COLUMNS

Dos and don'ts for marketers to start building a community

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Mazin Melegy is strategy director at Crush & Lovely

By Mazin Melegy

Customer retention is an often-neglected, vitally important aspect of business. Think about it: millennial consumers are calling themselves brand loyal in increasing numbers. Artists such as Beyonc have large communities of fans who provide free PR. Fitness brands create lifestyles around their products and it is all done through cultivating community.

Here are some dos and don'ts for organizations looking to get started in community.

Do: Meet your members where they already are
In today's world of notifications and pings and distractions, it is really quite silly to assume that people are going to log in to a platform that is not already built into their daily routine. That is why it is critical to communicate with your community members through a medium that they already use every day.

It is possible that members of your community prefer, by and large, to use email. If that is the case, make sure they are updated on community activity in their inbox at a pace with which they are comfortable.

Maybe you have found that a large percentage of your community uses Facebook very regularly. In this case, consider setting up a Facebook group that supplements whatever communication you are having on your community platform.

It may sound counter-intuitive, but the most important piece of community work is to connect your members. Making sure your members can see all of the activity is the first step.

Do: Respond to community activity as soon as possible
Especially if this is the first time a community member is contributing.

Feverbee found that 90 percent of users who received a response to their first community contribution gave a second contribution. That number dropped to 63 percent after 25 minutes, and drops to 10 percent after 24 hours.

Timeliness is becoming more important to users. Responding right away makes it clear that the community has

members and that they are interested in helping or talking.

This is an extremely important first impression that, if maintained, can help you maintain an engaged membership.

Do: Identify high-value members and reinforce their activity
It will be obvious who your super users are. Do not take them for granted.

If you identify a high-value member, reach out to them and ask them for help. Yes ask them for help.

Maybe it is just feedback on the community, or maybe it is a specific role you would like them to fill. They have already demonstrated that they are interested in having the community succeed. Give them a way to actively contribute to it, and they will appreciate it far more then you think.

And, of course, do not be afraid to give out swag. Consumers love swag. And a physical reminder of the special connection you have made will only get them more engaged.

Do: Have a well-thought-out onboarding process
Too often the onboarding process is seen as a nice-to-have or a post-launch consideration. It should not be.

The early days of a new community member's interactions will shape their experience with you. You will want to spell out exactly how you are expecting them to contribute, inform them of what they can expect from the community, and give them an easy way to contribute, such as asking them to introduce themselves.

A positive first impression is critical, so you should be setting the rules and providing a consistent experience.

Do: Ask for feedback from your members constantly
The best way to know how well you are serving the needs of your members is to ask them. This can be done in the form of surveys, in-app questions, or by picking up the phone and having a conversation for a few minutes.

It is a mistake to let the loudest voices of your community steer the entire direction, but it is also a good idea to consider what the membership is saying and not saying.

The corollary to this is: trust your community manager.

Too often, businesses are focused on the dollars and cents or hard numbers, and ignore or devalue the strategic direction a community manager is recommending.

Community success is tough to quantify, so the voice of the person who spends every day with the members is one worth hearing.

Don't: Assume consumers see community as a value-add in and of itself
Consumers join communities for a variety of reasons, but the reason is never "to be part of a community."

Sometimes it is because they get some sort of pleasure out of posts or images that make you laugh, sometimes it is a pain-point that the community helps to resolve. Sometimes it is about exclusivity, sometimes it is because you have to be a member of the community for legitimacy.

It is important to develop a strategy around the real reason why members are joining your community. That reason is never just because of the community or platform.

Don't: Get frustrated with low user activity in early stages
Community building is a slow process. It will be a long time before the community is thriving on its own, with posts being created organically every day and users responding without your prodding. The key is to be patient.

Don't: Do the work without a dedicated community manager
Community building is real work. It requires forming authentic relationships with consumers, creating content calendars, evaluating and creating strategy, responding in real time.

There is never a time where community really turns off. That is why it is important to have someone staffed to work on the community full time.

Depending on the size of the community, it may be necessary to have multiple people staffed.

Having someone monitor the community as an add-on to their full time job will create serious challenges that will likely negatively impact success.

Don't: Build features without user feedback that supports it

Features are awesome. Really. They differentiate your platform, they can create a lot of value, and sometimes people love them.

A lot of the time, though, they are just nice to have, or not particularly useful.

Think of Samsung's strategy of including a lot of bells and whistles into their phones only to watch Apple's carefully marketed "user education" win out time after time.

The key is to stay inventive while also responding directly to what users need. And, to make it even more complicated, sometimes it is not about what they say they need either.

Don't: Use vanity metrics to measure success
A vanity metric is a metric that says nothing about how your community is performing.

The best example of this is "total users." While it is nice to look at a number that always goes up, total users tell you nothing about how you performed this week.

It is important to stay grounded and only use metrics that tell you how you're really performing.

More on this here.

Mazin Melegy is strategy director at Crush & Lovely, New York. Reach him at mazin@crushlovely.com.