



## **Think Globally, Act Locally with Customer-Centric Communities**

The Internet is vast and, by definition, transcends national borders and geographic regions. This is one of its great strengths: customers can shop the world over without leaving the privacy of their homes, and e-marketers can reach millions of people with a single website or email campaign. But its very vastness can be disconcerting, and the choices available may impact customer loyalty.

The truth is that people still long for a small-community feeling, which is one of the reasons social networking sites have been so successful: they humanize the web and enable participants to feel part of something special. What if you could capture that trend and make it work for your brand? What if you could instill loyalty while giving customers exactly the experience that they're looking for?

Enter customer-centric communities, a strategy that takes branding and website usage one step further, beyond web 2.0. With customer-centric communities, any company can offer a community experience that turns prospects into customers, customers into loyal customers, and loyal customers into evangelists. How? By taking the familiar look, feel, and tools of social network sites, wrapping them in one's brand, and providing the intimacy of a small, local group to people spread out across the world.

An e-commerce site that offers high-end gift products, for example, might offer a customer-centric community that contains wish lists, discussion forums on gift-giving where participants can give each other gift suggestions and ideas, message boards enabling communication directly with the company about future product lines and services offered, and all this with invite-a-friend capability that ensures viral growth of the community.



Another site might offer pet products. Here community members can post pet photos, share pet stories, receive advice from the site's resident pet expert or veterinarian, communicate with the company about future product lines ... and, again, have the invite-a-friend capability that keeps the community growing.

What makes these communities so special? They provide the customer with intimate surroundings and the ability to feel part of a community that shares one's interests and cares about one's opinions. At the same time they provide marketers with an opportunity to capture customers' preferences, keep customers' attention focused on the company's website, not only for shopping but as a destination, and to engage in constant dialogue with customers.

These communities aren't cluttered with advertising or with the obnoxious behavior that many social networking sites seem to bring out in people: they're focused, engaged, and loyal—both to other community members and to the sponsoring company/brand.

We no longer have the option to not think globally; but we do have the option of retaining the feel of local markets where our names and faces are known to the merchants who sell us their wares, where our preferences and opinions are sought and remembered, and where we share a sense of community with those around us.