

Excerpt from book

Communities Dominate Brands:

Business and Marketing Challenges for the 21st Century

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250 pages hardcover, March 2005,

futuretext Ltd

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Chapter 12 - The Emergence of the Community

Trust your friend

From the Zapatistas of Mexico, to the running street battles of Seattle, to the massive increase of bookclubs across the UK, online and off-line communities are forming and becoming increasingly visible and effective. The emergence and the notion of the community as a counterforce in business is not new in many ways, but it has evolved recently into something far more potent. All through its history mankind has of course lived in communities. First the caveman had his family and tribe, then gradually emerged the nation-states and with industrialisation mankind found several different communities. Up to the end of the 20th century, communities were dormant as a force to consider in business. Yes, there were isolated incidences of consumer reaction to an oil spill or child slavery labour etc., but for the most part, individual consumers did not instinctively group together to form a power of the masses. Not until the Connected Age, where we have authorities on social contagion, social network theory, the tipping point theory. The list is endless – the point is they are right.

A CONNECTED AGE

We discussed the change from the Networked Age to the Connected Age in the Introduction chapter. It is an important theme to our book and for this chapter we need to return to that theme. The Networked Age was a good term for the last decade, as it did describe how we as humans approached "the network" i.e. the internet - we logged on, we accessed our e-mail and we surfed seeking information. The Networked Age was the dawn of how humans could build virtual communities, and is a necessary step on our evolution to the Connected Age. Much of what most readers will consider the digital world and digital convergence will consist of that networked model. It is imperative to understand that all the effects of the Networked Age are but the prelude to the period of the Connected Age.

Half step into the Community

The Connected Age is like the Industrial Revolution before electricity. The first steam-powered machines were central engines, like a big heart in a factory, and all devices were then connected by pulleys and belts and other mechanical means to such engines. The first factories such as for clothing worked like this. There was one central engine, and it *physically* powered all sewing machines of the factory. The whole design from the engine power to the power transmission, to individual sewing stations had to be carefully planned and built. The factory and its working stations were very precisely tied to explicit locations. There was not much room for variation or expansion in this model. It was much better than no engine at all,

but it wasn't until the advent of electricity that it became possible to have an omnipresent power source - the electrical grid - and free machines and workers to perform differing deeds in differing locations. Much more importantly for any growing business, it allowed a smooth expansion of capacity by just plugging in more devices to the electrical outlets and paying a bit more in the electricity bill.

The analogy to the fixed Internet is that while readers may think the Internet has created immense changes to their business, it is like the first mechanical machines for the industrial age. Yes, major change. But very modest changes when compared with the much greater change that came through electricity-based machine power. Any changes you have witnessed due to the fixed Internet will become dramatically more pronounced via the mobile Internet during the next ten years.

Much like our ability to connect to "the network" whether by *accessing* our e-mail, *accessing* our voicemail, or *accessing* the internet, there was a two-step process. Something might have happened in the virtual world - like us receiving an e-mail - and we had to check in periodically to see what if anything was going on. The connectedness was by necessity limited to telephone outlets, our internet and voicemail were accessed through the telephone network, which in the middle of the last decade was a fixed wireline network everywhere, even in Finland. But like the advent of electricity, now telecommunications is omnipresent, wirelessly, through the cellular or mobile telecoms network. Now human networks can grow and move as the need emerges.

Most importantly, the newest technologies are all built on an always-on principle. The power and speed of SMS text messaging is not with the sender, yes, we like it that we have the sending machine in our pocket all the time. The true factor of speed is that *every recipient* also carries the same device on their person, and are able to receive text messages even when voice calls are not practical. SMS text messaging has shrunk the *receiving* side of human communications. That is why a new telecommunications term, "reachability" has been coined.

Addictiveness of connectedness

When we consider Generation-C and other connected people living with electronic communities, it is possible to connect with traditional electronic media, particularly the fixed Internet, e-mail and chat, but the real power of communities arrives only through connectedness. We achieve connectedness through the mobile phone. Rather than our internet access which is mostly locked to a place such as our desk at our office, one room in our home, or the computer lab in the school, the mobile phone is on our person, with us at all times.

Rather than an actually or potentially shared device, such as the personal computer often is at home, and may be at work where a secretary or colleague or boss might suddenly borrow your computer, or walk in and see what is on your screen, the mobile phone is always personal and private. Most of all the other networked systems require logging on, we have to set aside time to access our network, our internet, our e-mail, our chat. But the mobile phone is always connected. Thus while yes, all the other means were going in the right direction for digital community mindset, they were only a half-step. The full step is the Connected Age.

Now sharing information is power

The Connected Age brings with it a new paradigm also for the role of information and power. All through the centuries and up to the Networked Age, information and power had held the relationship that those in power held onto information, keeping it to themselves. Withholding information maintained and built power. Before, during the Networked Age and always

before, it was that those who had information held power. Withholding information was the key to power. This is how bureaucrats built their empires from Roman times to today.

The Connected Age reverses this equation of power. We all know that any information in a mainstream digital format conforms to the thought that information is very different from cash. With cash if I give one dollar to you, I don't have it anymore. But with valuable information (in digital form), if I give it to you, I still have it myself. While you have become richer for the added knowledge, I am no poorer for telling you. Now, when everybody is always connected - it means that information will reach everybody who wants it, eventually. That is why the equation changes and those who understand the change and learn to live in it will prosper.

Those who have mentally arrived to the Connected Age, understand this principle fundamentally, even subconsciously. The impact is that people of the Connected Age rush to share information. They intrinsically understand how important speed is in the spread of information. We have seen evidence of this throughout this book, but nowhere as strongly as in the Blogging chapter.

With the emphasis shifting from withholding information to sharing, the most rewarded contributors are those who are fastest at sharing. They get a reputation for information communicators, those who always know. They will invariably be rewarded by their contact network, where others will send information to them, in return. This enriches those who know how to share. Equally anyone who is found to be hoarding information, withholding it, is punished. In a very real sense it means that in the Connected Age, *sharing* information is power.

B SMART MOBS

The person who discovered the notion and concept of "smart mobs" or "swarming" was Howard Rheingold. He wrote about it in his landmark book of 2002. Rheingold, a pioneer of virtual communities, identified that via the internet and digital technology per se, people's behaviour was changing. Up to then, if you wanted to meet someone, it had to be in a specific location. You agreed on the location beforehand. Swarming is the exact opposite. You know you will meet at an approximate time, but the final destination is set by the community at the last moment. Earlier young people would sit at home on a Saturday waiting for... (continued)

Communities Dominate Brands: Business and marketing challenges for the 21st century is a book about how the new phenomenon of digitally connected communities are emerging as a force to counterbalance the power of the big brands and advertising.
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