The Community Effect (part 1)

Becoming a Customer Experience Leader

The Art of Enabling Community for Your Business

This paper is the first in a series on the ART, SCIENCE, and TOOLS that enable companies to realize the “community effect.” Get Satisfaction has been on the forefront of community management and technology development for six years. We know communities better than anyone – and offer a unique perspective on the future and strategic value of communities.

About Get Satisfaction

Get Satisfaction helps customer-centric organizations engage millions of consumers in meaningful conversations about their products and services every day. The Get Satisfaction community platform transforms these conversations into powerful, user-generated marketing content and insights, enabling businesses to create differentiated customer experiences, acquire more customers and bring new innovations to market. Headquartered in San Francisco, Get Satisfaction has customers around the world, including Citrix, HootSuite, Intuit and Kellogg’s.

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The Benefits of Becoming a Customer Experience Leader

At Get Satisfaction, our experience has shown that companies with a thriving customer community that is well integrated into the heart of their business see tremendous benefits. We call this the Community Effect, and we think that all business can achieve this customer experience advantage.

So what are these effects? In simplest terms, communities will foster:

- Cultivation of a more customer-centered culture that encourages a laser focus on what customers care about
- Systematic incorporation of voice-of-customer feedback into decision-making across departments and at the executive level
- Highly effective self-service and social support that efficiently taps expertise across your business and customer base – and scales as you grow
- Creation of customer-generated content marketing and other word-of-mouth programs that are authentic and effective
- Improved customer loyalty, brand perceptions, and lifetime customer value

These are kinds of benefits that every CEO should care about because collectively, they are instrumental in maximizing shareholder value now and in the future. The business performance of companies that successfully differentiate their customer experience speak for themselves; according to Watermark Consulting, an analysis of the 6-year stock performance of customer experience leaders versus laggards compared to the S&P 500 (2007 – 2012) shows that customer experience leaders clearly outperform the market (see Figure 1).

Understanding Customer Experience

“Customer experience management” (CXM) is not a new concept; rather, it is a proven business strategy popularized more than 10 years ago. The goal of a CX strategy is to create compelling, user-friendly experiences at every customer touch point and provide personalized, contextual information that aligns with customer needs (pre-sale, point of sale, post-sale, and beyond). Over the past few years, social technologies have given companies more tools to create some pretty amazing customer experiences. As explored in this paper, community is one of the most versatile tools in that toolkit.

### Table 1: Community as Customer Experience Driver

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Experience Driver</th>
<th>Community as a Tool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-channel</td>
<td>Content optimized for discovery in mobile, brand website, social, and search engines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-friendly</td>
<td>Easy-to-navigate, simple interface, search optimized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized</td>
<td>Incorporates customer profile and behavioral context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>Displays content that is relevant to customer needs or stage of lifecycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>Allows customers to get responses from the brand or other customers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Figure 1: Customer Experience Leaders Outperform the Market

Learn the Secrets to Cultivating a Strong Community Effect

So how can you establish a customer community to generate a strong Community Effect – and rapidly accelerate your path to a more customer-centered business? Success requires vision and strategy, strong internal leadership and communication, solid execution, and a finesse that’s based on extensive experience. This series will not only overview the basics of starting a successful community, but also share our experience-based best practices and insights to accelerate your learning curve. Each paper in the series will focus on a different aspect of community:

- Paper #1: The Art of Community – What are the key components necessary to build a vibrant, valuable customer community? This paper will discuss the formula of people, process, and organizational elements, while touching on some practical to-do's as you prepare for your community’s launch.

- Paper #2: The Science of Community – Next, we’ll focus on the technical aspects of running a community, such as how to integrate your community with your website, back-end business systems and processes, and social networks to capture data needed to measure, analyze, and optimize your community.

- Paper #3: The Tools of Community – Learn how successful Get Satisfaction customers are using our platform’s tools to strengthen the Community Effect. We’ll share practical examples of how they are cultivating and exploiting the Community Effect to create a customer-centered culture and competitive differentiation.

What is the Community Effect?

When you have a thriving customer community, no one can pretend that they don’t know what customers are thinking about your brand, how they are experiencing your products, or what they are feeling about your company. Customers say it like it is, giving every area of your business first-hand insights into what’s working, what’s not, and why – and telling the world about it at the same time. Their conversations raise the level of accountability that departments and even individual employees have regarding the quality of the customer experience and how they feel about your offerings and brand.

And this is when the magic happens…. Departments start to work together to address customer issues raised in the community and act on their ideas and suggestions. Employees move beyond bureaucracies, policies, and inflexible processes that hinder collaboration and innovation, paving the way for everyone to be in regular communication to take timely action. Imagine having your sales team collaborate with your support team to understand the biggest pain points and feature requests; marketing talking to product development so they know how best to position new offerings in product launches; support talking to marketing so they produce communications that accurately reflect the biggest challenges customers face; and so on. Everyone – companywide – is on board with what customers are saying and asking for – and your customers feel heard, valued, and happier to be a loyal customer and advocate of your brand.

The Community Effect is accelerated by integration with core business processes and systems – CRM, knowledge management, marketing automation, business intelligence, and so on – so that decision makers receive a steady feed of prioritized customer feedback, suggestions, and insight. In other words, you can have a community-enabled customer experience because the community helps key departments stay aligned to meet customer needs and respond to their feedback.

Figure 1: Community closes the gap between business departments and your customers.
The Art of Community

Preparing Your People and Organization to Drive Community Success

Establishing a successful community isn’t as simple as, “build it, and they will come.” It requires vision, commitment by management and your organization as a whole, careful investment in the right places – and the finesse of an artist who instinctively employs certain techniques to achieve the desired outcome. This finesse can take years of experience to cultivate – and most likely, you don’t have that much time. This paper will help ensure your success by sharing some of the techniques and best practices developed by the experts at Get Satisfaction.

The art of community is about orchestrating the right human and organizational resources and employing the right techniques to set you up for success.

Laying the Groundwork for Transformation

Build Strong Internal Relationships Around a Shared Vision and Strategy

Traditional communities are built on solid relationships – and online customer communities are no different. The little-known secret to successful communities is that they are dependent upon a strong web of internal relationships between executives and employees spanning a wide range of departments – all of whom must be motivated to work together to respond to customer questions, issues, ideas, and praise raised in the community in a systematic, timely manner. It’s this need for internal collaboration – triggered by the introduction of voice of the customer into a business – that breaks down traditional organizational silos and helps your business become more customer-centric.

Let’s explore this secret in more detail – and share some proven techniques and best practices to help you build these relationships.

Communicate Your Vision and Strategy

Introducing a customer community into your business can be a truly exciting and transformative event because it captures and elevates the voice of the customer – and like a pebble thrown into water, customer conversations shared throughout your organization can result in all kinds of ripple effects. Most importantly, a community can make your business more aligned around the customer (see box below).

Communities make your business more customer-centric by fostering:

- Serendipitous collaboration and innovation between employees and customers
- The creation of a “Voice of the Customer” culture
- The ability to identify, respond to, and fix issues more quickly
- Always-on infrastructure for listening, acting, and closing the loop with customers
- A forum for many-to-many conversations to enable knowledge sharing
- A platform for delivering amazing self-service experiences for customers
- Differentiation from competitors by delivering an exceptional customer experience
The goal of a customer community as a communication channel is always two-fold:

- First, to provide an engaging customer experience
- Second (and just as important), to help employees understand more clearly how their work is valued by customers, as well as address their need and desire to proactively improve the business

Before getting started, it’s important that everyone understand these two goals. So kick-off the initiative by explaining how community creates a direct line of communication between them and the people (customers) who ultimately keep them employed by consuming the products and services your business offers. Your objective is to get them excited about participating in the community and seeing the effects it will bring about internally.

Consider an anecdote shared by Prezi, one of Get Satisfaction’s customers – a business that develops cloud-based software that brings presentations to life. When a developer helped the support team to answer questions and issues raised in Prezi’s community, he said, “I have to be more careful with my work. I had no idea it had such an immediate effect!” Hearing the voice of the customer through the community got this developer thinking outside his coding bubble – and focused on quality and excellence in the areas customers care about.

Making the Community Part of Your Business Strategy

**Think big**

We’ve found that customers who have successfully built thriving communities with a strong Community Effect chose to invest in one because they wanted to:

- Create a customer-centric business
- Build a social brand
- Have customers generate authentic, trusted, and persuasive marketing content
- Differentiate based on service quality and get recognition for it

Notice that their goals are broader than just “improving customer service” – and for good reason. As discussed earlier, communities are far more than just self-service support platforms. They can, for instance, be the linchpin of your customer experience strategy, helping you differentiate based on the quality of your total customer experience.

What is your community strategy going to be? Think big – and ask yourself:

- Which business goals and objectives are your top priorities? How do you envision your community supporting them?
- What systems and processes – both customer facing and back office – would need to integrate with your community to support this vision?
- Who are the stakeholders you’ll need to bring on board from each department, and how can you make them understand the impact this will have on their specific department?
- What are the organizational barriers to building a more customer-centric business, and how can you address them?
- Where will the budget come from? When done correctly, community impacts and is used by multiple departments. So who will own it?

Align Cross-Departmental Stakeholders

As you share your vision and objectives, secure the approval and commitment of key stakeholders in departments such as Marketing, PR, Research, Analytics, Content/Production, Customer Service, Legal, Compliance, and IT. Never underestimate the need to secure broad support for your community.

First, your community managers won’t be able to handle every issue; they will need to reach out to relevant departments for timely expertise and assistance. Your success will be assured if management of each department fully
embraces the community and makes a commitment to engage with customers.

And second, teams will need to collaborate around customer needs, ideas, and issues that require cross-departmental engagement. This requires breaking down traditional organizational silos and impediments to collaboration and innovation, such as inflexible processes, outdated policies, and obstructive processes.

For this reason, consider having a private, internal community where different departments can collaborate. Customer-facing teams can use it to discuss the best answers to complex customer questions with engineers. Marketing can ask about the most common support issues as inspiration for blog posts. Product development can post updates about their latest release. And Sales can use it to let everyone know key factors in won and lost deals. In this way, all departments can act as a more cohesive unit and pool their collective knowledge to best serve your customers and drive innovation in the areas customers care about most.

To gain buy-in, share your strategy and translate how the community will help the company achieve its goals. For example, when talking with the head of support services, discuss how community can impact the bottom line by deflecting issues away from more expensive, one-to-one channels like chat and email. And when you need to secure the approval of marketing, share how communities impact the top line by vastly improving search engine optimization and organic referral traffic to your company’s marketing website.

**Determine How You Will Measure Success**

Being clear about what the community’s strategy and objectives are will help determine what you should measure, what you should report on, and what success looks like in measurable terms. For example, if your goal is to break down business silos to become more customer centric, your success metrics might be as simple as “X number of customer ideas implemented.” If your goal is to reduce contact center costs, you might measure support tickets deflected and pageviews on support conversations. Similarly, referral traffic and unique visitors are great measures of marketing success as well, since a goal of a marketing should be to attract new prospects with relevant user-generated content.

It’s helpful to publish a dashboard that clearly displays your metrics over time (weekly or monthly is best). This will allow you to see the progress you’re making, as well as identify areas that could use some extra attention. According to The Community Roundtable, to assess overall community health, most companies measure:

- Total activity
- Members (total, active, & contributing)
- Questions answered
- Volume of comments

Look for a platform that makes this easy to do – for example, the Get Satisfaction platform includes an advanced Community Health Analytics dashboard.

We’ve found that companies that measure impact (or even ROI) invest more in community management – likely because they’re realizing all the value their community is creating and want more.

**Creating a Customer Engagement Playbook**

**Set the Stage for Dynamic Customer Conversations**

At this point, most companies want to deploy a community platform and start engaging with customers. And the fact is, not all customer community platforms are easy to deploy. (The biggest challenge is selecting the right one for your business – a topic that will be discussed more fully in the second paper in this series, “The Science of the Community Effect.”)
But the secret that companies with successful communities know is that a bit more prep work is needed to set the stage for successful customer engagement. This prep work is central to the art of community. It’s the “soft stuff” that you need to layer on top of the platform to make it a place that customers will enjoy visiting and contributing to on a regular basis.

Let’s take a closer look at what’s involved in getting ready to engage with customers.

**Hire the Right Community Manager(s)**

The first person you delegate – or hire – as your community manager is one of the most important decisions you will make regarding your community. Lying at the crossroads of social media and key departments such as marketing, customer support, and product development, community managers are uniquely positioned to help re-focus organizations on the voice of the customer.

Many companies focus on hiring someone with the skills and traits to make them an effective online presence. To succeed in this area of their jobs, they need the right technical skills, as well as certain personality traits. For instance, you need someone with a strong sense of empathy and altruism so that they instinctively respond to customer issues with warmth and care. You need an enthusiastic person that expresses this in person and in their writing. At the same time, look for a very detail-oriented person so nothing falls through the cracks – especially when your business faces a crisis. Community managers also need to have a healthy sense of curiosity and be willing to try new things; communities and their enabling technologies are constantly evolving, and this person needs to stay on the cutting edge of new tools and tactics. And they need to be strong, diplomatic writers and communicators who care share tough news (such as a product delay) with grace and clarity.

But the real secret to hiring the best person for the job is balancing out these skills with those needed to make them an effective internal representative of the voice of the customer within your business.

Remember: this person will be responsible for understanding and sharing the voice of the customer with the right people at the right time. This requires judgment, analytical skills, communication skills, and business understanding, as they need to be able to easily discern what’s important and elevate their findings to decision makers in a way that is clear and actionable. In addition, they must be able to get along easily with others and have good judgment and instincts regarding what is important and what’s not.

**Set Community Guidelines for Employees and Customers**

You’ll want to write and distribute community guidelines that will set rules for what’s acceptable and what’s not – and ensure your community is a positive, collaborative place that keeps customers coming back and generating more content. Tailor them for your audience, of course. Once you launch, be sure to enforce them. Here is a link to our community guidelines: https://getsatisfaction.com/corp/help/community-guidelines/

In our work with thousands of businesses, we’ve seen that guidelines will vary depending on the stage of your community and your business goals. For example, if your community is fairly established and your goal is to increase customer collaboration, you may want to wait 24 hours before responding to customer issues so that community members have a chance to respond first. If your community is new and you’re trying to funnel all requests there, you may want to set a rule specifying company responses to customer issues within four hours (or even faster).

**Train Employees on How to Respond to Negativity**

Regardless of what we’d all like to admit, not every customer is going to be satisfied 100% all of the time, and there will always be a few who are more than happy to voice their opinions loudly over the Internet. So develop a
negativity plan and train employees to execute it faithfully. Teach them to:

- **Listen.** You want your community to know you are listening and understand what they are saying is important.
- **Show empathy.** Show that you feel their pain or their joy. Recognize it.
- **Express appreciation.** Tell people that you are glad individuals are engaged and you appreciate all comments — that’s what makes the community real.
- **Use negative diffuser statements.** Give people sample “diffuser” statements to use so that the tone of your community stays positive.

Often overlooked, it is important to remember that dealing with negativity is an opportunity for your brand to shine as you handle issues with grace and care, as well as uncover ways to improve your products and processes.

At Get Satisfaction, we find that:

- Customer insight is always valuable – even if it’s negative. Use negative feedback as an opportunity to learn and co-create with our customers.
- You can turn negativity into positivity by handling issues swiftly and gracefully.
- Negative comments are a great opportunity to break down organizational silos. Many groups can benefit from these conversations, analyzing them to see how they contributed to an issue and working together to fix root causes.

**Cultivate a Tone that Customers Will Love**

Take the time to create a community voice that channels the friendly, supportive, empathetic friend that everyone tells their problems and secrets. This voice will be a powerful extension of your brand, so educate employees explicitly about what it sounds like when responding to both positive and negative comments – for example, by providing examples. While your support team may find it easy to adopt this voice (remember, they are used to talking to customers all day), your product team probably isn’t. Make sure they’ve been trained on your company’s tone, know when and how to escalate situations, and are comfortable using your community.

**Conclusion**

Increasingly, we are seeing a transformational change among Get Satisfaction customers who actively and fully embrace their customer community: the breaking down of organizational silos to enable closer alignment around customer needs, priorities, and expectations. We call this transformation the “Community Effect,” and it’s what happens naturally when you capture and elevate the voice of the customer to its rightful place at the heart of your business. As such, capturing the “community effect” should be a c-level initiative. And to do it effectively, you need the right combination of art, science, and tools.

**Learn More**

Interested in taking the next step to make your customer service more social? Want to deliver exceptional, differentiating customer experiences with a community platform while also saving costs, enhancing productivity, and increasing revenue? Get Satisfaction enables you to create engaging customer experiences by fostering online conversations about your products and services at every stage of the lifecycle. Companies of all sizes such as Intuit, Kellogg’s, and Sonos rely on the Get Satisfaction community platform to acquire new customers, provide better service and build better products.

**Contact us for a customized demonstration.**

(877) 339-3997