commercial marketing activity and credible authenticity when solving this equation for the brand.

■ 4. Conclusion

Brand community meaning making is an inherently uncontrollable process driven as much if not more by the cultures and consumers that own them. The good news is that some lucky brands become a part of the cultural symbol system and thus can claim benefits of community for the firm. The bad news is that once a brand becomes a part of the cultural symbol system, any consumer can use it in any way. And, the more distinct or strong the cultural meanings, the greater the interest the consumer has in owning and managing them.

The management’s role when building brand communities should be a governing one in the sense of brand governance that does not over-engineer but rather secures continuity. Structures, cultures, people and systems need to be developed to support brand-building measures (Davis 2000, p. xii). Companies that seek to cultivate a brand community will have to confront the difficult decision of designing an effective and successful organizational structure to support and manage it. They could choose to build up a separate function such as with Harley-Davidson’s HOG organization, or they could decide to run community as a part of the marketing department. A

separated group would have the advantage of offering a boundary function between consumers and the company that seeks to protect the delicate balance of marketing and authenticity at its core. But, at the same time, this situation, and the lack of organizational integration – one of the key marketing concepts of the past years – that it entails, creates its own conundrums. No solution is perfect, and each creates interest conflicts as well as situation-specific advantages. An analysis of organizational processes that allow successful brand community building could surely be used to define best practices in facing the tightrope walk between marketing and authenticity. At the end of the day, the goal of community is to turn the brand into an icon and its admiring customers into winners (Schouten/McAlexander 1995, p. 55). Of Harley-Davidson, Kunde (2002) says: “Harley-Davidson is not just the most powerful motorcycle cult, it is also one of the most powerful religions – if not the most powerful brand religion – worldwide.” Strong brand communities hold the power to create brand equity and brand loyalty long-term. If we can manage the flame.

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