

Brand Communities: For the love of Brands

Smack took a long look at some of the world's top brands and found the most successful businesses all have one thing in common: a loyal following of everyday consumers. Consumers that form vibrant and loyal communities around a brand, what Smack calls Brand Communities.

This white paper is designed to give you a general introduction to the Brand Community, and the benefits and philosophies of Brand Communities to your business.

The Changing Consumer

If you think that the introduction of the Internet into popular culture was a world changing event, you really haven't seen anything yet. Right now, as you read this, the very fabric of the Internet is changing. Never mind the billions of web sites currently in existence. Never mind the boundless libraries of both old and cutting edge information all readily available. The Internet has become more than that, it has become a tool that facilitates the most basic of human needs: a tool for conversation. Through blogs, message boards, and sites like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, people are now engaging in conversation with countless others. Engaging others with similar interests. Sharing opinions, photos, news, videos, and taking note of new ideas. People now have networks of friends they have never physically met, networks that surpass international boundaries, all with many shared interests like childhood buddies, music, and more.

The Adapting Marketer

This emerging type of consumer has ultimately led to an adapting marketer. The last 10 years have seen marketers slash their traditional media buys for TV, Print and Outdoor, all while funneling unprecedented funds into more experimental media buys like loyalty programs and consumer relationship management projects. The move is on and ongoing, not only on initiatives to better understand the new and emerging consumer base, but also methods that will enable companies to open channels of communication and begin honest conversations with their consumers.

Brand Communities

When looking at brands that have successfully adapted to the changing consumer, you need to look no further than brands like Apple, Harley Davidson, and Jones Soda. And what do these brands all have in common? Through consumer-centric product development, loyalty based web initiatives, and innovative communications strategies, they all found ways to foster and nurture a community of their most loyal fans, their Brand Communities.

When defined loosely, Brand Communities have existed for as long as humans were able to converse with others about a particular item or philosophy. For example, somewhere in the prehistoric heart of Europe, a Neanderthal discovered a new technique in creating stone tools. Through word of mouth, open conversation and instruction, the Levallois technique spread to other tool makers and came to define the depth of Neanderthal skill as well as the geographic boundaries of their culture.

Like a brand of stone tool creation, many of the major Brands in today's marketplace have attracted loyal and enthusiastic fans who have not only made their chosen Brand an integral part of their everyday lives but have also chosen to actively seek out and interact with others who share the same interests as well as those who may have been unaware of the Brand's benefits. The community that arises from the consistent conversation and interactions among these peers is what we call a Brand Community, or as defined by Smack, a group of people interacting with one another based on their love of a brand.



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Natural Brand Communities

In a landmark 2001 study, Albert M. Muniz, Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn, set out to give a modern definition to the term Brand Community as well as a description of the common characteristics inherent in Brand Communities. In the study, Muniz and O'Guinn compare traditional definitions and characteristics of geographically bound communities with their findings on non-geographically bound Brand Communities that arose without the assistance of a parent company. In studying the Brand Communities pertaining to the Macintosh, Ford Bronco, and Saab, Muniz and O'Guinn detail three main characteristics found in Brand Communities that are also shared with traditional communities.



Consciousness of a Kind

The intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. It is a shared knowing of belonging.



Shared Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness. Shared Rituals and Traditions provide legitimacy to community membership by helping to exclude those who are not "in the know" and thus not true brand enthusiasts.



Moral Responsibility

A sense of moral responsibility, which is felt as a sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members. The sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action in times of threat to the community.

Membership into a Brand Community is like a membership to an exclusive club. Members are insiders who have just the right amount of information, just the right amount of knowledge to claim ownership over the Brand. When part of a Brand Community, consumers are not only fiercely loyal and protective of the Brand, they are also superb disseminators of the Brand's story and superior benefits, as well as recruiters of new consumers.

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The Power of Community: A Brand Community Case Study

From a small time distributor in Western Canada, to an international industry behemoth, Jones Soda has established a Brand Community so loyal, members will do anything to find new experiences with the brand. Even swigging back an ice cold bottle of Jones's special Turkey and Gravy Soda.

The Birth of a Rebel

In 1987, a distribution company in Western Canada under the name Urban Juice and Soda Company Ltd opened its doors and a rebel was born. With labels such as Just Pik't Juices, Arizona Iced Tea and Thomas Kemper sodas, company founder and president Peter van Stolk saw the potential of introducing "alternative" products to the beverage industry.

By 1996, Peter van Stolk launched Jones Soda with six flavours; Orange, Cherry, Lemon, Lime, Strawberry Lime, Raspberry and Grape. But as "alternative" as those flavours were, they were nothing compared to his marketing tactics.

Creating the Buzz and the Seeding of the Jones Community

Chugging down and loving a Jones Soda was one thing, finding a Jones Soda was quite another. In an effort to hold true to its rebellious roots, Peter van Stolk limited distribution of his soda line to those he thought would appreciate an alternative to the standard cola and lemon-lime flavoured sodas. Jones Soda product coolers, complete with their stylized flame design, started popping up in places frequented by their intended targets, like surf shops, skate shops, music stores and alternative fashion outlets.

By limiting the distribution of Jones Soda to those who were on the fringe, as well as serving those unique consumers alternatives to the standard soda flavours, Peter was quickly able to imprint a brand image that his consumers could relate to. Word quickly spread about a new rebel soda with equally rebellious flavours, an outsider that didn't conform to the offering of multinational corporations, a new breed of soda available only to those who were in the know. A rebel was born and so was the Jones Soda Brand Community.



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Nurturing the Jones Community

As word spread, Jones Soda quickly outgrew its small business tag while profits and expansion beckoned. Now, the company was facing a dilemma - how to stay true to the rebellious image of the Brand, maintain the loyalty of its Community members, maintain the mythology created by the Jones Soda Community and still achieve mainstream sales. In true Jones Soda style the rebel was up for the challenge.

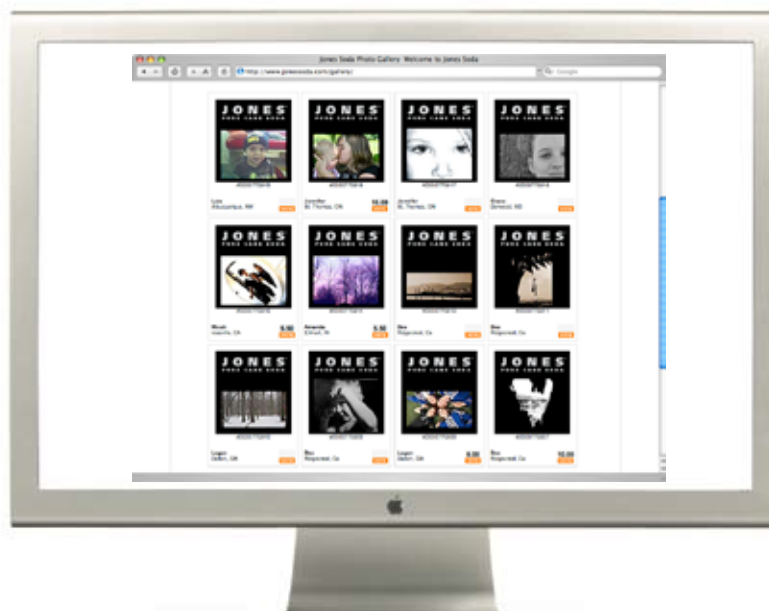
Jones Soda owed their success to a vocal and loyal consumer community who would accept nothing over the sweet taste of Jones Soda. As the company grew, they made sure that the Community who solidified the Brand maintained ownership over the Brand - and you only have to look as far as a bottle of Jones Soda to see it. Besides the logo and basic template of the label, every Jones Soda bottle features a photo created by one of their community members. Skaters, surfers, kids, dogs, flowers, friends, youth, art, black and whites, landscapes, life. To look at the entire collection of photos (43,000 and counting in all) is to see a montage of what Jones Soda represents to real people truly engaged with a simple bottle of soda and a Brand that they can now honestly call their own.

JonesSoda.com: The Hub of a Thriving Brand Community

To help feed the interaction between community members, encourage consumer ownership over the Brand, and encourage members to reach out beyond the confines of the community, Jones Soda added numerous interactive features to their web site. Here are just some of those features:

Photo Gallery

For starters, jonesoda.com allows for community members to submit their own label photos as well as view and rate the 43,000 photos other members have submitted. In a collage of photos, members of the Jones Soda Brand Community can communicate their personal experiences with the Brand and identify with other members of the community.



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Product Rater

The product rater is a bold and gutsy move by Jones, but really, would we expect anything less from the rebel company. The product rater allows site visitors to rate - on a scale of 1 to 5 stars - and later give their opinion of all Jones Soda products. The feature gives a voice to the consumer, helps keep ownership of the Brand in the hands of the Community, and helps Jones provide new products that are tailored to the needs and tastes of their most loyal fans.

Message Boards

The Jones Soda Message Boards are the hottest area for community interaction. The message boards host a variety of topics including the best and worst flavours, Jones stock, suggestions, and a general forum. A true measure of the success of the Jones Soda Community is the number of topics being discussed in the general forum. To date, there are over 1400 topics in the general forum with over 37,000 messages posted. A quick search through the topics reveals that community members, driven by their love of a brand, are now reaching out to others in the community finding commonalities that strengthen interest in each other and maintain the common bond that cements the community.

You on the Jones Soda Map

In collaboration with frappr.com, community members can mark their geographical position on a map and see if there are any other Jones Soda Community members nearby. To date, there are over 5,000 members on the Jones Soda Map.

Building Your Brand Community

Building a Brand Community around your Brand can be both prosperous and beneficial to the growth and maturity of your company. But you don't have to tackle building your own Brand Community alone. Smack can help.

Smack Inc is a brand management agency that specializes in executing fully integrated marketing strategies that help develop your Brand Community.

We can help your company build better relationships with your consumers and cultivate passion for your brand. We'll promote your company's consumer-centric benefits while encouraging your consumers to engage in worthwhile experiences with your brand and other consumers like themselves.

To learn more about Smack services or Brand Communities, please feel free to contact us at community@smackinc.com or browse to www.smackinc.com.

