

The Smack logo is an orange rounded square with the word "smack" in white lowercase letters.

Tools for Building Brand Community: A Case Study

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.



The Indigo Community: A Community with no Community.

Nothing makes the folks at Smack happier than seeing a new community take flight online. So, you could imagine the joy that breezed through the office when news broke about the launch of Indigo's self-proclaimed Community. Eager to test the mettle of this new Community, we signed up. We built our profiles. We invited friends. We started groups. But even as we tinkered with all the bells and whistles available, we still felt hindered; isolated somehow from connecting with other members. So much so that we quickly realized the Indigo Community is a community with no real community.

Something to build on.

Now, let's take a step back before we clarify what it means to be a community with no community. There are a number of impressive aspects to the Indigo Community site that deserve mention. So here's a little rundown on all that Indigo can build on.

Familiar framework.

A quick look at the Indigo Community, and you'll immediately notice terms like Your Profile, Friends and Groups. Simple additions to be sure. But by mimicking two of the most populous online communities in MySpace and Facebook, Indigo has provided an environment that is familiar to those most open to the idea of online communities. Also, it enables even the most novice users to set up their account and engage in what the community has to offer without the added hassle of learning an entirely new set of rules, tools, and most importantly, a new lexicon. Just sign up and you already have a mental image of how to make the most of your new community.

Your Shelf

By inputting favourite books, DVDs, and music, the Your Shelf feature in the Indigo Community is the user's primary method of exhibiting their own interests and comparing those interests with others in the Community. The feature is front and center - taking up at least one third of a user's main page - and highlights books,

The logo for chapters.indigo.ca features the text "chapters.indigo.ca" in a blue sans-serif font, with a small red maple leaf icon above the ".ca" part.

DVDs and music that the member has engaged, is engaging, or is planning to engage in the near future. The simple act of scanning over someone's media collection can speak volumes of its owner and help immensely in determining grounds of compatibility. Members can find common interests in authors, actors, musicians, or even genres and current hot-button topics. In the end, finding compatibility and areas of similar interest can help strengthen ties between individual members and encourage a sense of oneness, a key stepping stone to building and nurturing community around a brand.

Top Ten Lists

Media and Top Ten Lists go hand in hand. So when we saw that Indigo included a Top Ten List tool as part of its main feature set, we were excited. Like Your Shelf, Top Ten Lists provide other members of the community a glimpse into the list creator's personality and values.



Bookclubs

Probably the feature most dedicated to nurturing community specifically around the Indigo Brand, is their page dedicated to helping users create Bookclubs within the framework of the Indigo Community. The process to create a Bookclub is simple. In fact, building a Bookclub consists of starting a group themed around whatever the club may be about, and then requesting friends to join the group. Once the group is started, members can set meeting times, locations, post opinions, questions and more. Not extraordinary in terms of technology, or what may be available on other networking sites, but what is remarkable, is that by calling these groups Bookclubs, Indigo is connecting those consumers most passionate about reading with a brand that shares their passion. In essence, these groups foster subject matter experts, leaders in the Community, and ambassadors of the Indigo Brand; key components of building and nurturing Brand Community.

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But still falling short.

As commendable as this project may be, the Indigo Community is still greatly lacking in two cornerstone elements of community building; networking and conversation.

So, where is everyone?

Being a member of community is about feeling that you're a part of something much greater than yourself. That you're part of a collective that shares the same interests, thoughts and dreams. That you feel equally comfortable in sharing your interests as you do in reviewing the interests of your peers and the common ties that may exist between you.

Unfortunately, for Indigo and for us, this option is nonexistent. There's simply no method of browsing the profiles of other members of the Community. We're fairly independent souls at Smack but, in the end, this left us longing for Community members with whom we could share our passion.



So here's how the system works. As much as we searched, there is no option for browsing profiles or browsing groups. But there is a Search field and an Invite a Friend option. If you know someone who may already be in the Indigo Community, you can find them by typing their name in the Search field. If they haven't signed up for the Community, you can invite them to join using the Invite a Friend option. In this situation, the system performs well. But again, what about those you don't know? This is where things get tedious. For the most part, you can click on anyone's name on Community pages to view his or her profile. But finding people to click on is left to you with very little assistance from the Community site. Some options include: viewing your friends' profiles to see who they are associated with; viewing a list of Featured Profiles and Groups on the bottom of the the Community's main page; or searching for a book in the online store and seeing what members of the Indigo Community reviewed it.

In the end, in lieu of allowing open and free networking opportunities to strengthen the relationships between members of their Community and the Community as a whole, Indigo has effectively placed barrier after barrier to impede the growth of the Community.

Talking to a wall

Another key element of Brand Communities lacking in the Indigo Community is conversation. Conversation is vital to any community because it allows members to not only share their interests to others in the community, but it also allows members to have their interests evaluated and validated as part of the community conscience. Without the duality that conversation provides, members would essentially be talking to a wall. We can't say that the element of conversation is completely lacking in the Indigo Community. It does however take some rather unnecessary creativity on the user's part to make conversations happen.

The only form of communication that can be independent of a Group, Review, or Top Ten List is what Indigo calls a Post. A Post is sort of like a mini-diary, where you can write about any topic you like, add a video, a photo, or a poll and post it on your Profile or Group page. If one of your friends would like to respond to your Post, they can use a text field to comment. The Comment feature then becomes your tool for conversation. It's the only tool for conversation and is very rarely used as such. But the limitations don't stop there. Posts can only be made on your profile page, not on anyone else's. This means you need to post the topic you are interested in, and hope that someone with similar interests gravitates toward it. Posts cannot be used for one on one communication. If you would like to ask someone a question, your guess on how to achieve that is as good as ours. And finally, Posts are not searchable. If someone in the community posts an item of interest, you'll never know unless you keep a close eye on the New & Hot on Indigo Today ticker, which sits at the bottom of your profile page.



WRITE A REVIEW
WRITE A POST
CREATE A TOP TEN LIST

Add New Post

*** Required Fields**

*** Post Title:**

*** Create Post:**

Would you like to add photos, video or a poll to your post?

UPLOAD PHOTO
 CREATE A POLL
 EMBED VIDEO

Would you like to add an item on chapters.indigo.ca to your post?

SEARCH & SELECT ITEMS

Tag this Post

So, what's the answer?

There is no better way to build long-term, profitable relationships with consumers than through building and nurturing a Brand Community. By neglecting to add both networking and conversation tools to the community site, the Indigo Community has tossed community theory aside and built a site that feels like nothing more than a sham. So what's the answer? Give people a reason to come back to the site to truly engage and interact with everyone else who loves the art of storytelling. Imagine the one on one debates you could have on authors such as Noam Chomsky, DVD's such as Dexter, and on and on and on. Imagine the conversations that could take place between authors and their fans, screenwriters and artists, poets and politicians. The Indigo Community could easily become a hub for innovation and contemplation, with exclusive content attracting more consumers than ever before. By starting the site, they've started the conversation. Let's now see if they can implement the proper tools to ensure they're not just talking to themselves.

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 or any other of your marketing objectives alone. Smack Inc 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 communicate@smackinc.com or browse to smackinc.com.

Bottom line, without the ability to converse, there's no way for members of the Indigo Community to feel any more important to the Brand and each other than as providers of sales recommendations. It's no accident that every Review, every Top Ten List, and every Recommendation ends up tightly attached to the sales process. Which is fine, the investment in building community is all about leading to improved sales and maximizing profit. But in this case, Indigo could have been a little more subtle in their execution and not attempted to capitalize on the success of Facebook and the like by building a Community with no true aspects of community.