# CAPTURING COMMUNITY

How To Build, Manage, and Market Your Online Community
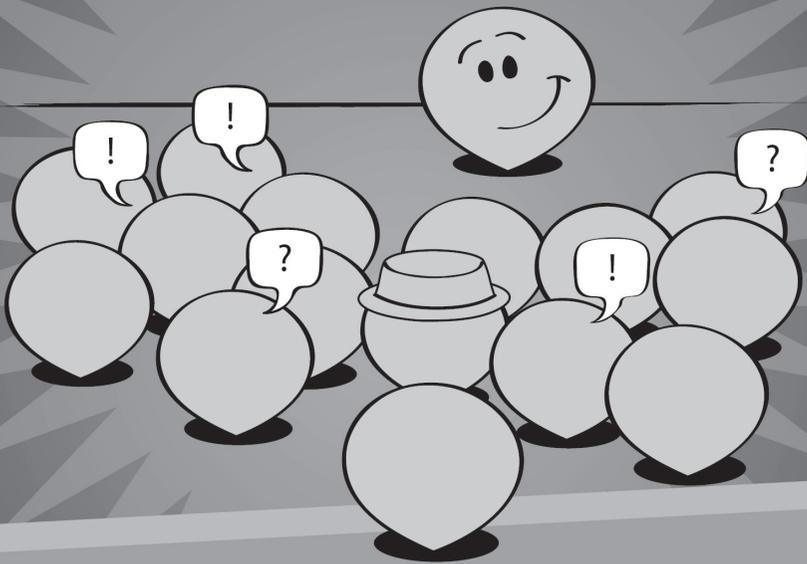
By Michael Silverman

Founder & CEO Duo Consulting

Foreword by Jay Batson

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Foreword

"Community" is one of multiple names for the same thing. My favorite is "tribe." Either word represents a group of people connected by a common background or interest, working together for common good.

These groups are important parts of everyone's lives. Experiences with others are the linchpin of our human existence. They move us. They warm our heart, or boil our blood. They appeal to our emotions to make us do, or not do things. And they form the memories that become part of our perceived reality, our sense of life. Sometimes these personal experiences even cross that invisible line to become *history* that is larger than us.

Communities might arise spontaneously, or be intentionally organized. Either way, they're populated by people who care enough about others in the community that they'll spend their time voluntarily to participate in it, shape it, share it, and help it accomplish something.

A passionate community can trigger powerful change. But whether or not a community will have impact is not something you can directly control. A community moves like an amoeba, and does what its collective spirit agrees to do. But communities *can* be influenced if you know how they work—and how to work with them.

A successful community is the result of a magical brew of ingredients. It's not just about bringing together people with shared interests—success will also depend on the ways the members interact, the community culture, a shared vocabulary, the technology in use, and more.

I have both a personal and professional interest in this topic. Personally, I've been part of several notable communities that have brought me much happiness in life. From cycling communities to faith communities to work-based communities, I'm glad to have been a part of them.

The community I'm most active in right now is the Drupal community for open-source software developers (www.Drupal.org).

Open-source software is a fertile area for pioneers. It's full of people trying to change how existing markets and software work.

In spring 2007, I attended the DrupalCon conference in Sunnyvale, California. I was blown away by the passion of several hundred Drupal programmers and users. They were all motivated to make Drupal better, to get things done—and to be with each other. It was clear to me that you could feel the community blooming big.

This community has grown dramatically since then. There are now hundreds of thousands of people with user accounts at Drupal.org. For a software project, this is an amazing community success. It's also FUN.

But I can't help but think that information from the book you're holding might well have shortcut some of the lessons learned by the Drupal community. And there are probably still opportunities to better the community by adopting some of the recommendations herein.

If I would have had this book when I set out to develop Acquia Commons, which enables anyone or any organization to build their own digital community, there are some things I would have done differently. Not so much in how we built Commons, but in how we've tried to build a *community* around it. We took some missteps in the beginning, but we listened to our users and responded to desired changes quickly.

In the same way I could have benefitted from reading *Capturing Community*, I think this book is a must-read for anybody considering building an online community. I can assure you that communities aren't just "build it and they will come." You need to build smartly, THEN launch, THEN nurture growth, THEN manage a mature community. This book will show you how.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did.

Jay Batson
VP, Founder
Acquia, Inc.

Chapter 3
What's In It for You?

If you build it, they will come. That's the concept Ipswitch, a privately held network management software manufacturer, was banking on when it decided to upgrade its online community. It worked. WUGspace, a community built around Ipswitch's software suite *What's Up Gold*, has driven stronger product development, brand loyalty, and lead generation for the company.

When WUGspace's community manager Jason Williams shut down the previous version of the company's online tech community, it held around 2,000 members. Every member account was deleted. The new community launched in March 2011, and in just eight months it grew from zero to 3,400 members. The benefits to Ipswitch have been enormous.

Whether you're a marketing professional, association manager, or an aspiring entrepreneur, developing and launching your own online community has the potential to bring great prosperity. In this chapter, we'll take a look at these benefits and explain how online communities foster them.

But first, a story of trial, error, and success…

Ipswitch's WUGspace: Good as Gold

Ipswitch has been in business for more than 20 years. In 2006, the company decided to split into three divisions for three separate products: file transfer, messaging, and network management software.

In the network management space, *What's Up Gold* is used to maintain more than 100,000 networks across the globe. Customer forums had always been a successful part of the company's support resources. In general, the work had been done for them; they hosted the site but provided no forum moderators. As a result, questions and answers were both supplied by customers.

In 2008, management decided to take the forums to the next level.

Ipswitch built an online community to offer customers more ways to interact. Unfortunately, it went largely ignored by an already busy staff.

By 2010, Ipswitch found itself losing the customer engagement built up through the forums. It was clear someone would have to take control of the community—a job that fell to Jason Williams, who'd been with the company for about six years.

"We'd built our original community around the forums," Jason explains. "The quality of the community's forums was low because the software platform didn't have a strong forum feature. It was the first thing we needed to fix."

Jason rebranded and re-launched the community as WUGspace. WUGspace's short-term mission was to rebuild the community around customer engagement. For the long-term, WUGspace was built to attract potential customers with high-quality content and an open-ended model.

Ipswitch rebranded and re-launched its IT community as WUGspace, with a focus on high-quality content.

"In the beginning, it made sense to focus content around our software so we could work on rebuilding that community," Jason says. "We're starting to build up some editorial content geared toward network administrators and managers to expand the conversation."

Jason contracts with freelance writers to build informative content for the new WUGspace Resource Center, with the goal of drawing in outside network professionals. The bustling conversation of the community, which he hopes will extend to the Resource Center as it starts to gain traction, should be a big draw for professionals outside the community.

What can a brand-sponsored online community do for *your* business?

Brand-Sponsored Online Communities: Building Community Trust

While most of this book focuses on uniquely branded communities, it's important that we discuss some of the pros and cons for marketers in working your brand into the equation.

So far, brand-sponsored communities appear most successful when they're backed by a large brand with a large community rallied around it—partly because these brands have already won the trust of a large group of customers and can leverage connections with other large brands (corporate and personal).
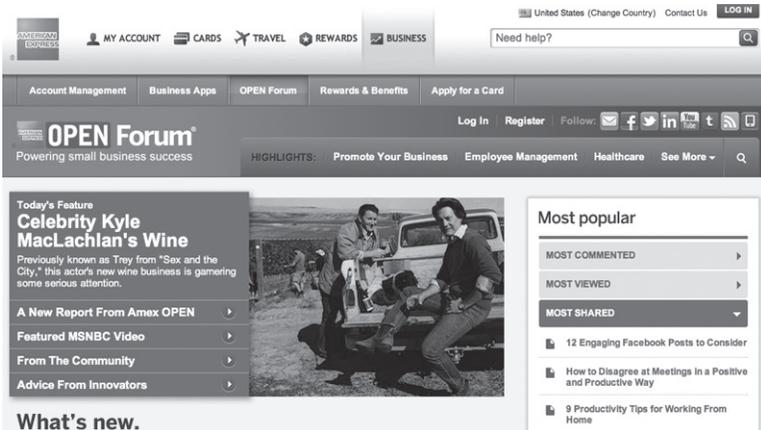
OPEN Forum houses a vast library of resources, creating value for small business professionals.

One of the most successful examples of a brand-sponsored community is American Express OPEN Forum. The success of OPEN Forum has helped create a powerful business community around the American Express brand.

Launched in 2007, OPEN Forum is a community of small business owners that leverages the power of editorial, user-generated, and networking content to bring value to its audience. The power of the OPEN Forum brand swayed business innovators like Guy Kawasaki and Pete Cashmore to become notable contributors.

In 2008, OPEN Forum logged 425,000 page views—not too shabby for a relatively new online community. By 2010, that number jumped to 10 million page views, in part due to the gigantic library of content available to hungry search engines.

"We initially designed OPEN Forum just for our American Express OPEN Card members," Jason Rudman, the man behind OPEN Forum's content strategy, told *eMarketer* in 2010. "We felt that credentialization as a small-business owner would help minimize the clutter that is endemic on some social networking sites. But I think we realized that we had an opportunity to broaden the conversation without sacrificing that credentialization."[1]

Jason then launched into an account of OPEN Forum's API integration with LinkedIn, a powerful avenue for drawing in small business professionals. That integration validated the concept of the independent community by channeling the far-reaching audience of a professional network like LinkedIn.

The American Express brand has found huge value in the OPEN Forum community. Three primary benefits are unique to this type of community: leadership, differentiation, and credibility. The first comes from using the community as a platform for brand leaders.

Brand Leaders: Let Your Voice Be Heard

In addition to its own editorial team, OPEN Forum gives business leaders (like American Express OPEN President Susan Sobbott) a platform to build their personal brands. The success of the personal brands is intimately tied to the success of the corporate brand. Leveraging a community to empower leaders with a voice can help

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[1] http://www.emarketer.com/blog/index.php/case-study-american-express-open-forum-social-media-small-business/

bolster social media, conference marketing, and public relations.

Traditionally, corporate blogs have been used to grow your leadership brand. But blog traffic is difficult to create, and you can attract more readers within a larger community-oriented setting. In a forum and a community where everyone has a say, members aren't afraid to speak up. Leverage your brand's control over the community to feature leaders with a powerful spotlight. Then, turn the discussion over to the community.

Competition Requires Differentiation

The success of OPEN Forum plays a role in how American Express differentiates itself from competing brands like Discover, MasterCard, and Visa. In a market dominated by large brands, credit card providers do the best they can to differentiate their offerings—but the brands that differentiate on a macro level, specifically with the positioning of the brand itself, gain an advantage in the market.

According to a 2011 study by marketing research firm Brand Keys, 50 percent of survey respondents don't differentiate between credit card brands.[2] By playing the role of facilitator for information and networking, American Express positions itself differently—especially important where the target audience could be swayed by the slightest possible differentiation.

Consider this: wherever you fit in your industry, hundreds of conversations that you could be a part of are taking place. In fact, your competition may already be involved and making a name for themselves as leaders in the field.

By creating an online community that serves as the quintessential venue for that conversation, you can view the dialogue as it happens and offer feedback, commentary, and thought leadership wherever possible.

As your online community grows in relevance, your community builds more trust in your brand as an authority in your field, giving you a strategic advantage.

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[2] http://moneyland.time.com/2011/07/12/consumers-distinguish-toilet-paper-brands-better-than-banks/

Measuring the Impact on Brand Credibility and Trust

How do you measure how much trust and credibility your brand has in the market? It's no simple task—and one that can only be answered by a comprehensive study. But OPEN Forum's numbers offer plenty of insight into how much the community members trust the OPEN Forum brand. Many of these insights can be carried over to how much trust they put in American Express.

The growth of the community is just one factor to keep in mind; OPEN Forum maintains an active, engaged following that gains exposure to the American Express brand with every visit. But OPEN Forum administrators measure more than just impact within the community.

"OPEN Forum also influences perceptions of the American Express brand," writes David Deal, vice president of marketing at iCrossing, in a June 2011 blog post covering a presentation given by Stacey Gutman, director of OPEN Forum. "By surveying members, American Express can track the relationship between OPEN Forum and customer perceptions of American Express for being an accessible brand."[3]

Between consistent brand exposure and the ability to measure the impact of the brand on the community, OPEN Forum has made big waves in the concept of brand-sponsored online community.

Gaining Professional Insight from Your Community

Thought leadership requires experience—but it also requires a close eye on news, industry trends, and the voices that represent deep knowledge and innovation in your market. By making your community the go-to place to talk about your market, you attract that influential information and build a library of cutting-edge content.

Developing a strong community gives you access to some of the biggest names in your market. It will take work on your part, but once you've established credibility for your community, it'll become a magnet for prominent brands and people within your industry.

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[3] http://thecontentlab.icrossing.com/post/6586774751/how-american-express-open-forum-rocks-content-marketing

Associate Your Community with Industry Leaders

A new online literary community called LitReactor launched in late 2011. While the strength of the community is tied to the interaction of members, LitReactor gives members access to strong, successful voices in the literary and publishing industries.

To help build the community's credibility, LitReactor features "alumni"—successful authors who have established their brands within the walls of the community.
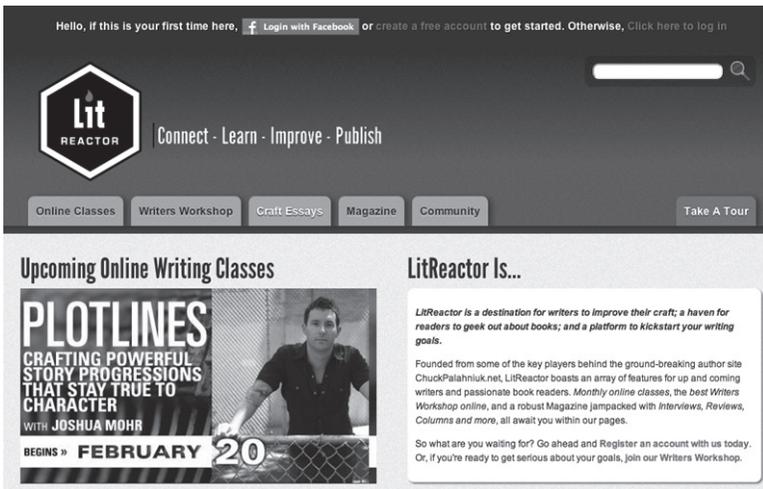
LitReactor is a community for writers that attracts industry leaders in the literary and publishing industries.

Leaders in your market are itching for more targeted platforms to get their message out. The same way LitReactor attracts some of the loudest voices in its corner of the publishing industry, your community can become a sounding board for leaders, building the credibility of your community's brand.

OPEN Forum did it with Guy Kawasaki and Pete Cashmore—of course, it helps if you have friends in high places. Easier said than done. But it's possible. Ask some of today's leading online communities and they'll tell you: it takes human interaction to launch a successful social network. You have to start somewhere, and once you begin to build

your community around a specific niche, you'll have a captive audience that industry leaders can't ignore. In turn, the industry leaders that join your community will take its credibility to new heights.

The Cutting Edge of Industry News and Trends

Your community is tapped into the news and trends that drive their passion, interest, hobby, or professional niche—and that's why a strong community will always stay on the cutting edge.

It's true: until your online community is the quintessential place for conversation and reporting around your market, your membership base will continue to get information from outside sources. But that's the beauty of user-generated content: community members that are engaged are more likely to share that news as soon as it breaks.

Journalists across the globe are already seeing this demonstrated through Twitter's real-time information-sharing interface. Through Twitter, we can access firsthand accounts of newsworthy events as they're happening. This is an extremely positive development.

On the other hand, it's accompanied by an incredibly powerful rumor mill. Sure, journalists in general have done a good job adapting and building a following on Twitter. Then again, so have celebrities—and many of them aren't trained journalists. That means a careless tweet can ignite a blazing frenzy.

Like journalists, fact checkers, and editors, it's up to community managers to perform due diligence prior to posting timely news. AbsolutePunk accomplishes this by keeping newsfeeds and forums separate—but giving members the ability to submit news.

Because AbsolutePunk has gained a reputation for reliability and a large following, musicians and other trendsetters in the industry actually use the online community directly to break news, premiere songs, and share album art prior to the record release date.

Learning from Your Audience and Tailoring Your Products Accordingly

An online community doubles as a focus group. If your audience is engaged, they're ready and willing to give you feedback.

It's difficult for marketers to perceive their brands from the perspective of the customer. An online community will give you a deeper view of how your customers and potential customers view your brand.

Germaine Reyes, managing director of Synergy Business Consultancy, recently spoke about the benefits that online communities are offering marketers:

"These new innovations can enable market research consultants to augment existing traditional methods to gather consumer insights. The emergence of social communities has prompted a new research strategy, webnography, where researchers study online human interactions."[4]

Webnography (also called "online ethnography" and "netnography") builds off the practice of ethnography, a qualitative method used to study cultural phenomena guiding cultural groups. In essence, it's the same practice, only performed online.

For the most part, today's webnography measures behavior within blanket social networks like Facebook—but having your own data source (your online community) makes the process simpler.

Cut Customer Support Costs

Creating a support community for an established brand offers you the ability to cut costs, save time, and build brand loyalty. If you can accomplish a high level of engagement, a support community offers a measurable ROI that's easy to justify to management.

Security software company Symantec understands the benefits of running a customer support community. Launched in 2009, Symantec Connect boasts nearly 260,000 community members, 95 percent of whom create content, taking the burden of customer support off of the company.

This helps Symantec save precious time and money normally allocated to a busy support staff. The company still employs a support

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[4] http://www.gmanews.tv/story/220849/technology/social-media-reshaping-market-research

team to monitor the forums and other community elements, but it has a robust rewards system in place to encourage engagement and contributions from community members.

As a result, Symantec Connect has logged more than 850,000 pieces of content, creating a gigantic, interactive knowledge center that monitors itself. Customers visit to ask questions and share knowledge, finding and sharing answers that power a tight-knit group of brand advocates.

Poll Your Community!

Surveys have always been a gigantic part of marketing research, but several different factors stood in the way of guaranteeing accurate results. How do you motivate perfect strangers to willingly give you honest behavioral and personal data? When is the best time to engage the consumer to get the most accurate results? How do you reach an audience that represents the people you want answers from?

In the past, marketers have done their best to incentivize surveys and other polls. They've also used intrusive tactics, like cold-calling or blindly mailing out polls. In short, while effective on some level, polling your community has been a flop compared to the goldmine of research available within a targeted, engaged community.

Take OPEN Forum, for example. They used feedback from a video as market research.

As Mary Ann Fitzmaurice Reilly, SVP of partnerships and business development for American Express OPEN, explained to *Fast Company*:

"When we launched AcceptPay (e-billing and payment acceptance), we put a video out there and got feedback that said, 'great, we understand how it works, but what's in it for me?'" Mary Ann acknowledged learning an important social media lesson, "It's not about us telling you what you should do." [5]

A simple example like this opens up a world of endless possibilities around product feedback, consumer behavior and desires, popular

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[5] http://www.fastcompany.com/1669407/charging-up-small-biz-on-social-media

trends, brand perception, perception of competition—and so much more. As a marketer, an online community specific to your market empowers you with a resource beyond your wildest (professional) dreams. Throw out your mail-in surveys. Put the phone down. Cancel your focus groups. Everything you need is right in front of you.

Profiling Your Audience Has Never Been This Easy

An online community gives you actionable information—and the next logical step is to put it into action.

Polling your community requires work on your part to spark the right conversation, but a successful online community is already jam-packed with data that can help you profile your audience. In turn, you can tailor products and services based on behavior and personal information.

In fact, some of the most backbreaking labor performed by marketing researchers involves building accurate customer profiles. The task requires you to perform tons of interviews with a large sample of your customer base that may or may not return accurate results.

But with an online community, you have direct access to willingly supplied personal data and ready-made customer profiles. If that weren't enough, you have full vision of the conversations that power your community's interactions—a bold and striking bank of customer behavior and opinion.

If you do a good job of getting people to complete their profiles, you'll be well on your way to securing a vault of useful information.

Sourcing Ideas from the Crowd

Technology moves forward rapidly—and that means ideas aplenty are floating around your community. Crowdsourcing has led to a controversial debate between businesses, but the practice also has led to great successes.

Stealing intellectual property is unethical, and that's not what we're advocating. However, working with community members to recognize and reward them for ideas you use in your business can be an effective way to power innovation.

Successful communities have been built on the crowdsourcing model. Some examples include Crowdspring, a community for creative professionals, and Threadless, a t-shirt company that uses designs created by community members.

My Starbucks Idea, an online crowdsourcing community focused on the popular coffee brand, has generated more than 150 different ideas that have been implemented. From bringing back a discontinued coffee flavor to ideas for new branded goods, Starbucks gains brand traction by encouraging customers to take ownership.
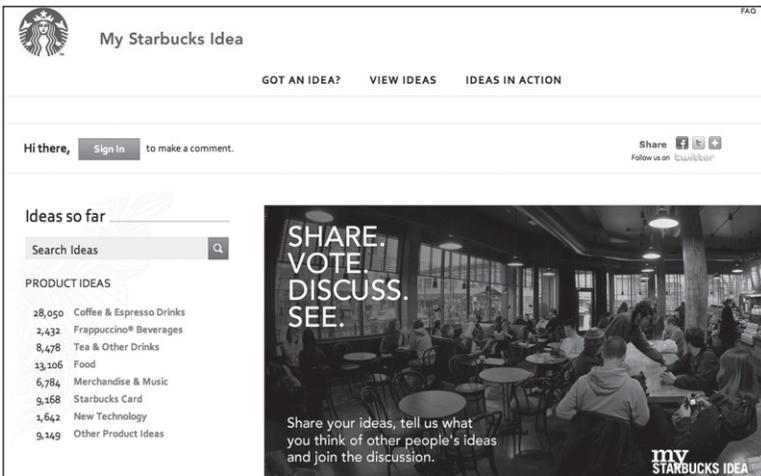
Starbucks engages its audience by giving community members a voice in shaping the company's direction.

Networking Advantages

Of course, *people* are the most critical part of your online community. People in online communities are looking to share, learn, and *connect*. The ability to leverage your community in order to network is a huge advantage you'll have as manager.

Networking has inherent benefits—you'll be able to identify potential hires, form relationships with major players in the industry, and attract new customers. When your online community functions as the quintessential venue for its topic, you harness the power of hundreds of influential voices.

Connecting with Potential New Hires

Diversifying how you search for new talent to fit roles in your business is an important part of the hiring process. Within a community, you can leverage existing online relationships (where you're already familiar with the applicant's knowledge) to speed the process along and ensure higher quality hires.

The Drupal community of open-source developers, for instance, publicly tracks member contributions to the community as a marker for their overall knowledge and expertise with the Drupal platform.

LinkedIn serves this role for staffing agencies because it's easy to search. At the same time, LinkedIn is a place for sharing industry information, rather than thought leadership, that'll only open you up to a small percentage of LinkedIn users that actually stay active in groups.

If you do the right things with your community, you'll keep a higher percentage of potential hires engaged and sharing their knowledge. In a way, this almost serves as prescreening for interviews. Your community introduces you to a whole new world of hiring opportunity.

Building Relationships with the Pros

Connecting with your typical online community members is a good place to start, but once you've built a reputation, you may find bigger names in the industry reaching out to *you*. Building your community's authority as the place to come for breaking news, trends, and voices gives you credibility beyond anything you've ever dreamed.

Industry leaders look to market their personal brands, and a captive audience (your community) is a great place for them to contribute and build more credibility for themselves. Leaders will grow organically out of your community as well, but established leaders will use the community as a platform for their own branding.

As a result, you'll have leading resources indebted to you and your organization—a critical benefit for community managers.

Finding New Clients and Customers

This benefit is a given—you know what your customers want, now give it to them. Of course, you don't want to treat an online

community like your personal sales playground; that will alienate community members, stop engagement dead in its tracks and seriously damage the credibility of the community.

Still, you can win clients and customers if you're willing to get creative. Because you can take certain liberties as community manager, it shouldn't be difficult to pass insights to a trained team of members who can build relationships while displaying visible ties with your company. In any community manned with consumers and professionals, networking is fair game—and networking can turn into sales.

You have other options for promoting your business within the community without appearing pushy. For instance…

Delivering a Targeted Message through Advertising

As community manager, you have full control over how you'll incorporate advertising. Best practices for advertising in communities are a topic for another book; however, you should be aware of the benefits that advertising (done right) can bring to your business and your community.

Jason Tate says that advertising is AbsolutePunk's bread and butter. In this community, advertising simply blends into the experience.

If you're running a targeted community, chances are members will talk about the products most relevant to them. If you use small amounts of space for ads and work with a professional designer, ads will take on a less intrusive role and appeal to consumers at a time when they're most receptive to the message.

Companies will pay good money to market directly to their consumer base. For entrepreneurs, your community engine will be powered by advertising. After all, the goal of the entrepreneur is to make a profit. (We'll discuss advertising for monetary profit in more depth in Chapter 10.)

If you're a marketing professional building a non-sponsored community for the sake of your business, you have a reason to leverage advertising, too. It will help show that you're credible as a standalone online community whose mission is to benefit everyone involved.

You won't plaster your brand all over the community, but careful study of how online advertising works will help you work out best practices for your own community.

Rich in benefits, the creation of a community offers a world of potential to those who can grasp it. But to reap those benefits, you must develop a brand and an environment with which your target audience can identify.