

Why Care About Communities?

Simply put, you should care about communities because they want you to. A 2008 study by Cone, LLC, found that most online consumers want companies to have a presence online, and that many want them to be interactive with their customers, and use social networks to help them with problems (Figure 12-1).

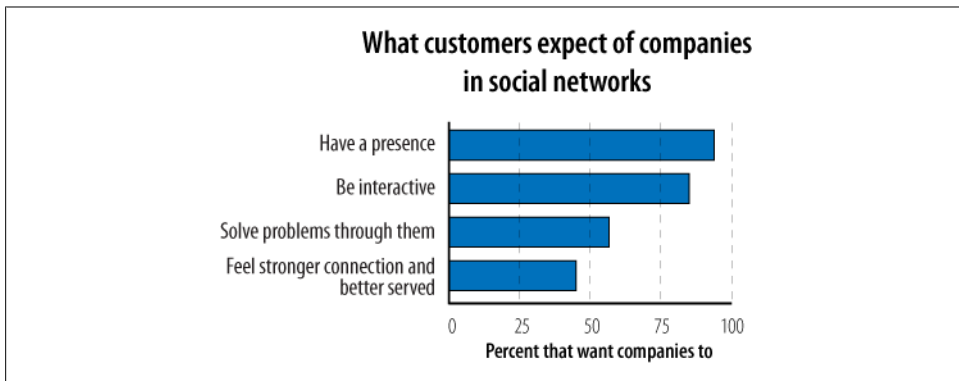


Figure 12-1. Most users of social networks want companies to join them

Many of the benefits of communities are associated with marketing communications—a new kind of public relations. That’s only natural. Marketing communications is about getting messages out to the world, and as conversations, social networks fit that bill well. But communities do much more than simply deliver messages.

They are the start of a long funnel

Audience engagement starts long before someone visits your site. It begins in the communities and online venues where your market first hears of you.

They amplify messages more efficiently

If the community adopts your message, it will amplify that message across the Web in a new and more effective form of promotion that people trust.

They help customers to help themselves

Community-based customer self-service not only lowers your own costs, it actually provides better service than you can offer by yourself—and customers prefer it.

They make your business more agile

By short-circuiting traditional market research, you can go straight to the source and design better products or services faster than ever.

They provide the first signs of online liability

Others may be doing things that have a legal impact on you, such as distributing your intellectual property illegally or slandering you. If you run your own platform, you may also be liable for what's said on it. Staying in touch with your community is an excellent way to discover these problems early on.

They improve referrals

A community dramatically expands your social network and your reach, whether you're looking for customers, suppliers, or employees.

Before diving into what makes up these conversations and how to join them, let's take a closer look at each of these.

The Mouth of the Long Funnel

As we've seen, web analytics is all about outcomes. Visitors arrive at your site, and—assuming you've done your job right—a number of them progress inexorably toward a goal you've set. This is often represented as tiers in a funnel, starting when the visitor arrives and tapering toward the outcome you intend.

This “short funnel” is increasingly outdated. It no longer accurately describes the way companies engage with a web audience. Today's long funnel starts the moment a potential visitor hears about you—with a mention on a blog or a comment on Twitter. Sometimes this is not a single event, but instead a series of interactions over time that gradually builds up interest in your product or service.

Tying what happens out on the Web at large back to outcomes on your own site is difficult. In fact, it's the major challenge for the web analytics industry in coming years. There's no consistent way to link several impressions across multiple sites you don't control, and since privacy concerns prevent you from identifying individual users, you can't know which specific events on a social network triggered activity on your site.

This is changing. Social networks like Facebook, as well as identity frameworks like OpenID and cross-site blogging platforms like Disqus, all help web users leave trails—and build personal identities—as they navigate many websites. This kind of tracking information can let you know every time that someone interacts with your brand or message online, and may one day eventually tie a person's actions elsewhere on the Web back to an outcome on your website or in the real world. Unique URLs targeted

at a specific message or a segment of the social network can also be used to track who clicks what, tying a link in a microblog to its outcome.

We may not need to rely on such tracking methods. Consumers are increasingly willing to disclose tremendous amounts of personal information in return for web functionality like bookmarking and sharing. Twitter profiles, for example, are visible to the world and often contain personal details as well as links to blogs and other personal records. While profiles like these will help tie community interactions to outcomes, using them may pose ethical and legal risks to your organization resulting from privacy and confidentiality issues.

There are other challenges in tracking the long funnel. Many of the social networks on which discussions start and opinions form want to make money by charging marketers for insights into what communities are thinking. At the same time, analytics firms want to be the primary source of insight into web activity. There's an inevitable power struggle brewing between analytics companies and social network platforms.

Whatever happens, monitoring the mouth of the long funnel is becoming an increasingly vital component of a complete web monitoring strategy, whether it's done through analytics tools that instrument online communities, clever manipulation of short URLs, or services provided by online communities directly.

A New Kind of PR

With so many free web platforms now available, it's easy to craft a message and build grassroots support, provided you can generate genuine attention from an audience. Getting genuine attention is the hard part.

In an industry once dominated by one-to-many broadcasting, online marketing analytics brought accountability to advertising. Viral marketing approaches made it easy to spread messages. And now community marketing—done right—makes it possible to overcome the natural skepticism of a media-saturated audience and communicate with it directly. [Figure 12-2](#) shows how information flows in each of these models.

Broadcast Marketing Communications

Broadcast marketing was the twentieth century's dominant form of promotion. It cost money to design and produce a message, and still more money to print and ship it, or to license some spectrum and transmit it. Broadcasting a single message to a broad audience offered the economies of scale needed to market cost-effectively. Where the industrial revolution gave us mass production, broadcast marketing gave us mass media.

Computerization and lower production costs meant that advertisers could target their messages to specific audiences according to publication, TV program, or geography—with computers, the incremental cost of a personal message was nearly zero. Marketers

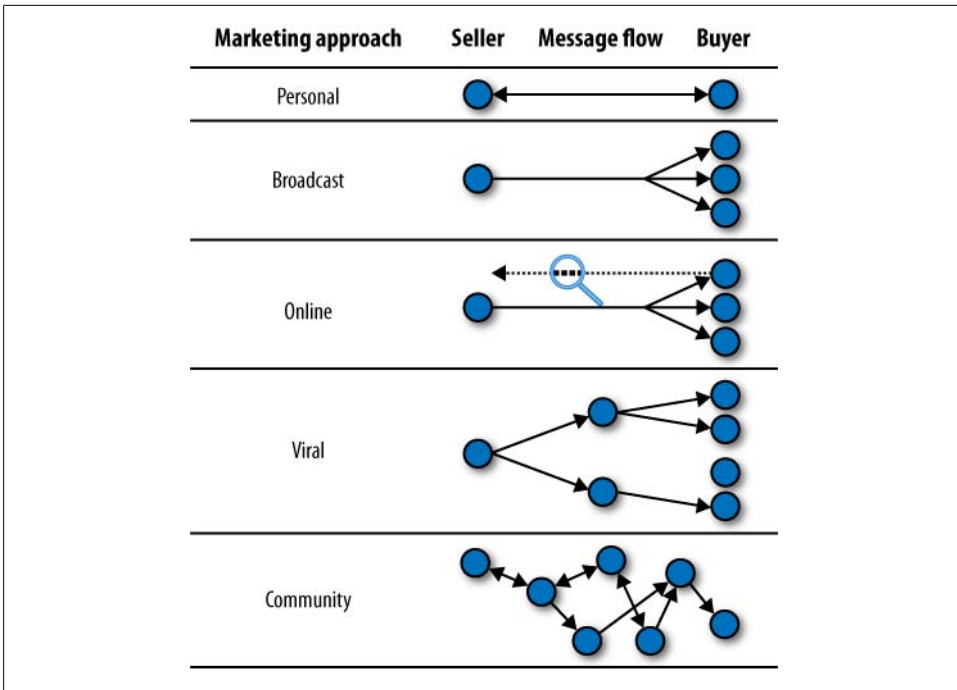


Figure 12-2. How messages flow between buyers and sellers in various marketing communications approaches

used databases and form letters to try to optimize which prospects received which messages. But while they were tailored to some degree, those messages were tightly controlled.

In the traditional marketing communication model shown in Figure 12-3, the marketing team creates a message that combines the interests of the product team, legal and ethical restrictions, and the company’s brand and overall positioning. The message is then distributed through mass media, public relations, and other channels. The audience is segmented, but largely unqualified. In broadcast marketing, that’s OK: volume trumps precision. The more people you reach, the larger the response.

Unfortunately, broadcast audiences are nearing saturation. The average American sees a tremendous amount of advertising, as shown in Figure 12-4: 245 ad exposures daily, of which 108 come from television, 34 from radio, and 112 from print (these are AMIC.com estimates—some of the most conservative). And that’s just the ads they notice—some estimates claim that they’re exposed to thousands a day.

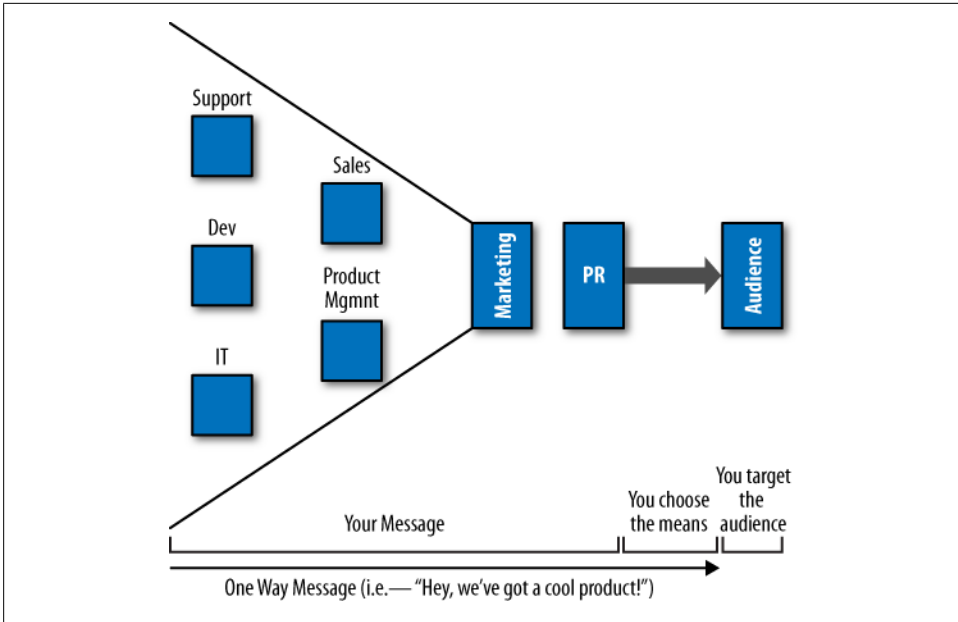


Figure 12-3. Traditional marketing communication model

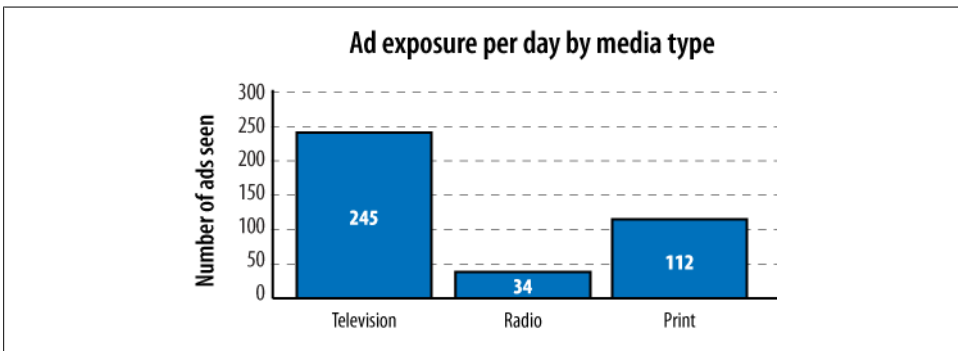


Figure 12-4. The amount of ad exposure Americans receive per day by media type

It's not just saturation that's killing traditional marketing. People are also ignoring the messages. They tune out promotions, skipping them with their Tivo. TV producers have switched to product placement as the world skips past paid advertising. *30 Rock* runs an episode mocking demand for product placement, and in doing so, showcases a product. Tina Fey looks straight at the camera, winks, and says, "Can we have our money now?" Even the great Stephen Colbert tells his Nation to eat Doritos as part of the show itself.

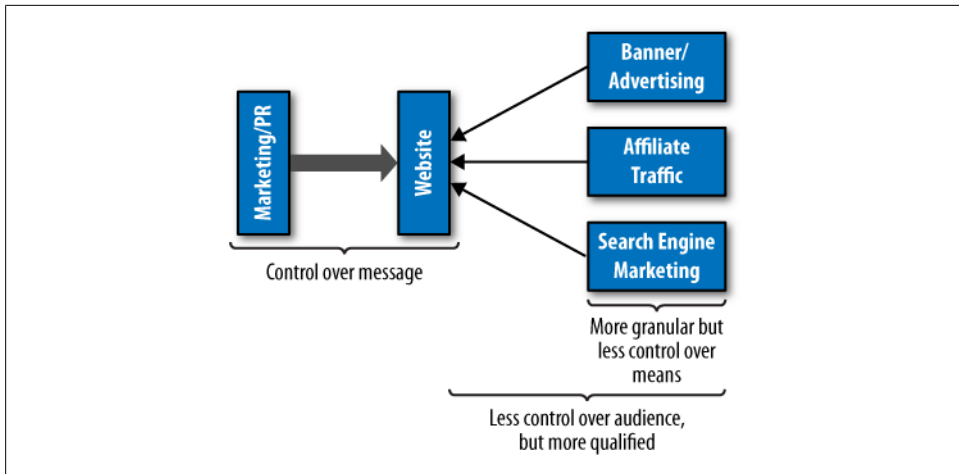


Figure 12-5. Online marketing communication model

Broadcast audiences are both weary and wary. Ad revenues are in free-fall, and newspapers are foundering. The broadcast era is waning, not only because people are saturated and bored with its impersonal content, but because the precise tracking that’s possible with online campaigns makes broadcast media look like a blunt instrument. It’s unaccountable, unwieldy, and overpriced, and advertisers are switching to other approaches.

Online Marketing Communications

With online marketing, advertisers see the results of their efforts. Outcomes are tightly tied to campaigns, making online approaches a much more attractive resource for getting a message out.

Online marketing can be better targeted, too. Through careful segmentation along dimensions such as geography, gender, age, or keyword, there’s a much higher chance that a message will resonate with its recipient, turning a prospect into a convert. And those messages can be adjusted over time, mid-campaign, to maximize their effectiveness.

In the online marketing model, advertisers still control the message, although it might take the form of teaser ads, search results, affiliate referrals, or paid content. They can also choose their target segments, but they have much less control over the distribution of the message—they’ve outsourced that part of the work to the other online properties instead. [Figure 12-5](#) shows how online marketing works.

Online marketing is still paid marketing. Ad dollars are tracked for effectiveness to provide accountability, and to let advertisers optimize their spending. It also has two fundamental problems:

- First, *a message only goes as far as it's paid to*. It's not amplified by the audience. To reach more people efficiently, advertisers need a communications model that scales well, growing by itself rather than costing them more money to reach more people.
- Second, the *audience still largely ignores the message* because it's untrusted. Ads are noise, and with the notable exception of relevance-based advertising, like paid search, people mostly ignore them.

One technique, viral marketing, addresses the first challenge by letting the audience itself amplify the message.

Viral Marketing: Pump Up the Volume

The term *viral marketing* was coined by Jeffrey Rayport in 1996. It describes a form of marketing that's designed to be repeated. Borrowing from concepts within epidemiology, viral marketing “infects” the audience, encouraging those who hear the message to amplify it. Done right, it's a much more efficient way to garner attention, it's cheaper to deliver, and it enjoys *demand-side economies of scale*. That is, the volume of the message grows as more people hear it.

In nature, when an initial carrier is infected by a virus, that carrier then spreads the disease to the immediate environment, and from there, the infection spreads as carriers transition across borders to previously uninfected territories. [Figure 12-6](#) shows an example of viral spread across population groups.

Distribution costs for viral marketing are lower because the audience becomes the medium. Making campaigns viral isn't easy, however. You have to craft the right message and convince the audience to amplify it across many sites and platforms.

The classic example of online viral marketing is Hotmail. In its first 18 months of operation, Hotmail grew to 12 million users. At one point in 1998, the company was signing up 150,000 users *a day*. By comparison, a traditional print publication hopes to grow to 100,000 subscribers over several years. And Hotmail did it all with the seven short words shown in [Figure 12-7](#).

During those 18 months, Hotmail spent less than \$500,000. There were other factors that influenced its success, of course: most people didn't already have web-based email; many people were connecting to the Internet for the first time; and the service was free. But an inherently social tool like email proved the perfect growth medium for the virus.



There is some debate between the Hotmail founders and the main investors, Draper Fisher Jurvetson, as to whose idea it was to implement the email footer. In any case, the story had a happy ending: Microsoft acquired Hotmail in 1997 for \$400 million, touting more than 9 million members worldwide at the time.

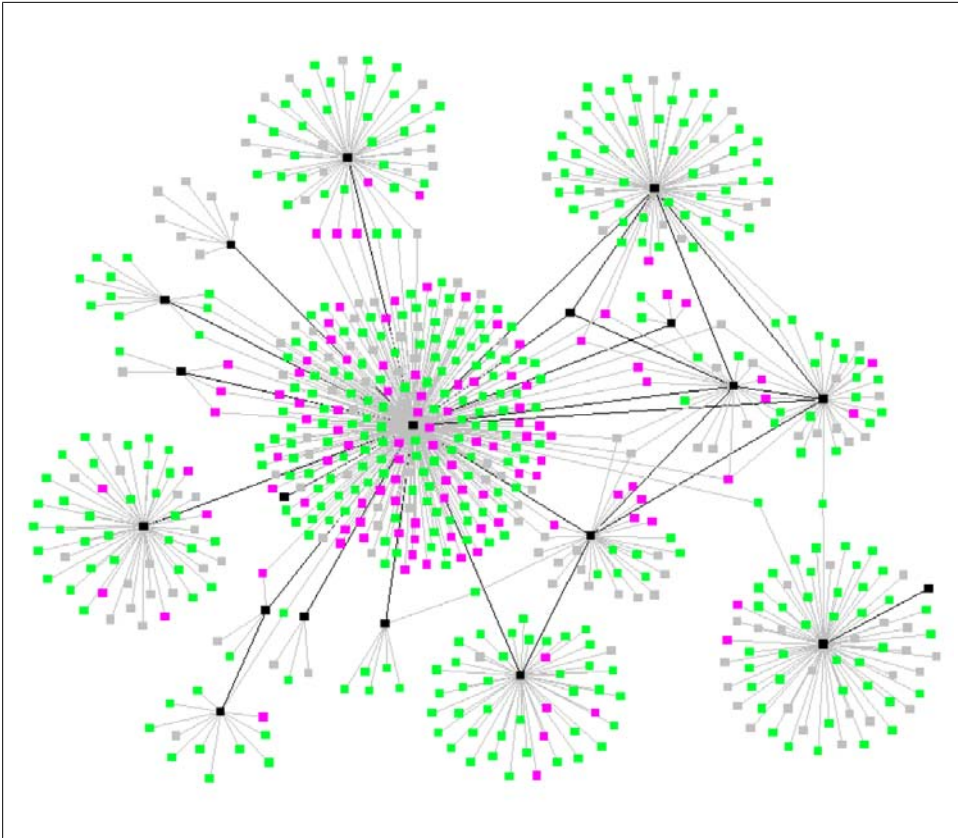


Figure 12-6. A CDC contact tracing map of real airborne infectious disease

Get your free private email at <http://www.hotmail.com>

Figure 12-7. The Hotmail footer is perhaps the Internet's most successful viral marketing campaign

The Bass Diffusion Curve

Viral marketing isn't new. Decades before Hotmail's record-breaking growth, Frank Bass published research on message diffusion and introduced marketers to the Bass Diffusion Curve.

Traditional advertising campaigns are a function of two things: how many people hear your message, and how effective that message is in getting them to act. In other words, to get better results, you can either advertise to more people or you can improve the

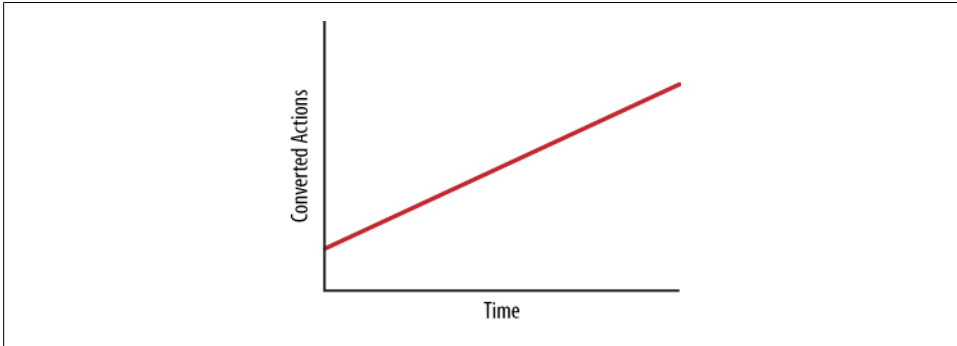


Figure 12-8. Traditional marketing diffusion curve

offer. This implies complete control over message power (the offer) and people who hear it (the reach).

$$\text{Converted buyers} = \text{message power} \times \text{people who hear it}$$

Assuming a regular monthly expenditure on advertising (reaching the same number of people each month), the result of this traditional marketing model looks like the straight-line message diffusion curve shown in Figure 12-8. A convincing message reaching a certain number of listeners each month will result in a specific slope to the diffusion line—and the better the marketing message, the steeper the slope.

But Bass realized that there’s a second channel for your message—the *buyers themselves*. If your message is sufficiently engaging, your audience *becomes* your marketing medium. This second channel isn’t in your control, but it’s free. It’s word of mouth.

The Bass model adds a second element to the equation:

$$\text{Converted buyers} = \text{message power} \times \text{people who hear it} + (\text{buyers} \times \text{WOM power} \times \text{People who hear it})$$

In other words, in addition to traditional advertising reach, there’s word-of-mouth reach. And word of mouth grows as more people become amplifiers who adopt and repeat the message. The more amplifiers you have, the further your message travels until, ultimately, everyone has heard it.

The effect of word-of-mouth diffusion is strikingly different from traditional marketing, and yields the diffusion curve shown in Figure 12-9.

Early on, word-of-mouth diffusion isn’t very effective. Word of mouth starts off slowly, but as the number of buyers, users, or visitors builds, it can quickly outpace traditional marketing.

This doesn’t happen by itself. Viral marketing requires certain things to work well:

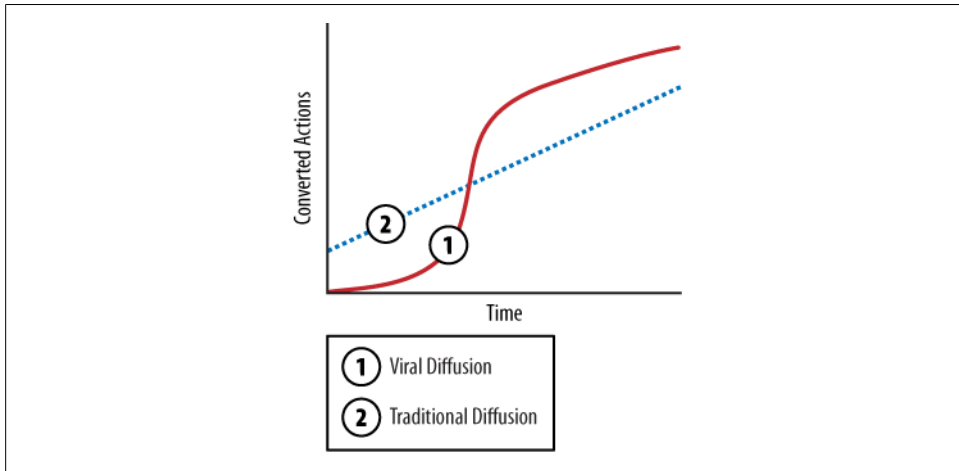


Figure 12-9. Viral marketing diffusion curve

A good story

Some marketing messages are inherently viral. Apple’s Steve Jobs calls inherently viral products “insanely great”—something so wonderful that you feel smarter when you tell others about it.

Something of real value

While virality pays for its own distribution, you’ll need to work harder to craft your message. The Web is full of chain letters and goofy videos, but they’re not viral marketing unless they somehow lead to an outcome—they’re just entertainment.

Consider Gmail, Google’s web-based email offering. Unlike Hotmail, Gmail launched into a market that already had entrenched web mail platforms, such as Yahoo! and Hotmail. Google tried to differentiate itself by offering a hundred times the storage capacity of competing services, and by using an invitation-only model to drive adoption. By limiting invitations, the company was able to create perceived scarcity, which in turn drove up the perceived value of the service.

Support from community leaders

You can improve viral marketing effectiveness by targeting *supernodes*—extremely connected individuals—in social networks that have a broader reach and whose amplification has a greater impact because it spans several different groups.

A large end audience

Viral marketing reaches a saturation point as the target audience hears and tires of the message (which is what gives it an S-shaped diffusion curve), so bigger markets are worth targeting. If your market is small or you can reach it efficiently through traditional means, it may be better served with more traditional, personalized advertising.

A platform for distribution

Hyperlinks, videos, and pictures work well because they're easily shared. The easier you make it for someone to tell another person about your message, the better you'll do. Hotmail worked well because the product was itself a platform for spreading the message.



Seth Godin's *Unleashing the Ideavirus* (Hyperion) and *Purple Cow* (Portfolio Hardcover) deal with the issue of how to transmit ideas that others will pick up.

For an excellent overview of crafting messages that are easy to remember and pass on, see Chip and Dan Heath's "Made to Stick" website at www.madetostick.com/.

Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (Back Bay Books) is required reading on supernodes and how messages grow rapidly.

It's important to set the right expectations for viral marketing within your organization, since it has fewer concrete, short-term effects.

In the early stages, when you're seeding your message into the community, conversions from word of mouth will be low. Once a message gets into the hands of *social hubs* (networks of people with many casual friends and followers), the likeliness of message transmission greatly increases. If each user you bring in adds more than one user, you have a positive viral coefficient, and growth will follow.

Robert Zubek explains: "The viral coefficient is a measure of how many new users are brought in by each existing user. It's a quick and easy way to measure growth: if the coefficient is 1.0, the site grows linearly, and if it's less than that, it will slow down. And if the coefficient is higher than 1.0, you have superlinear growth of a runaway hit" (<http://robert.zubek.net/blog/2008/01/30/viral-coefficient-calculation>).

You can help prove the value of viral transmission to your organization by tracking word-of-mouth conversions separately from broadcast marketing. Get viral marketing right, and you'll have a huge, cheap channel for your message. Hotmail adoption from June 1996 to June 1997, shown in [Figure 12-10](#), closely follows the curve predicted by Bass' research 30 years earlier.

In Hotmail's case, the message was embedded in emails its users sent, and Hotmail controlled most of what was said as a result. You won't be so lucky—as your message spreads, it will be diluted and misinterpreted. The Web will edit and repurpose it. Reactions and comments to the message might become more important than the message itself. Sometimes, entire communities will emerge around an idea as it becomes a part of online culture. Writer and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins calls these cultural ideas *memes*. They're transmitted from mind to mind, evolving and competing with other memes for prominence.

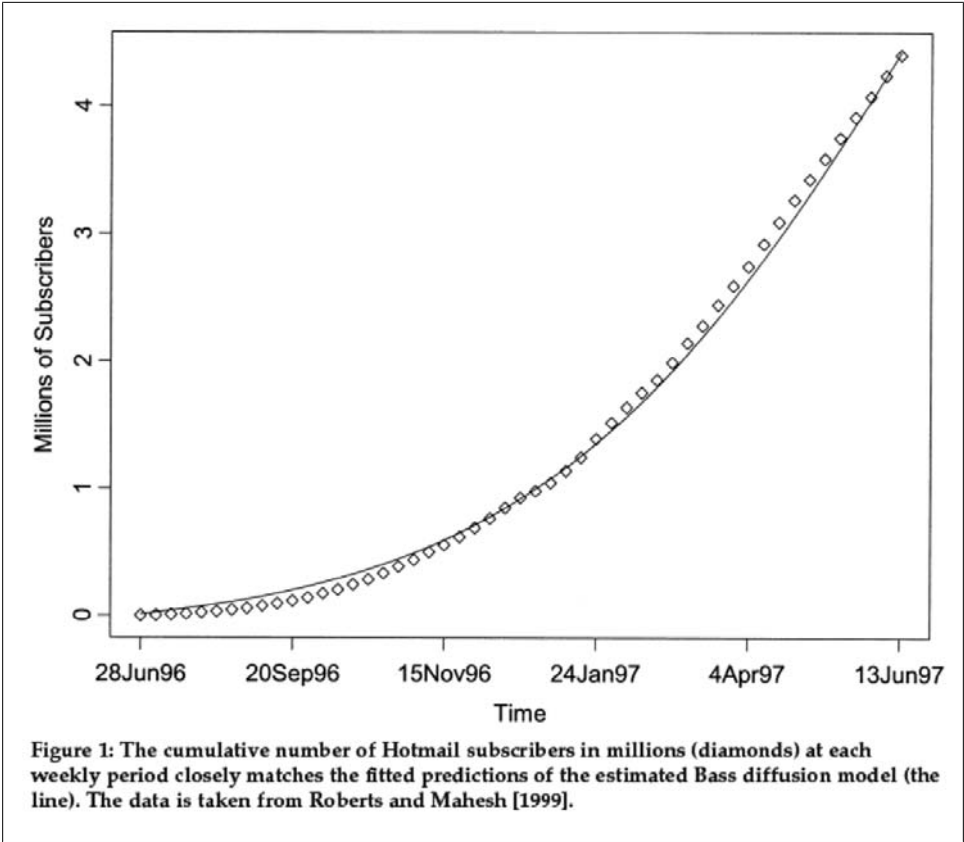


Figure 12-10. Diffusion curve plotting Hotmail adoption over one year

In the same way, communities relabel and repurpose viral marketing messages as they enter the Web’s zeitgeist, often at the expense of the original intent.

Consider, for example, a failed martial arts backflip that became the “Afro-ninja” Internet meme (www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_NQCTbvRnM), garnering millions of viewers. That this video was in fact related to an ad for the video game Tekken 5 was completely lost, and the marketing opportunity was missed entirely, despite its rapid spread to all corners of the Internet. Communities tend to do that. So why would we want to hand over our message to a Web that might change it?

Because we’re all skeptics.

We live in an attention economy where being noticed is the best currency. In his book *Free*, *Wired* Editor-in-Chief Chris Anderson cites social scientist Herbert Simon, who in 1971 predicted the rise of this attention economy, saying, “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” Paris Hilton and Google both make money from their ability to steer our attention toward a particular product or service. *And nothing gets our attention like the advice of a trusted source.*

Community Marketing: Improving the Signal

Community marketing and viral marketing are closely related, since both rely on the audience to amplify the message. But while viral marketing focuses on message spread, community marketing combines message redistribution with the genuineness of a message crafted by others.



There are subtle differences in the types of community marketing messages that exist today. David Wilcox at the Social Reporter has a great blog post about this at <http://www.designingforcivilsociety.org/2008/03/we-cant-do-that.html>.

In community marketing, you engage the community through interaction, hoping that you’re able to make yourself the subject of discussions. It’s more about engaging and creating platforms for interaction like the one in [Figure 12-11](#) than about crafting clever videos. It’s also often about listening and joining, rather than crafting the message yourself.

Community engagement helps to promote products or services, particularly for business-to-consumer marketing efforts. It also helps increase brand awareness. But communities are extremely wise—if the community marketing effort isn’t tied to genuine value, the community will rebel and the message will backfire, as it did for Belkin. Revelations that an employee had paid for positive product reviews online prompted anonymous letters claiming that the company engaged in even more deceptive practices. These far more damaging claims would likely never have surfaced if the disingenuous behavior of the initial employee hadn’t come to light. There’s a fine line between using a community to share your news and becoming the news itself.

As online consumers become increasingly savvy, they can tell pitches from proponents with great precision. They flock to trusted peers. For example, sites like Chowhound, TripAdvisor, and Yelp (shown in [Figure 12-12](#)) have changed how consumers check out restaurants.



Figure 12-11. AppleInsider fan community

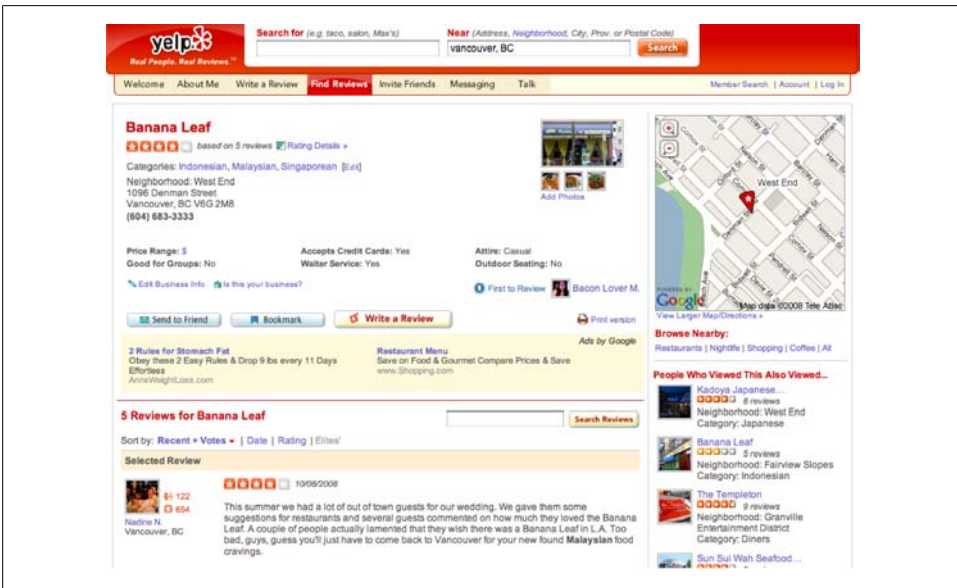


Figure 12-12. Yelp reviews are from real users, which makes them far more credible than those from marketers



Figure 12-13. A message that Oracle does not control

Perhaps because of this, communities terrify traditional marketers. Community discussions peel back the veneer of a product, unearthing all manner of wart and weakness. Communities roam off in unexpected directions, as shown in [Figure 12-13](#). Sometimes, they'll talk about the message you've created; other times, they'll talk about messages that one of your competitors has created about you. Most of the time, they simply won't talk about you at all. When they do, however, you need to be ready to engage them.

Marketing communications in the age of widespread online communities consists of many different groups within an organization having many different dialogues. Gone are the hierarchies, the message approval, and the controlled release. In their place are many flows of information linking your organization to the rest of the Web, as shown in [Figure 12-14](#). It's very different from the controlled, predictable communications of broadcast marketing.

With little control over delivery or message, there are still five things you can do:

- *Create platforms* where communities can flourish, such as groups, hashtags, and forums.
- *Find mentions* of your message and your brand across the Web using search and referring URL tools.
- *Engage with communities* so you can nurture and gently steer conversations.
- *Provide relevant content* so you can grow customer loyalty and help the community to correct misinformation itself.
- *Build products and services that don't suck.*

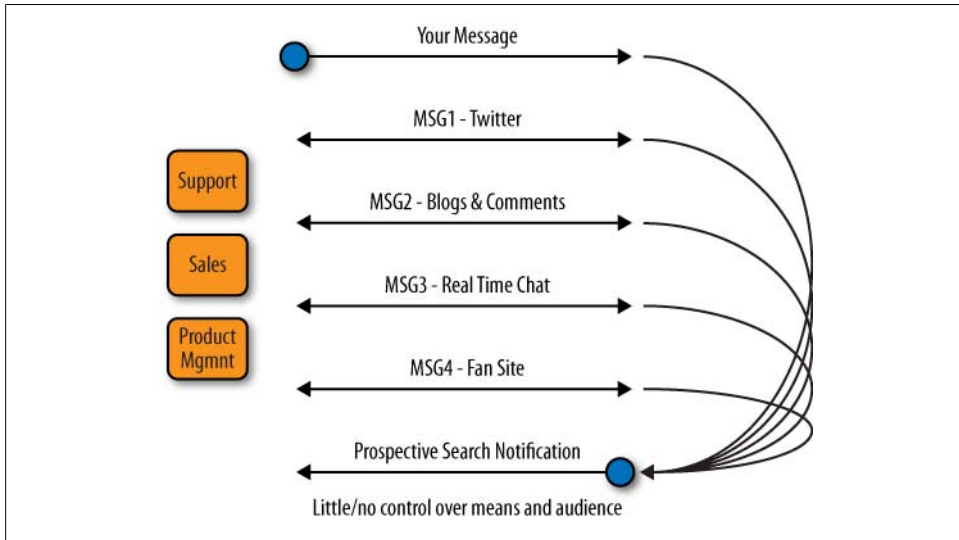


Figure 12-14. Marketing communications in the age of online communities

Many people equate community management with next-generation marketing. It's an obvious association: public relations has always been about getting the right message to as many people as possible, and because online communities are cheaper and more genuine vehicles for that message, they're attractive. It would be wrong, however, to think that marketing is the only reason companies need to engage communities.

Support Communities: Help Those Who Help Themselves

One of the most compelling reasons to create and engage communities is that customers love helping one another. They're good at it. It's also much cheaper for customers to service themselves than it is for you to handle their support calls.

We've known for many years that online service is cheaper than the in-person alternative. A 1997 study conducted by Booz Allen Hamilton showed that a web banking transaction cost a bank just \$0.01, compared to \$0.27 for an ATM transaction and \$1.07 for a transaction carried out in person. Dell Financial Services estimates that it saves \$1.41 for every transaction completed online versus a transaction completed by an employee.

It's not just about cost savings. Communities often provide better support more quickly than the manufacturer itself. To harness the power of better, faster answers that cost less, you need to create a platform for discussion and moderate it. Because support communities benefit both end users and companies, they are one of the fastest-growing community initiatives within businesses.

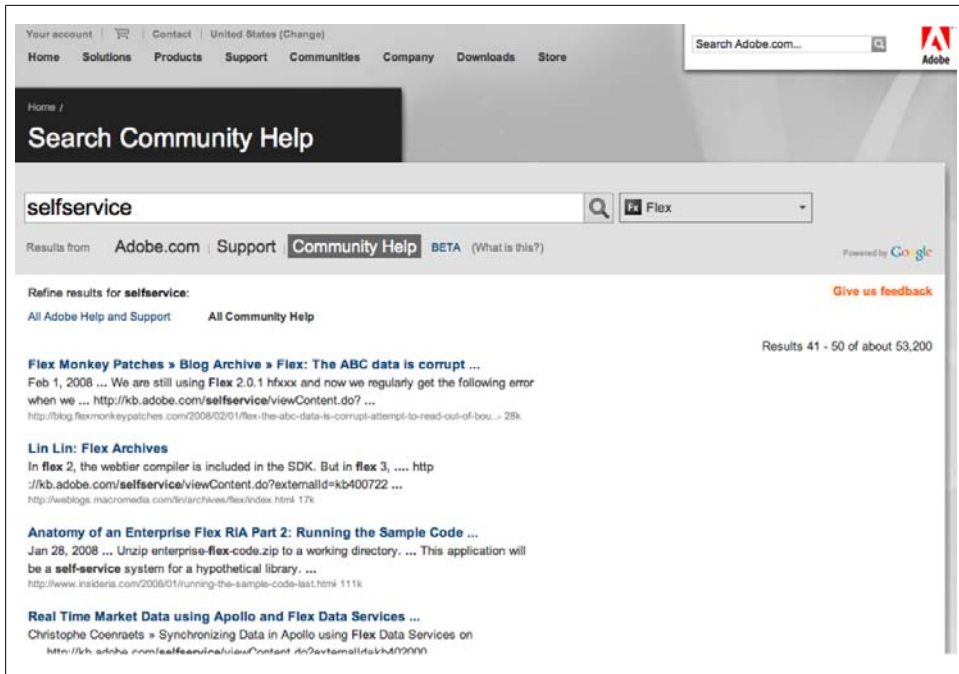


Figure 12-15. Adobe's support community

Consider Adobe's community help site, shown in [Figure 12-15](#), for example. It's run by the company itself on systems that it controls, staffed by subject matter experts, moderators, and editors. In fact, the company often promotes its online community rather than its support sites.

Other support platforms are less tied to a particular company. Mahalo Answers, for example, is a self-organizing community that tries to help its members with a variety of topics. And sites like Stack Overflow, shown in [Figure 12-16](#), build around a particular subject matter or topic—in this case, developers.

Support communities can just as easily appear on Google groups, IRC channels, or anywhere a company's users congregate. Most of the members of these communities will arrive through word of mouth, or by searching for a particular name, brand, or string.

What Makes a Good Support Community?

Users have to be able to explain their problems easily and find the best potential answers. Often, this is a combination of robust search and a means for community members to upvote the most relevant or well-prepared responses. This kind of functionality is one of the reasons support-focused sites like Get Satisfaction, shown in

Figure 12-17, have grown in recent years—they offer better rating, organization, and feedback mechanisms than generic communities such as mailing lists or Usenet.

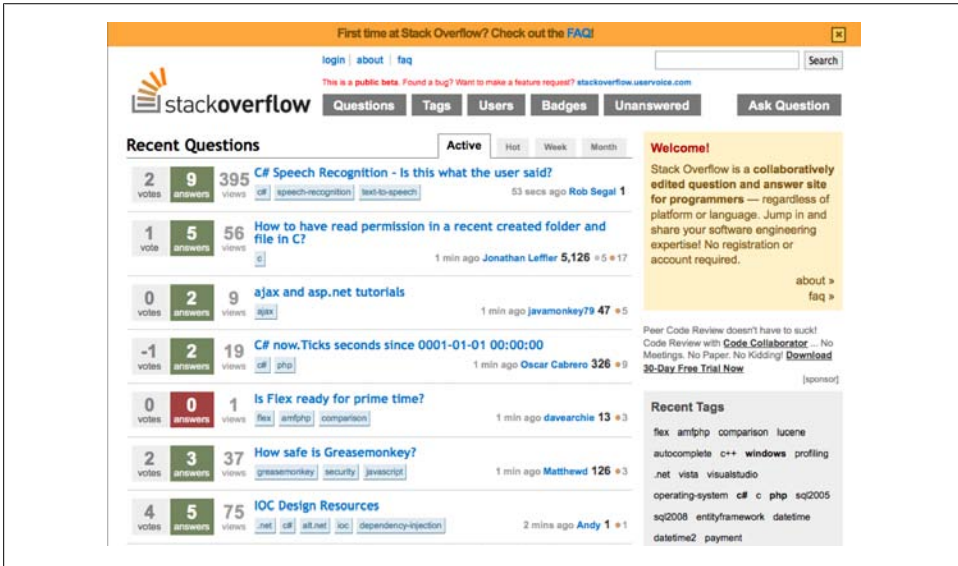


Figure 12-16. Stack Overflow is a developer-oriented question-and-answer community

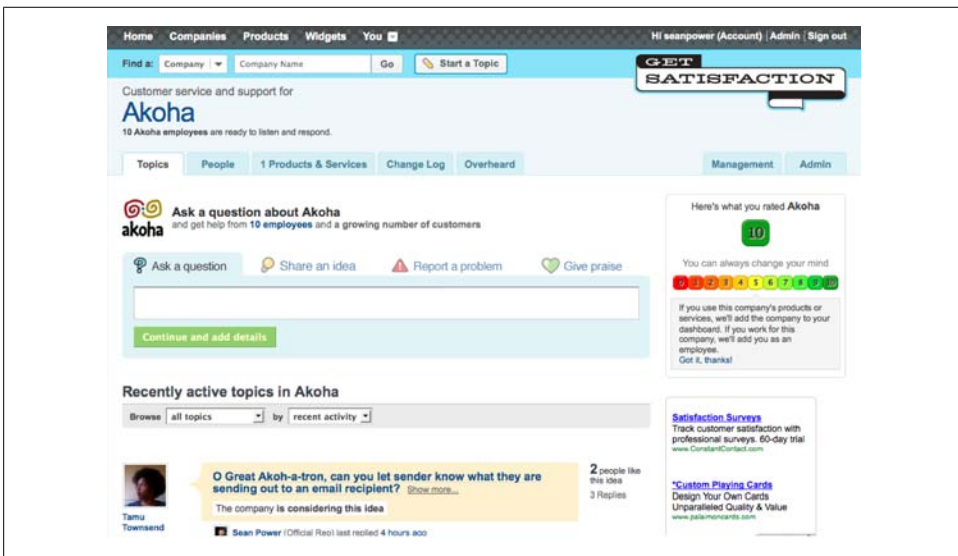


Figure 12-17. Get Satisfaction is a customer satisfaction portal where communities demand attention from companies

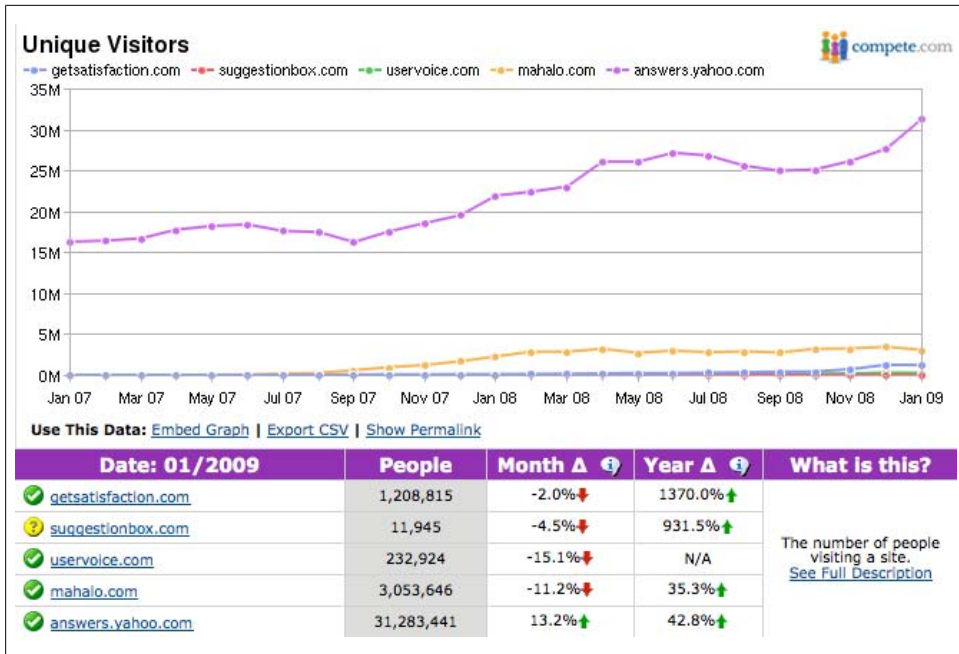


Figure 12-18. Up-and-coming sites have healthy growth; established sites have huge numbers of visitors

Community self-service sites are growing quickly. While Yahoo! Answers dominates the self-support field today with millions of unique visitors a month, some of the more targeted, topical support sites we've seen are rapidly gaining market share (Figure 12-18).

Risk Avoidance: Watching What the Internet Thinks

The Web is an open forum, and there's very little control over what's said. This can affect your business in important ways.

First of all, online content may be *libelous* or *slanderous*. With web communities, everyone in the world has a soapbox. Open conversation is the norm and the Web is a relatively free form of expression, but if people post things that can be proven false, you can often challenge them or have them removed.

Don't be overbearing with your retaliation to online commentary, or your challenge may backfire. Search engine caches, whistle-blower sites (like Wikileaks), and even attentive users taking screenshots will preserve copies of what was said and distribute them on platforms beyond your control. It's always better to deal with the criticism openly, and to let the community draw its own conclusions, as long as you can support your claims with facts.

A second source of risk is *intellectual property violation*. So much of your company's assets are tied up in brand equity, proprietary information, media, and other forms that you may experience significant material losses when others use that information.

While digital piracy might seem the most obvious form of intellectual property risk, other, subtler, ones are also important. For example, some vendors may repurpose your brand or slogan, modify it, and sell it on clothing; you need to defend that brand across all media. Communities provide excellent early warning against this kind of behavior.

Finally, there's *your own liability*. If you set up a platform for a community, you have a moral—and sometimes legal—responsibility to moderate what goes on there. This may depend on the subject matter (healthcare, stock tips, and financial advice are good examples of high-risk topics) or audience (sites aimed at children are particularly restricted). You may be responsible for what others post to your platform, since you're the one operating it, and you're definitely responsible for reviewing complaints about offensive or damaging content and taking appropriate actions.

During the recent U.S. electoral campaign, for example, attackers posing as Obama supporters created posts that included embedded video links to malware-laden video sites. It's not clear who would be responsible for infections delivered in this way, but courts may yet find that companies have an obligation to use recognized best practices to protect visitors from such risks.

Even if you don't have legal reasons to moderate content, you should still maintain your community. Jason Kottke makes a good case that untended communities, like uncared-for neighborhoods, bring out the worst in people (www.kottke.org/08/12/does-the-broken-windows-theory-hold-online#).

Business Agility: Iterative Improvements

Companies that don't understand their markets are doomed to failure. You may have the best product in the world, but if you're selling it to the wrong audience—or if they don't actually need it—you'll lose. Communities keep you nimble by showing you what they need and providing immediate feedback on what's working and what's wrong.

A Climate of Faster Change

When business cycles were slower and customers lacked the means to engage companies directly, firms had slow product release cycles. They could take months or even years to design new products, build them, release them into the market, and see how they fared. If the companies were clever, they built instrumentation into their products and reviewed the resulting data when the time came to build new ones. But it was still a slow process, shown in [Figure 12-19](#).

This cycle existed whether the company was releasing a car, a phone service, or a new ad campaign. To know if things had improved, the company looked at the results. This

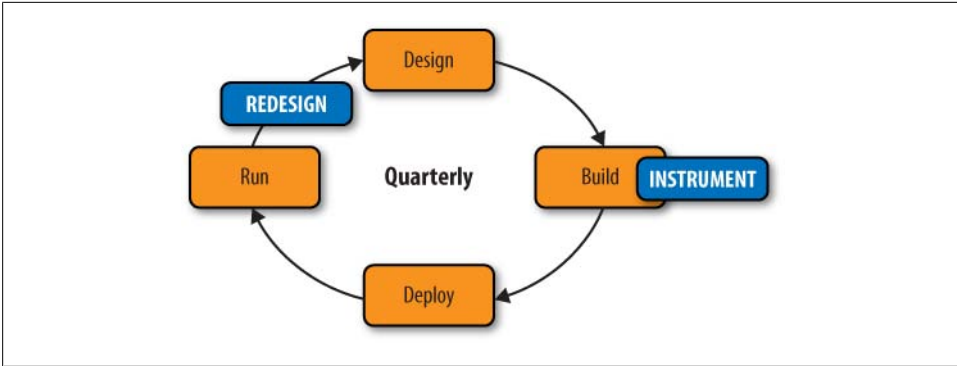


Figure 12-19. Traditional design/feedback cycle

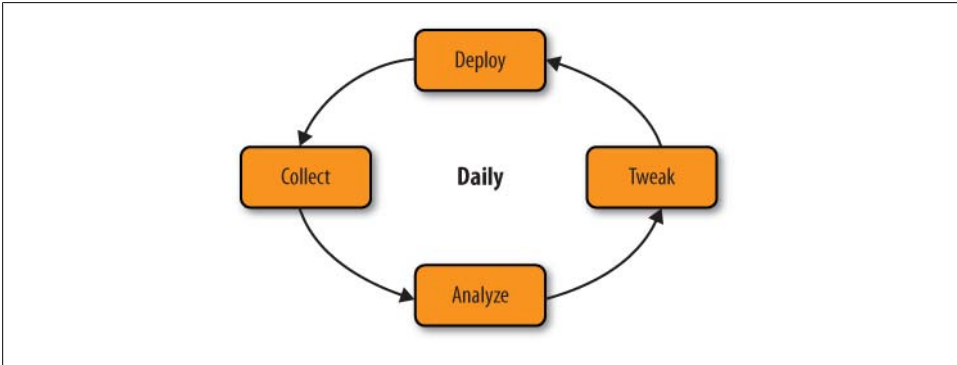


Figure 12-20. Modern design cycle incorporating community feedback in real time

approach also assumed that the problem the product solved was well understood and that the solution to that problem was clear—it just needed to be built.

A long product cycle and periodic review of feedback is simply too slow for competitive, fast-changing business climates, particularly if your company is web-based or offers a service whose policies and offerings can be quickly adjusted. You not only need to tweak the solutions you offer in real time, you also need to adapt your fundamental business model to tackle new problems or take advantage of changing market requirements.

To do this, you need to go straight to the source—your customers—and get the answers from them with a daily cycle of collection, analysis, and iterative tweaking (Figure 12-20). This turns your business into a real-time business that measures and adjusts itself quickly.

Communities provide an excellent way to find out what your users think. You can share feedback with internal teams, such as product managers, and you can repurpose this feedback as marketing collateral. Provided you set expectations properly and manage

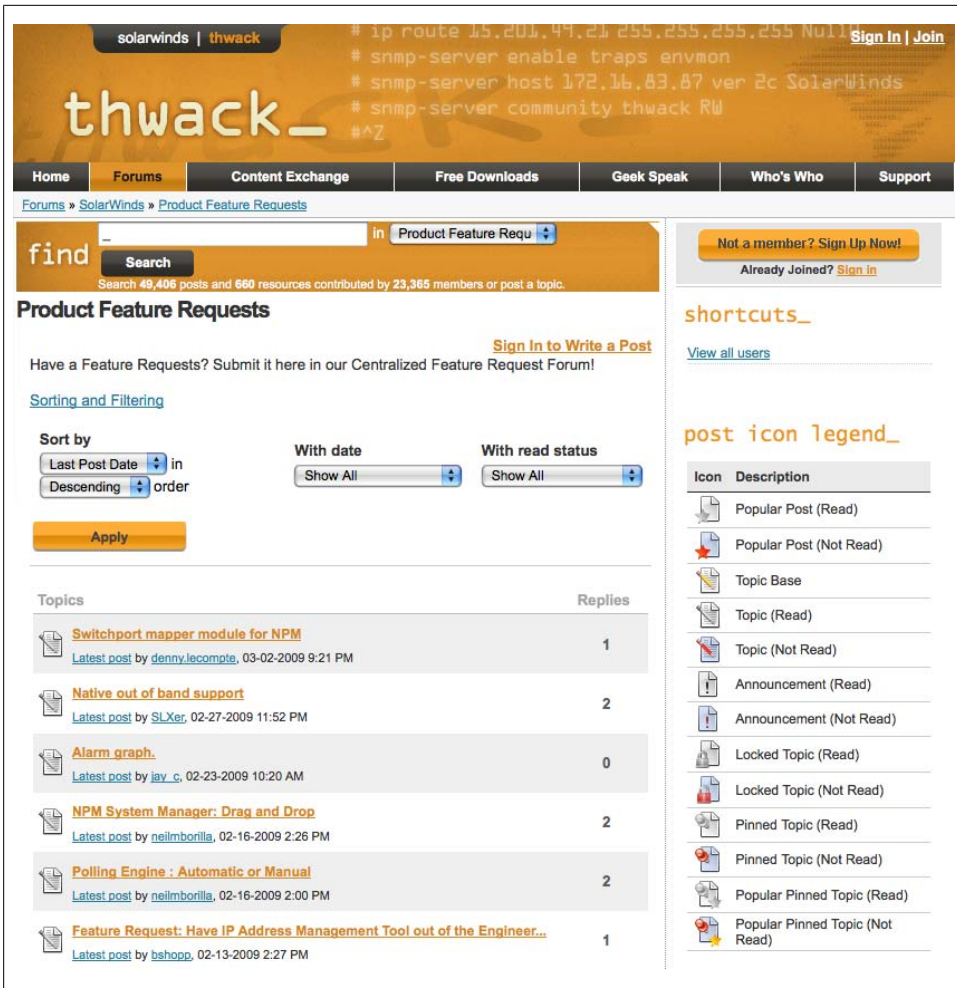


Figure 12-21. SolarWinds feature request

the occasional disappointment, you can even invite customers to help you define your product road map, as network management vendor SolarWinds does on its website, shown in Figure 12-21.

Getting Leads: Referral Communities

Another important business reason for communities is referral. Whether your company is looking for new customers or for new employees, websites are quickly becoming the most efficient tool for establishing new relationships.

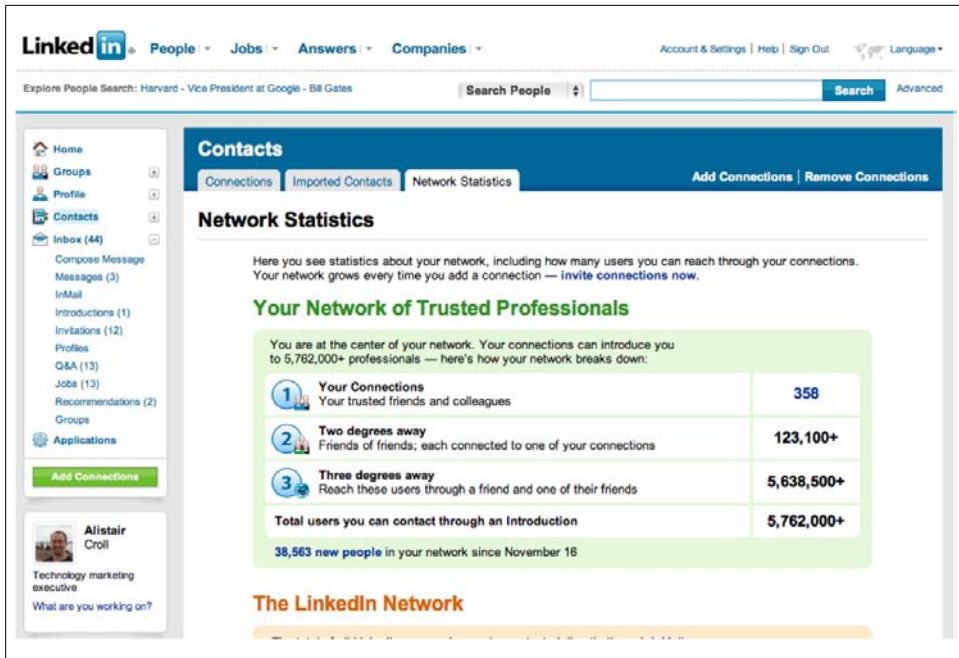


Figure 12-22. LinkedIn is a social community targeted at business users

While sites like LinkedIn, shown in Figure 12-22, are primarily focused on individuals rather than companies, they are important resources for your business and need to be treated like a community, either by training your employees on their use or by monitoring your presence.

Clearly, there are many reasons to engage your community, whether your goals are better marketing, improved support, broader reach, or simply to find out what's going on across the Web in case you need to get involved.

The best way to learn about communities is to join the conversation. And like any conversation, that's a matter of figuring out who's talking, what they're saying, and where they're saying it.