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## Are you Building Master-Planned Customer Communities? Or Shanty Towns?

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With all of the discussion about social media, blogs and communities, corporations and marketing agencies are actively putting two-way dialogs in motion. According to Technorati, more than 100,000 blogs are being created every day.

The ease with which corporate social media can be built may present a future nightmare for CMOs and IT of larger companies. Without a broad-based plan and governance policies, the following consequences could arise:

- **Blogs and communities are built based on organizational structure instead of the customer.** Innovative groups in business units build communities to connect with customers. Without guidance, they build whatever suits the best interest of their product instead of the broader context. This fragments the customer relationship, customer attention...and the brand.
- **Islands of Communities Appear:** Just as many companies experienced islands of automation, the proliferation of blogs and communities created by multiple business units and employees will have different customer engagement and data collection techniques. Extracting data for useful decision support becomes cumbersome. One Fortune 500 company we interviewed had more than 75 different customer databases, thus making predictive modeling an uphill battle. There is clearly an opportunity to learn from this in building communities.
- **Customer Confusion:** With different look and feel, different business unit approaches, different interaction points and different messages customers will undoubtedly be confused. In our ADHD society, most customers will not take time to figure it out.
- **Ghost Ships:** As corporations reorganize and employees change jobs, many blogs and communities will be abandoned as priorities shift. Valuable customers will be set adrift.

### A Customer Community Master-Plan Avoids Pitfalls

Just as city planners utilize master plans to promote healthy growth, a Customer Community Master Plan™ enables executives to determine an overall customer interaction plan. Based on our work with Global 1000 clients, elements of a strong plan include:

- **What is our Community Strategy?** Why are we building communities?
  - What do we hope to achieve as a corporation?
  - Advertising and awareness?
  - New product development feedback?
  - Revenue generation through extended relationships?
  - Access to new markets?
  - When do we want to build our own? When do we want to leverage other communities such as Facebook, Linked-in, industry groups.
  
- **Customer-Centric Architecture:** Given your strategy, how should customers interact with your company? What are the major needs/groups/contexts that would define optimal community structures from the customer perspective?
  - What are your major customer segments? Do your customers' digital footprints coincide with your proposed community technology?
  - What are the product-lines and services that map to community segments?
  - How do communities link with your sales force and channel partner strategy?
  - How does each community cascade and support each other into a comprehensive strategy? Both on-line and off-line?
  - Are there common data elements we wish to collect for decision support across communities?
  
- **Governance:** This sets the parameters as to how different groups in your company should approach community and blog building.
  - How should new communities be approved?
  - Is there a customer community steering committee?
  - Who "owns" each community?
  - How do we avoid the "everybody and nobody owns it" syndrome?
  - Who is allowed to post content? What are examples of appropriate and inappropriate comments by employees on social media?
  - When is legal review of content needed prior to posting?
  - What threshold metrics should we deploy?
  
- **A Whole Customer Experience:** What else do customers need as they work on their task? Are there other companies we need to include in our communities to build a Customer-Focused Architecture? Do we need to work with other communities and brands that touch our customers?
  
- **Look and Feel:** How do we ensure a common set of design elements that extend our brand? What are the must-have components?
  
- **Community Management Processes:** How do we keep track of our communities?
  - Do we have a single list of all of our communities and blogs? Who owns it?
  - How do we avoid "ghost ship" communities when reorganizations and job changes occur? How do we ensure a transition plan for customers
  - How do we track and ensure action on important feedback about our company emanating from these communities?

### **Policies Should Facilitate a Two-Way Dialog**

The goal of a Customer Community Master Plan™ is to encourage appropriate community development; it should avoid being overly restrictive or cumbersome. For example, mandating that every blog post

undergo legal review would silence your employees; the legal department would quickly become a bottleneck. Such a policy is undesirable.

Your employees are your best word-of-mouth marketing advocates. Training that exemplifies appropriate action, desired messages and best practices for your employees, will magnify your company's impact on the market.

A Customer Community Master Plan™ enables the CMO or Chief Customer Officer to set policies that encourage action and share best practices across the company. It also avoids headaches in the future by providing a master plan for growth. Such a plan will place your communities well on the road to ROI.

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