

Social Networks

The idea of building communities around a common experience or topic is part of human nature. Whether it is formal, such as boys and girl scouts, or informal, a crowd at a sports bar, communities exists.

Technology platforms are being used to facilitate information sharing of all formats and for a variety of purposes.

The cases cited in this document involve a community of employees in a large, diverse retailer and customers of a new technology

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Creating a social network: Don't just build it - listen and they will come

These best practices and observations for creating social networks, internal or customer-facing, are interpreted from interviews with Steve Bendt and Gary Koelling of Best Buy, regarding the internal employee social network BlueShirt Nation, and Gina Bianchini, CEO and co-founder of Ning, regarding the Ning Creators Network.

by Senior Fellow Albert Maruggi

Before you start

Build to address specific issues. In the case of Best Buy's internal BlueShirt Nation network, it was to identify consumer needs so Best Buy could develop effective advertising.

Accept that the dynamic of the group may yield a much different result than your objective.

Articulate the objectives for the network.

Be open to accept wisdom of the crowd if you want to foster inspired dialogue.

Solidify and appreciate senior management's support of the network.

After you deploy

There is always a beta version. Seek feedback, and listen to most of it. Be willing to change.

Corporate guidelines should be flexible to accommodate users' needs. If it looks like it was mandated from the C level, it is less likely to be user-friendly.

Encourage social interaction by letting issues percolate up from users.

Usually – not always, but usually – top-down seeding does not generate the intense dialogues you want. Encourage and be open to those issues sparked at the grassroots level of a corporation or a customer community.

Observations of a social network in progress

Employees raise issues that are outside the scope of the objectives but are nonetheless important for improvements in process, messaging and morale.

Employees – in the case of Best Buy, more than 14,000 active on BlueShirt Nation site – who are engaged in the online community are less likely to be part of the 60 percent average turnover rate.

The Ning Creators Network is a vibrant community for the company's most engaged users. Management is better informed through quicker and more efficient dialogue.

Product management is better able to meet customer-articulated demands, increasing the chances of greater customer satisfaction.

Product development is faster and more efficient as a result of increased sharing and listening to customers' needs.

Building a social network is less an issue of money and more one of patience. Social networks are about relationships; establishing and nurturing them is a reoccurring process.

Successful social networks will uncover dynamic ideas, create sustained energy and evolve to new dimensions.

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