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CREATING I-COMMUNITIES FOR THE MODERN BUSINESSES

Foreword

Internet is fast becoming a dominant factor in developing virtual economy. Technologies based on Internet are creating a virtual space of commerce, in which, various categories are parts of on-going relations. Those categories are: virtual information, virtual business, virtual business environment, virtual goods, virtual currency, virtual transaction, and others. In a greater scope, many traditional processes, such as production processes, commerce processes, service processes, financial processes and others are transformed to the Internet in parts or as a whole. This raises the level of virtualization of traditional forms of economy. Meanwhile the Internet platform is also becoming a host to many new business entities, which are solely based on the Internet. In this other instance those businesses exist and function only in the Internet space.

Subjects of i-economy are using the Internet space to carry over basic business processes including communications with their environment. Internet tools, such as: e-mail, websites, discussion groups, discussion forums, e-CRM systems, are playing a major part in pro-market activities focused on marketing, advertisement, promotions, public relations, lobbying, sponsoring and creating their image and identity. Simplifying the matter, when you consider earlier mentioned activities, all of such actions are dependant on "good" relations between the business and elements of its environment. Businesses which are conscious about the whole potential of Internet tools can actively utilize them to influence their relations with their environment. One of such possibilities is to create I-community around the business and its products, services, etc.

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Essence of I-community

According to "Słownik Encyklopedyczny Edukacja Obywatelska" [SNOL99]: a community is a gathering of people living in a defined space, connected by social relations, common living conditions or cultural traditions. This traditional definition, derived from sociology, needs to be redefined to describe virtual space of the Internet. First, we have to acknowledge, that members of such I-community must fulfill set of conditions, e.g. free access to the Internet, knowledge and skills required to use a wide spectrum of Internet technologies. When it comes to Internet communities traditional geographical boundaries are irrelevant, which in turn makes obsolete geographical criteria of categorizing different communities. Meanwhile social relations, common living conditions and cultural traditions can still exist as a basis for creating such communities. On the other hand, heterogeneity of themes and subjects which determine the content of information exchanged by Internet creates new levels, on which such communities can come into existence and function. Taking those differences into account we can establish following definition of I-community: it is a gathering of people, who use Internet in an active way to exchange information related to common beliefs, attitudes and interests. The nature of Internet as a medium makes this gathering difficult to identify, amorphous – in short – virtual. Though it is not fully correct, I-communities are sometimes referred to as e-communities or virtual communities.

It doesn't need any further explanation, that members of I-communities are Internet users. Such internet users, who create Internet community, are communicating between themselves using mainly Internet tools, such as: e-mail, discussion groups or lists, instant messaging applications (e.g. ICQ), or IRC applications. Meetings taking place outside of the Internet space, in real life, are usually rare, sporadic, and always a consequence of earlier consolidation of the community in the Internet.

Creating I-communities for their own needs, businesses communicating with their environment, are using majority of existing internet tools in an integrated way. Such activities result in establishing a gathering of Internet users, interested in the business as such, or one of it's products or services, who are exchanging comments and opinions on the subject of business catalogue, and passing on positive image of business to other users. Interest in creating of I-communities, which is now on the rise, is a direct consequence of modern public relations theories, according to which, the next step in developing relations with the customers should be increased support of building virtual communities around products and services [4]. According to research quoted in the cited article, businesses which initiate creation of communities assembling customers

or business partners, are becoming trusted advisors. It has a colossal impact, if we consider the fact that in recent years there was a major shift from other marketing strategies to strategies focused on customers, who in turn undertake the decision of purchase, relying on a rich stock of earlier acquired information. In context of such tendencies, a trusted source of information is a dominant incentive influencing consumer loyalty at present. Skillfully created and managed I-community can become such source of information.

Employees of company can consciously become members of existent I-community, or initiate a new internet community related in a way with activities of their business. It needs to be added, that in instances of many businesses there is a powerful potential which could be a direct basis for a new I-community, needing only a small impulse, in a form of a simple invitation to a community, broadcasted to interested Internet users (e.g. owners of common model or made of car, users of popular computer application, hobbyists, etc.). If such community will be managed well, it will become a very essential value and major advantage for business in question, not only in the Internet space, but outside of it as well. Because members of I-community are communicating not only with other members, but with other Web users, and people from the "real world", in a way they will become representatives or advocates of the business, passing on information sent as a part of virtual pro-market activities run by business.

Other research, conducted by Jupiter Media Metrix [5], suggests that of all Web users logging on to WWW site of company, one third are people ready to actively participate in I-community, or already participating in it, if the company supports this channel of communications. It needs to be added, that members of I-community can generate as much, as two thirds of the whole number of purchases of products and services made by people logging on to a company website, which confirms their customer loyalty. The biggest I-communities in the world, assembled around internet store Amazon.com and auction service e-Bay.com, count as much as 30-40 millions of active users. On the average, Internet user logged on to e-Bay.com website spends there 100 minutes, which is a couple of times more, than average time spent on other websites, which circles around a few minutes, or even less. This means, that members of I-communities are more willing to become acquainted with virtual company offer, and spend more time on doing so, than other Internet users. These figures are worth remembering.

Process of creating I-community

Creating I-community requires company employees to conduct a sequence of activities and operations, including:

- initiating I-community,
- supplying sufficient technology (both in terms of software and hardware) allowing registration and identification of community members,
- supplying sufficient technology (both in terms of software and hardware) which guarantees efficient ways of exchanging information between community members,
- stimulating and moderating Internet community.

Sound basis for creating and managing of I-community is always a developed website, which is a main platform of information exchange, supported by other tools, such as electronic mail, or integrated with the website forums or discussion lists. People joining I-community, begin to function in its structure with undertaking the process of registration. Such registration is necessary to identify and differentiate such users from other Internet users logging on to website. Also, registration allows to gather additional information about members of community, helpful in future activities.

Every successful I-community, need a set of clearly stated goals, defining forms and ways of its functions. Trying to define the goals, which should characterize I-community in question, a compromise between goals of company, and goals of community members needs to be found. It's a common practice to start such process (of defining community goals) from defining target group, from which community members will be drawn, as well as its characteristics and important features. This allows to create a full list of goals and expectations of such Internet users which can be then compared to analogical lists created with company needs in mind. Such comparison helps to find common goals, and goals which are totally opposite, which in turns effects in crating a list of goals acceptable by both potential community members and company. Such list should be verified by company representatives (ideally by public relations employees and high management), and Internet users (e.g. by way of simple questionnaire put on company's website). Defined and verified goals should be then described in a concrete, understandable way, and diffused throughout the potential members (e.g. by putting such description on website, in an easy accessible place). Goals of community, and its missions, should also be expressed by a short slogan, motto, described in English terminology as *tagline*. Such *tagline* should contain condensed essence of I-community in one, favorably short sentence. For example such tagline of e-Bay website is "The World's Online Marketplace", see Fig. 1.

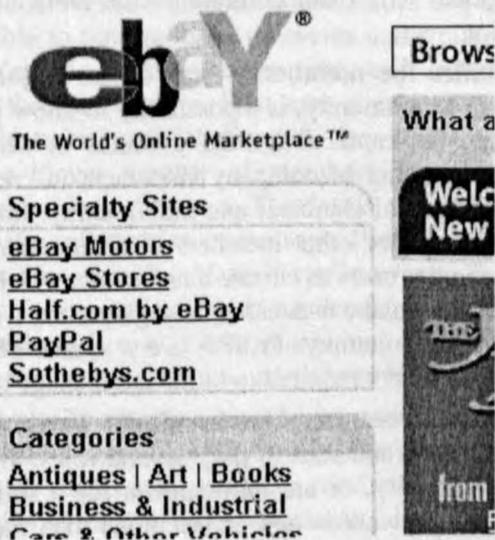


Fig. 1. Part of www.ebay.com website, with visible tagline "The World's Online Marketplace".

Managing I-community

Literature focused on internet communities [1], [2] describes a couple of relevant pointers on how to manage successful I-communities. Effective strategy of managing such communities can be contained in 9 points, which are practical clues for its leaders:

1) **Define and express your goals** – clear, understandable definition of goals, is a basis which allows to build effective community, sets objectives which community tries to fulfill, and characterize its potential members. This in turn should affect the way such community is designed, used technology and rules set inside the community. Goals of community also influence tools used in the process of its creation and management, as well as graphic design and image of its meeting point in cyberspace.

2) **Build flexible meeting places** – for a community to function, and for users to communicate freely with each other, and leaders of the community, there needs to be created a place or places (e.g. websites) in which those processes will be conducted. Such places need to be designed (especially considering its technology) in a way which allows flexible changes, in case of growth of community in question. Such places should be composed of one, main, central point

(WWW site), integrated with other communication tools, allowing it's users to exchange information.

3) **Create profiles for members** – one of the major advantages which company attains with I-community, is a possibility to know it's members better, which with communities centered around products or services of company, means also a better knowing of company customers in "real world". Member profiles give them a sense of character and individuality. Information contained therein are also important for other members of community, increasing mutual trust. Such profiles require users to choose a nickname, which will be used in the community, and such nickname is decided on registration, when an Internet user becomes a member of community. Profiles are a source of information (database) concerning all members required to build and manage community.

4) **Create with different members in mind** – with community growth its members will differentiate and start to play several roles. Web users, who consider joining the community, or are its members for a short, initial period of time, have totally different needs and expectations than members with longer experience, or community leaders. While designing community, one should consider requirements of all its members. Experience, and activity should be one of the factors allotting scope of accessible options and information, so it's required to design different areas of I-community, adjusted to needs of specific groups of members, as well as it's required to create a starting area, for all Internet users, who consider joining the community.

5) **Create a motivational leader program** – another consequence of community growth is the fact, that at one moment it will be impossible, or at least very hard, for its creators, to manage every aspect of community. This creates a need to pass some duties of community creators to its most experienced and most active members. Motivational leader program includes techniques of identifying future leaders, as well as ways of preparing them for their duties, and new function. Such program should also include concrete description of leader's rights and obligations, as well as tools required to fulfill them.

6) **Encourage to use proper etiquette** – when a group of people starts to communicate with each other, conflicts are inevitable. With this in mind, it's becoming a necessary requirement, to develop rules of etiquette, obligatory to all community members, as well as ways to handle any possible conflicts, and means to enforce such solutions. Community etiquette should be constantly revised, and should evolve with growing community, and needs of its members. Community etiquette requires it's creators to come up with methods of punishing members who are breaking it. Examples of such punishment are: temporary ban from communication channels, restricted access to some areas of community, etc.

7) **Promote cyclic events** – internet communities are shaped by its members, so it's impossible to foresee many of events and situations taking place in such community. Yet, it's possible to promote, and undertake cyclic events, which have at least three advantages. First such events give community a sense of continuity, and historical context. Second, they usually draw to a meeting point in cyberspace bigger number of members in a specific time, which strengthens relations between members. Third, this allows to reach wider scope of users with a specific information or message. Presentations, competitions, or occasional meetings are examples of such cyclic events. To successfully promote cyclic events, it's required to create a calendar of community life, virtual meeting area in which such events take place, and choose technological tools which will allow community members to participate in cyclic events.

8) **Create community rituals** – every community functioning in the "real world" has its own set of rituals, such as characteristic greetings, common holidays, and others. Such rituals strengthen the relations between members of the community, and so it's advised to create similar rituals for I-community. Rituals can be very simple, e.g. greeting message sent to a member who joins the meeting area, as they can be more complicated, e.g. multi-faceted anniversary of community birth. To create such rituals community creators should come up with procedures to inform it's participants about ritual, as well as technologies, which allow members to participate in ritual.

9) **Make creating sub-groups easy** – every growing I-community reaches a point, where it's so big, that various specializations and sub-groups start to appear (e.g. sub-groups focused on specific car models in a community related to car-manufacturer). In such situation it's advised to create mechanisms, which allow activists engaged in those sub-groups to officially create such sub-groups, which become a part of a bigger community. It increases loyalty of members, and further builds its information database (with more specific, specialized info), which draws new members.

When company decides, that it's willing to create I-community, its creators should remember about flexibility of community's design. Each and every community start's as a small gathering, but the number of members can grow very fast. Yet, it would be erroneous to create bigger structure for huge number of members at the beginning – such community would appear abandoned and inactive in its first phase growth, which will have negative influence on new members and Internet users who consider joining it (e.g. highly developed chat service with only a few members). This means that community meeting areas, as well as technologies used in their creation, must allow easy, and flexible scaling depending on community size.

As it was mentioned earlier, WWW website is fundamental in creating successful and effective I-community. Such website should allow access to all forms of activities in the community. Technologies used to conduct communication process between community members can be different, depending character and size of community, though all popular Internet tools can be used. In case of small communities it's usually discussion list based on e-mail, bigger communities use discussion groups, synchronic text chat, synchronic video chat or so called virtual worlds. Most interesting, most complicated (technologically) – and not always most effective – are virtual worlds, used very often in case of communities related on some computer and video games. Such virtual worlds are graphical digital environments simulating existing or imaginary reality, in which community members are meeting with each other. Visualization in such virtual worlds is often achieved by means of specialized, dedicated applications, though sometimes their creators use also VRML procedures in WWW sites.

Leaders of I-communities

In each I-community, specific members play a major role of so called leaders or activists. Usually they are members with longest experience, very active, often those, who are part of the community from its beginnings. In the first period of community growth those people are usually its creators, who become leaders, and draw Internet users to the community. Later other members can become leaders, if they're working for the sake of community and other members. Activists are keeping the whole community in motion, so it's natural that play an important role in its life, influencing it's character, and themes of communication processes.

It should be remembered that I-community is created by its creators, but when it starts to function, its members start to influence it's form and nature. It's a natural process, which keeps community relevant and attractive, both to existing members and to Internet users who consider joining in. As it was said earlier it is necessary to create mechanisms that allow community members to express their opinions and remarks considering the community and how it functions (e.g. questionnaires, surveys, etc.). Leaders should also pay close attention to members' remarks, especially those negative and disapproving. With the inevitable growth of community, and identification of most active and creative members, such members should take over some of the duties compromised of welcoming new members, managing the community, etc. This will reduce the number of duties of community creators and moderators (employees of the company), as well as strengthen relation of new members with the community.

Member profiles are a very helpful tool in identifying community leaders, mainly because they contain a huge scope of information regarding members. When community creators specify information which should be held in member profiles, they should take a couple of questions into account. First, such profile should contain info regarding member activity in community, which will make identifying future leaders easier, as well as allow creation of motivational programs. Second, such profile must allow members to express their own style, character and individuality. This can be achieved by including in the profile such data fields as member motto, member photo, specific sign or other (e.g. favorite movie or favorite dish). Such personal info should adhere to specifics of the whole community. (e.g. favorite dish in a community focused on cooking). Third, profiles and mechanisms of their processing, should be flexible, and allow adding new data fields and elements with ease.

When creating member profiles it's also very important to provide sufficient level of security of information included therein. Member profiles contain basic information about member, such as first name, surname, age, date of birth, place of residence, sometimes even more personal data. This implies that a high level of security is needed, to assure members, that their personal information will be accessed only by accessed employees of the company. In regards to such notions, member profiles are often divided into three parts:

- system data – accessible to community creators, includes all elements of profile, along with the information describing member activity in the community,
- personal data – accessible only to member in question, includes nickname, password used during registration, other personal info,
- public data – accessible to other members of community, includes nickname, and specific personal data indicated by member himself (e.g. e-mail address, real name, etc.).

In communities where mutual trust is very important (e.g. communities related to auction websites) member profile should also include data field, which helps determine member trustworthiness. To achieve this it is a common practice to create mechanism that lets other members to express their opinion about the member in question. Such mechanism is used amongst members of e-Bay.com community, who are assigned a certain level of reputation. This mechanism allows other Internet users who traded with member in question to rate his trustworthiness (if the product arrived on time, if it was compliant with description on the website, etc.). Similar systems are commonly used by other auction services, as well as other I-communities.

Conclusion

I-communities created and managed according to observations included in this article should become an effective and successful tool of company-to-environment communication. If the target group of company's products, services is present and active enough on the Internet, company's activities, as well as its products can be or is interesting to wide range of Internet users, and the company is "open" and willing to use new pro-market activities in its approach, it's advised to create I-community. It seems, as it's the best way to reach company's pro-market goals, which integrates all available Internet measures.

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