



BUILDING A FAN COMMUNITY FOR SPORT CLUBS

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Abstract

Building community is important to sports teams. Being part of a community also gives fans a feeling of belonging with other fans with similar interests.

Value in brand communities is interactively co-created by companies and consumers, rather than merely exchanged between them. Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy. Due to the high level of fan identification with the team (brand), sports teams can build fan communities in ways that few other brands can.

Once customers become members in a community, switching costs dramatically increase due to the social bonds, personal rapport, and the trust that has been built thus customer relationship management must focus on building communities where fans and management co-create value.

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JEL classification: *M10; M30; M37; M37*

Building community is important to sports teams. Repeat customers generate over twice as much gross income as new customers. Bridging the gap between a customer who attends a single game or two and becoming a loyal fan is where community begins. The concept of community means an open partnership between management and customers where the customers feel a sense of belonging to the organization. (Winer, Russell S. 2001. A framework for customer relationship management. California Management Review 43.4: 89–109)

Joining a community suggests an interdependence of giving and doing for others as expected of them and produces a feeling that one is part of a dependable and stable social structure. (Sarason, S. B. The Psychological Sense of Community. London: Jossey-Bass, 1977.)

Sports teams are capable of building psychological exit barriers by building solid communities where fans will identify with not only the players on the team (who may come and go), but with the entire organization. (See Caruana, Albert. 2004. The impact of switching costs on customer loyalty: A study among corporate customers of mobile telephony. Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing 12.3: 256–268.)

Building communities starts with building one-to-one relationships through customer relationship management (CRM). Satisfying brand community

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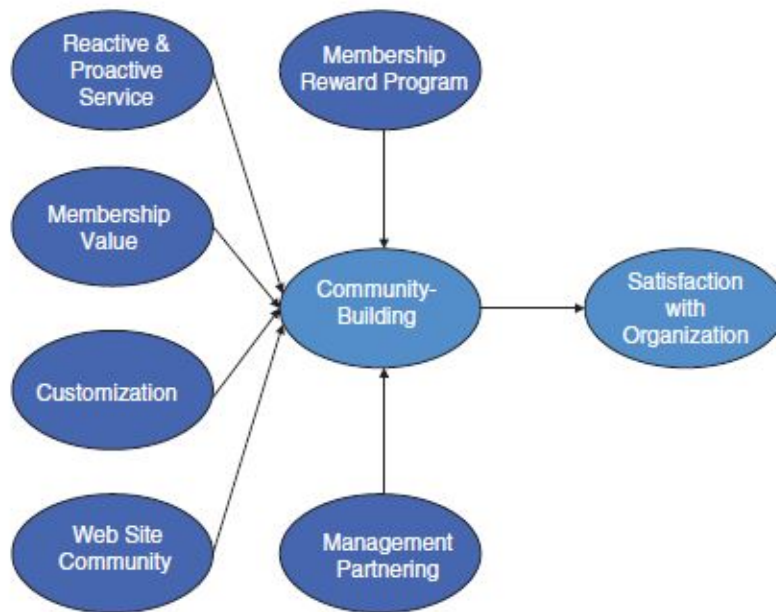


experiences are a function of six factors:

1. Reactive and Proactive Customer Service
2. Membership Reward Programs
3. Membership Value
4. Customization
5. Website Community
6. Management Partnering

(Winer, Russell S. 2001. A framework for customer relationship management. California Management Review 43.4: 89–109)

The Community Model



Customer Service

Customer service is the provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase. The perception of success of such interactions is dependent on employees "who can adjust themselves to the personality of the guest". (www.wikipedia.com/customer_service, accessed 03.2017)

Community building as it relates to customer service quality is not limited to only reactive services that respond to service failure or deficiencies. Any contact that a fan has with a team is a customer service encounter, and has the potential to either gain or lose repeat business. (Winer, Russell S. 2001. A framework for customer relationship management. California Management Review 43.4: 89–109)



Reactive Service

Reactive service initiates when the customer has a problem and contacts the organization to resolve it. To develop a healthy community, teams must reach beyond merely providing adequate service to reach fans' desired service level.

Reliable customer service in order to be professional must be with a 24/7 availability, be friendly and always willing to help in a timely manner.

Proactive Service

Proactive customer service is an approach to customer support in which businesses make the first move to help customers. These businesses go out of their way to first find potential problems and then resolve them before customers need to ask for help. (<https://www.livechatinc.com/blog/proactive-customer-service>, accessed 02.2017)

Membership Reward Program

Membership reward programs are promotional activities that reward repeat purchases in an attempt to add value for the fan and to help create loyalty to the community. The design of reward programs should accentuate the psychological benefits of:

1. Providing a feeling of participation and interaction
2. Anticipation of future awards
3. A sense of belonging. (Dowling Grahame R., and Uncles, Mark. 1997.

Do customer loyalty programs really work? *Sloan Management Review* 38.4: 71–83)

It is very important in the community and reward programs that the rewards are targeted for the fans that are very close to the team or club, that have season tickets or regularly come at sporting events, that regularly buy and wear merchandise. There should be a clear division between the loyal fans and the ones that go there once in a while.

Membership Value

Membership value is the additional attributes added to a service for those who have extended relationships with the sports club must represent clear value from an external perspective relative to competition and relative to nonmembers. (Wakefield, Kirk L, 2007, *Team Sports Marketing*, p. 255)

Customization

What is important to one fan may be unimportant to another. To integrate fans into the community requires a dynamic approach to adding value. Customization implies the creation of products and services for individual customers.

Fans do not want to feel as though they have no control over what role they can take in the community or are limited in some way to take only what is offered



when other feasible alternatives exist. Specifically, some teams offer little flexibility in ticket packages or hospitality services, basically operating with a one-size-fits-all attitude. (Winer, Russell S. 2001. A framework for customer relationship management. *California Management Review* 43.4: 89–109)

Web Site and Social Media Platforms

With the introduction of mass media via the Internet, geographic boundaries on a community hold less meaning than in the past.

Web sites and social media are a critical element in building a network of customers for exchanging product-related information and to create relationships between customers and the company. The goal of the Web site is to enable the fan to be a part of the organization, providing information and input as well as receiving it.

Maintaining freshness by continuously updating, making it easier to use, and improving the physical appeal of the sport club or team. (Wakefield, Kirk L, 2007, *Team Sports Marketing*, p. 259)

Management Partnering

Management Partnering means that value is interactively co-created by management and fans who together are united in their goal to serve the welfare of the community. The more that fans and management interact, the higher the likelihood of forming a strong relationship or bond. High levels of fan-management interaction can build a relationship that can be used to add and create value through cooperation. To implement management partnering, management must communicate the idea of community with the fans and then maintain open communication lines between the team and fans. (McMillan, D. W., and Chavis, D. M. 1986. Sense of community: A definition and theory. *American Journal of Psychology* 14.1: 6–23.)

Conclusions

Building a fan community is crucial for the financial survival of a sports club or sports team and because of the high level of fan identification with the team (brand), sports teams can build fan communities in ways that few other brands can.

Once customers become members in a community, switching costs dramatically increase due to the social bonds, personal rapport, and the trust that has been built thus customer relationship management must focus on building communities where fans and management co-create value.



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