

brandcommunity.hbr.org, your decision is not whether a community is right for your brand. It's whether you're willing to do what's needed to get a brand community right.

MYTH #1

A brand community is a marketing strategy.

THE REALITY

A brand community is a business strategy.

Too often, companies isolate their community-building efforts within the marketing function. That is a mistake. For a brand community to yield maximum benefit, it must be framed as a high-level strategy supporting business-wide goals.

Harley-Davidson provides a quintessential example. Following the 1985 leveraged buyback that saved the company, management completely reformulated the competitive strategy and business model around a brand community philosophy. Beyond just changing its marketing programs, Harley-Davidson retooled every aspect of its organization – from its culture to its operating procedures and governance structure – to drive its community strategy.

Harley management recognized that the brand had developed as a community-based phenomenon. The “brotherhood” of riders, united by a shared ethos, offered Harley the basis for a strategic repositioning as the one motorcycle manufacturer that understood bikers on their own terms. To reinforce this community-centric positioning and solidify the connection between the company and its customers, Harley staffed all community-outreach events with employees rather than hired hands. For employees, this regular, close contact with the people they served added such meaning to their work that the weekend outreach assignments routinely attracted more volunteers than were needed. Many employees became riders, and many riders joined the company. Executives were required to spend time in the field with customers and bring their

IDEA IN BRIEF

- **Many companies that try to turn their customers into a cohesive “brand community” falter because of serious misconceptions. For instance, they relegate community building to the marketing department instead of treating it as a high-level strategy, or they assume that an interactive website will do the trick.**
- **To build and maintain strong brand communities, companies must understand the individual and social needs of members and do everything possible to support and engage them on their own terms. Rather than attempting to control the community, the company should be guided by it; indeed, the brand community experience should be central to the firm’s business model.**
- **By managing their communities with a light, open touch – and sustaining them with corporate-level commitment – firms can build fierce customer loyalty, increase marketing efficiency, and enhance their brand.**

insights back to the firm. This close-to-the-customer strategy was codified in Harley-Davidson’s operating philosophy and reinforced during new-employee orientations. Decisions at all levels were grounded in the community perspective, and the company acknowledged the community as the rightful owner of the brand.

Harley’s community strategy was also supported by a radical organizational redesign. Functional silos were replaced with senior leadership teams sharing decision-making responsibility across three imperatives: Create Demand, Produce Product, and Provide Support. Further, the company established a stand-alone organization reporting directly to the president to formalize and nurture the company-community relationship through the Harley Owners

Group (H.O.G.) membership club. As a result of this organizational structure, community-building activities were treated not solely as marketing expenses but as companywide, COO-backed investments in the success of the business model.

MYTH #2

A brand community exists to serve the business.

THE REALITY

A brand community exists to serve the people in it.

Managers often forget that consumers are actually people, with many different needs, interests, and responsibilities. A community-based brand builds loyalty not by driving sales transactions but by helping people meet their needs. Contrary to marketers’ assumptions, however, the needs that brand communities can satisfy are not just about gaining status or trying on a new identity through brand affiliation. People participate in communities for a wide variety of reasons – to find emotional support and encouragement, to explore ways to contribute to the greater good, and to cultivate interests and skills, to name a few. For members, brand communities are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

Outdoorseiten offers an extreme example of how the needs of a community can actually give rise to a brand. The European website outdoorseiten.net originated as a venue where hiking and camping enthusiasts could exchange information about their shared lifestyle: Where is a good place to hike with children? Which shoes are best for rocky terrain? Members collaborated in order to gain access to the resources and skills they needed to accomplish their goals. Eventually, the community created its own Outdoorseiten brand of tents and backpacks. The community’s brand grew not from a need to express a shared identity but from a desire to meet members’ specialized needs.

Often, people are more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than they are in the brands