A TOP TIP GUIDE TO MONETISING YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY

by Robert Nash

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A LITTLE MORE IMPACT AND A LITTLE MORE ACTION

With the coronavirus pandemic rapidly accelerating the shift to online shopping, and boosting our confidence with making even big-ticket purchases via the internet, virtual communities have never been more valuable for businesses.

And it's easy to see why - after all, you're much more likely to make an impact on someone that's already at least slightly invested in your company, than someone who is completely new to it.

Why are virtual communities valuable?

And that's just the beginning.

The advantages of creating a thriving virtual community are enormous. For a start, they are one of the best-known tools for securing honest customer feedback on your products and services.

Just think how much more relaxed you feel chatting to your friends about things – this is exactly the kind of culture that virtual communities foster.

Not only that, but their peer-to-peer nature makes them great places for canvassing fresh and useful ideas from your customers that you might not have thought of.

This might be as simple as an observation in a particular forum that you spot and respond to.

The sense of community also promotes a culture of helping each other out. And with support tickets being deflected and resolved in community threads, the opportunity to reduce costs is huge.

If a thread has 10,000 views, that's 10,000 customers who quickly found the answer to their problem at no extra cost to you. Multiply this by your average cost-per-resolution and you can calculate your savings.

Effective moderation can also help deepen customer loyalty and understanding as well, because it gives you a chance to really listen and respond to customer needs – often unprompted - and reward the most active participants and influencers.

This builds a sense of partnership, and its why communities are so great at turning fans into brand advocates.

6 SIMPLE STRATEGIES

Aside from this, virtual communities can also serve as brilliant revenue streams, no matter the size of your business.

If your following is big enough and dedicated enough, charging for membership is an obvious place to start, but there are many other ways you can monetise your virtual community successfully, all of which are relatively simple to implement.

Let's dig into the best 6 ways.

- Reseach
- Recruitment
- Unlockable Content
- SEO
- Advertising
- Merchandise
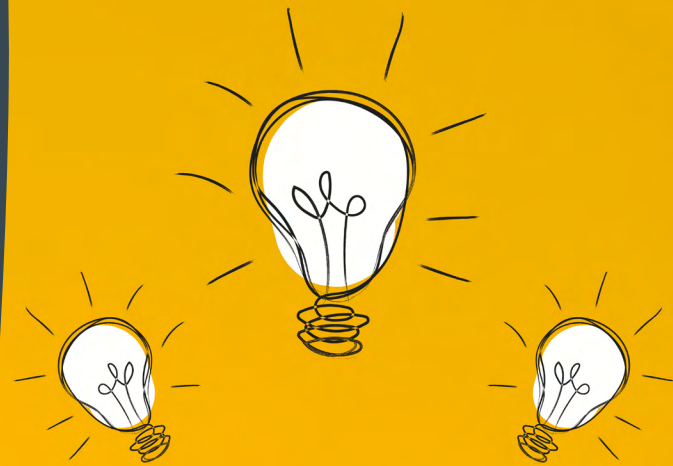
1 RESEARCH

Whether it's a business, brand, university or NGO, consumer research underpins a huge number of the decisions that organisations make.

But finding affordable, reliable resources is hard to come by.

Virtual communities are primed for this and serve as fantastic hubs for focus groups, surveys and more.

The leading sector specific online communities in areas like pharmaceuticals make a huge amount of money selling focus groups to interested companies.

So why not start reaching out to those organisations relevant to your following and ask if they'd like to be involved?

2 RECRUITMENT

Talent is the lifeblood of every organisation, but finding the right people can be challenging, particularly for niche industries.

Virtual communities by nature attract people of like mind or experience (depending on their purpose) making them ripe for identifying potential employees and employers.

A dedicated job-seekers area, where members can pay to share their professional profiles, speak to potential employers, and just seek general advice would serve as another brilliant income source.

On the flipside to that is recruiters, of course, who you can charge to feature ads on your channels.

3 Unlockable Content

It's almost a guarantee that anyone who has a long-term involvement with a virtual community is there because they feel positively about the organisation or topic.

So why not reward them?

Virtual communities can act as an amazing gateway to additional high-level content and information around niche topics, that many people will be willing to pay extra for.

Think about it: if you're a car fanatic, why wouldn't you pay more to see exclusive interviews, webinars or digital panels with leading technologists or manufacturers?

Especially if you can make it interactive, so users can engage directly, rather than just listening.

Correspondingly, there's no reason why you can't reach out to brands, media partners and more with packages inviting them to get involved with your community site.

For brands with cult followings, this would also be a fantastic way to nurture those customer relationships, by creating a sense of inclusivity that encourages repeat purchases.

It's all about creating as many opportunities as possible for brands to engage with your audience.

4 SEO

The value of appearing at the top of the ever-important search engine results cannot be underestimated.

However, this is a huge benefit that tends to get overlooked.

In a bustling community, your members are constantly adding content, navigating around and engaging with content.

Google & Bing are going to notice that and boost your site in the most important way; in search results, leading to organic traffic back to your website.

Community members creating content also means there is an increased likelihood of other users searching for the same queries and landing on your page.

New customers arrive via all manner of questions and your cost of customer acquisition drops significantly.

This kind of engagement is not easily replicated. It would take a team of marketers dedicated solely to SEO and content creation to achieve what an online community can organically produce.

Why not let your customers do the work for you?

5 Advertising

It sounds obvious, but advertising is a vital resource when it comes to making money on your virtual community.

If your community is successful, brands will want to sell products and services to your members and you can charge them for the pleasure of doing so.

After all, with virtual communities, bands have the guarantee of knowing that their advertising is going to be seen by people that really matter. That's a huge advantage in an economy where attention is hard to come by.

Not only that, but in a community, you can easily "segment" your community so advertising becomes more valuable.

Equally, any affiliate sales that might result from this advertising will also act as a great revenue stream.

6 MERCHANDISE

Virtual communities are, by definition, places for people to come together to discuss a common concern or interest.

We all love to feel like we're part of something, and there's no reason why this cannot have a physical manifestation as well.

That's why merchandise is such an effective revenue stream for virtual communities.

If you're obsessed with baking, why wouldn't you want to buy a branded apron from your favourite baking forum?

Remember your community is a brand, so you need to treat it as a fanbase – not a user-base.

THE MORE YOU PUT IN, THE MORE YOU GET BACK

Virtual communities can be a great way to drive profits, create sales opportunities, generate long-term brand salience, and give you a real advantage over your competitors.

That's not just because of the reasons above, but because they create a sense of partnership that just cannot be created through the purchase experience alone.

Building a thriving community is the first step of course – but once your following is strong, the opportunities for further monetisation are plentiful.

The last thing you want is for your community to feel like it's being sold to, however, and that's why **continuous engagement is paramount.**

Ultimately, the more you engage, the happier your customers will be, and the more room there will be to create growth and income, creating a virtual cycle that benefits everyone.

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RELEVANT PROJECTS
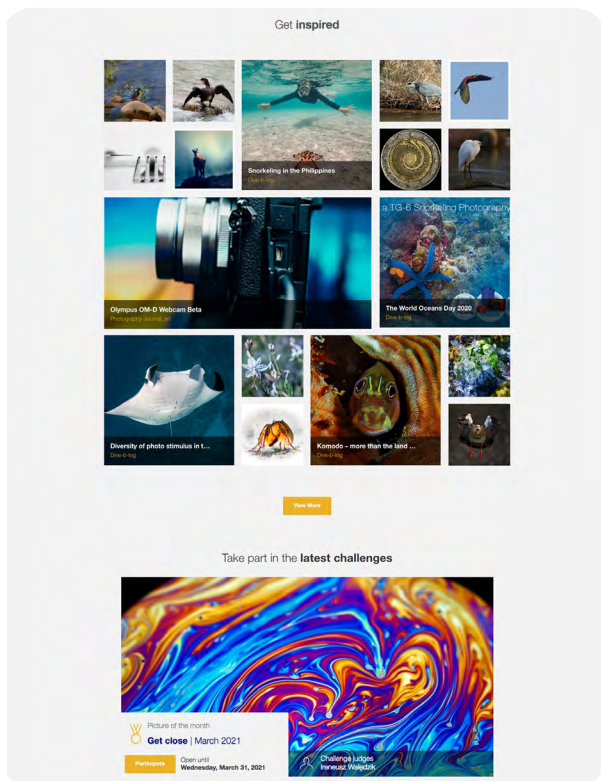
Olympus

Project: Online community

We worked with Olmypus to upgrade the MyOlympus community to drive product discussion, content sharing, competitions and create first-rate customer service environment.

After the initial upgrade, 4 Roads continued to add additional custom-built functionality to support the growing needs of the MyOlympus community.

READ CASE STUDY

Nordic Semiconductor

Project: Online Community

4 Roads was responsible for the new community build and a seamless migration, which involved porting all user information and ticketing details from two existing systems to the Verint system.

This included transferring user scores, reputation details, 30,000 forum posts and all personal information.

READ CASE STUDY

4 ROADS

Helping brands do more for their customers.

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