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Nurturing a Natural Brand Community

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 will give you a quick look at how a major corporation corralled a number of its naturally occurring communities into a single, corporate led Brand Community.



Harley-Davidson Case Study: Nurturing a Natural Brand Community

When you think of Harley-Davidson, what comes to mind? Well, motorcycles for sure. But if that wasn't your first thought, we'd argue that it was probably an open desert highway, leather boots and gear, and a rumbling exhaust that could make a jet engine seem all too meek. We'd also argue that Harley-Davidson symbolizes rebellion, youth, freedom, and open possibilities. Kind of like the first time you let go of the handle bars while riding your bike. It's an image created by the people. The riders. The enthusiasts that made Harley-Davidson one of the most recognizable and mythological brands in the world. It's an image the company itself may have tried to dump, but lucky for them, they did something far smarter. Harley-Davidson nurtured the community surrounding the brand creating a corporate sanctioned Harley-Davidson Brand Community.

The Beginnings of the Harley-Davidson Brand Community

The seeds of the Harley-Davidson Brand Community were sown by living the experience of the brand the way it was meant to be experienced; by riding. Soon after the inception of the company, motorcycle clubs began emerging across much of North America. These chapters quickly initiated rules to govern membership eligibility, codes of conduct and social hierarchies. Rallies were common and helpful to the seeding of the Brand Community because they allowed people with a common love of Harley-Davidson Motorcycles to meet and share their experiences, as well as learn more about the brand.

HOG Nurturing the Harley-Davidson Community

Seeing how deeply the Harley-Davidson culture was ingrained in the members of its fledgling Brand Community, the company initiated HOG, the Harley-Davidson Owners Group in 1983. HOG began as a program to help organize chapters and allow for greater interaction between members of the Harley-Davidson Brand Community. In the first two years alone, HOG grew to 49 chapters and over 60,000 members. Today there are over 1,100 chapters and over 1 Million chapter members.

But it wasn't simply the initiation of HOG that allowed for Harley-Davidson to nurture and feed its existing Brand Community. It was the authenticity that Harley-Davidson provided that helped the Harley-Davidson Brand Community thrive. In fact, HOG was created in such a way that didn't infringe on what made the natural Harley-Davidson Community so successful:

Consciousness of a Kind

By restricting membership to owners of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, HOG ensured that only brand loyalists existed within the community.

Shared Rituals and Traditions

By maintaining the Chapter structure, holding and sponsoring Harley-Davidson rallies, and allowing members to openly share their brand experiences, HOG ensured that the mythology surrounding the brand would thrive through future generations.

Moral Responsibility

Again, strict rules governing membership, along with the hierarchal structure of the chapters, allows for the community to police itself and ensure that only the purest of loyalists have the most say in the community.

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HOG Goes Online

In 2001, Harley-Davidson launched their H.O.G. program over the Internet making it easier for enthusiasts to join the Harley-Davidson Community, for members to gain a greater brand experience even when away from their motorcycles, and to connect with other members they may never have had a chance to meet before. A quick hop through harley-davidson.com's US Riders section will demonstrate numerous features that help encourage member interaction including event sign ups, event details, subscription to Enthusiast and Hog Tales magazines and so much more.

Today Harley-Davidson is in full alignment with the dreams and expectations of the Harley-Davidson owner because it was the Harley owner that dictated what the brand stood for. Harley-Davidson simply adapted to direction set by them. As a result, Harley-Davidson has seen unprecedented success in consumer loyalty, brand equity, and the bottom line.

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.

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.

