



# Making friends on the new media playground

Don't be shy: Get out there and build communities for your brand instead of just talking about them

by C.C. Chapman

Musicians have been leveraging the concept of the fan club since the first guitar solo rocked a sold-out stadium. That same philosophy can work for you.

I'm getting a little sick of hearing everyone talk about "conversation" and "community." They are some of the hottest buzzwords out there right now. But how many people fully understand what they mean in the social media space and are completely embracing them?

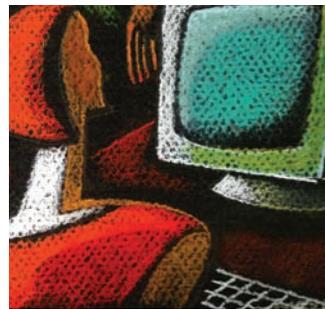
The concept of building a community around one's brand is something near and dear to my heart. I like to refer to myself as a new media maven because I love to share my passion about this space with anyone who will listen, and today I get to share that via this article. I hope you'll stick through it with me.

Imagine for a moment that you had hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals around the globe who loved your product or service so much that they couldn't stop talking about it. What would your marketing team say if you told them that

you knew people who would promote your company for free to everyone they knew?

Musicians have been leveraging the concept of the fan club since the first guitar solo rocked a sold-out stadium. That same philosophy can work for you and your company through the power of social media. A fan club is nothing more than a community. Not so scary when you think about it that way, is it?

At this very moment, somewhere on the Web, someone is talking about you. Perhaps they are blogging about a great service experience they recently had. Maybe they are sending an e-mail to a few friends asking if anyone has recommendations for a product or service they are looking for. The point is that if you are an established brand, people know about you and are talking about you. But are you listening?



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### Focus on the people

When it comes to using social media tools in your organization, the first thing you need to do is focus on the people, not the technology. There is always a new gadget, web site or service that everyone is excited about. But, at the end of the day, social media is about people. You need to discover and determine the best solutions to connect with them.

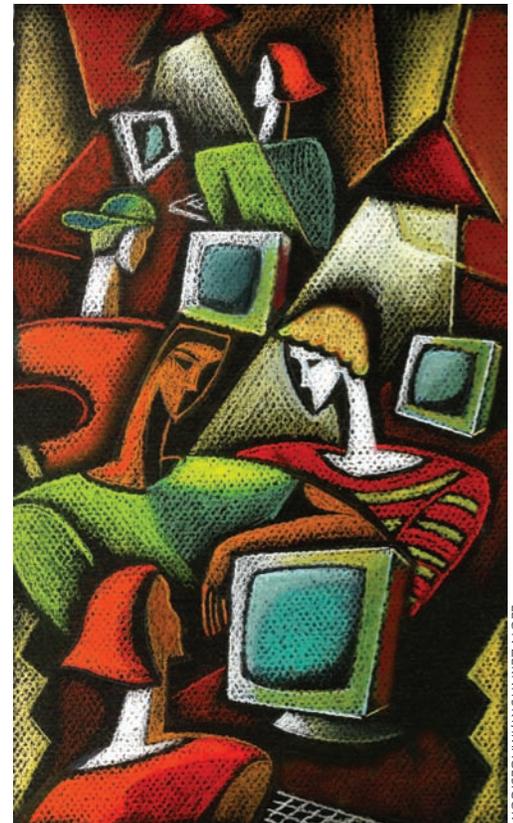
Second, learn to embrace experimentation and be unafraid to take some risks. Stop saying, “This is just a fad” or “I just won’t ever understand it.” Those statements will hold you back and prevent you and your company from taking your social media efforts to the next level. While you watch and wonder about other companies’ successes, you’ll grow stagnant. You won’t fail, but you certainly won’t soar in the social media skies.

Start small by listening to (or reading) the conversations that are going on around you. If your company is not already doing it, set up vanity searches on sites such as Technorati and Google Alerts. You can put in the names of your company, executives, products and URLs, and be instantly notified anytime those terms appear on the Web.

Then pay attention to the results and determine the best course of action. For example, resist the impulse to go on the defensive instantly if someone is speaking badly about your brand. Wait and watch—often your advocates will step up to your defense. If they don’t, engage in the conversation in a very honest and direct way. You’ll be amazed how much someone will yell and scream into the ether of the Internet, but when another human responds, they often calm down. Someone angry enough to write about your company on a blog is full of passion. Imagine if you could turn that passion into a positive. It happens every day.

But remember that you are helping to build a community by joining a conversation, so you must stay tuned in to the thread to answer back. You can be sure that if you reply to a blog post, the author is going to comment back or even e-mail you for follow-up.

Setting up a blog for your brand is a great idea, but don’t forget to engage with your customers on the channels where they are already participating. If someone posts a video on



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YouTube, respond with one there as well. If a blog post slams your latest product release, leave a comment right there. Don’t try to control everything, but rather let some of it go.

### Let go of control

I can see some of you cringing at the thought of letting go of control, but in today’s world, that is exactly what you are going to have to do. I heard the concept described once at a conference as “being a cruise director instead of a drill sergeant for your brand.” Of course, you want to make sure no one is doing anything malicious or inappropriate, but if you allow them a little freedom, those fans of yours might come up with something truly special.

Recently I managed a project for The Coca-Cola Co. called Virtual Thirst, where a contest was held to design a new kind of vending machine that would be built in the virtual world Second Life. Strict brand guidelines regarding the use of the Coca-Cola logo, for example, would have hampered people’s imaginations. Instead, company officials sat back and watched



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what these fans of Coke came up with. The diversity and quality of the submissions impressed all of us and is just one example of how letting go even a little can go a long way toward building your community.

Think about how you would like to see a community built around your company and products and how you want to use that community. Are you thinking more about it as a focus group to bounce ideas off of to get early reactions? Are you looking for an army of fanatics who will spread the gospel of your brand for you? Perhaps a happy medium, where you can get honest and open feedback and have a connection with your customers to help increase your exposure?

You likely want a little bit of it all. There is nothing wrong with that, but you have to remember that you can't force any of this to happen. The old rules that you've known for years in public relations and marketing don't apply to the new media playground that you're going to try to make friends on. Worse yet, the rules are constantly changing as the media mature. You have to be ready to shift with them.

How do you get people to form a community around you? The easiest way may be to establish your own social network and invite your customers to be part of it. Through its MINI Insider program, the MINI Cooper has done this better than any brand I have seen. The car's customer-fans are encouraged to sign up, build profiles, and share pictures and comments via their discussion forums. Insiders even name their cars and build profiles for them. Then face-to-face meet-ups happen around the globe. The interaction between the company and the customer is constant. It's easy to scan the discussion forums, and although every post is tied to a user, it's sometimes hard to tell who is an employee and who is a fan, because everyone there is filled with the same amount of passion for the car. In this case, the fans have had a community set up for them by the company, and can thus be reached whenever MINI Cooper wishes. There is no searching for fans because the community is already established.

Consider something simple and strong as a first step using what you already have. You probably have a customer database. Reach out to those customers with a specific purpose. If you

## Quick community builders

**Twitter:** Set up an account for your brand(s) on Twitter. Share stories, ask questions and respond to feedback when you see it. [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

**Facebook:** Someone in your company has a Facebook account (trust me, they do). Have them establish a group for you and fill it with useful information. Encourage people to use the discussion tools to communicate with you. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

**Ning:** Quick and easy instant social network for you. Allows for lots of customizations. Simple yet effective, and allows for quick experimentation. [www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)

**Blogs:** Setting up a blog can be a very painless process. Ask your IT department if there is a preferred platform, and ask to be set up. If not, installing WordPress on a server is a simple enough task.

**Podcasts:** Move beyond just words. Get your voice out there. Leave audio comments on podcasts talking about your brand, or start your own.

**Flickr:** Set up an account to share photos with the community, and encourage bloggers to use them in their posts. Pay attention to other people's photos that connect with your brand and leave comments on them. [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

**Virtual worlds:** These are not appropriate for all companies, but at least investigate the variety of options in this rapidly growing space to see if there is an opportunity for you. Just remember it is not all about big builds and lots of money.

—C.C.C.

are launching a new product, perhaps you send a few samples to individuals whom you have identified as influencers based on criteria you determine (perhaps because they have a blog or podcast), and let them talk about it to build some buzz. Perhaps you reach out to everyone you can to announce major moves your company is making. Whatever it is, don't just send a press release or a glossy flyer. Think on a personal level, never on a mass-media level, when trying to build your community.

Every large city began as a small town. Keep that in mind as you begin to think about what you would like your community to grow up to be. Keeping it small and intimate has its advantages. Sometimes, as a community grows, smaller subcommunities develop as well. Keep an eye on this and shift strategies as appropriate. You'll never know what the right size for you is until you get there.

Finally, when in doubt, ask. Bring in people who know the space to advise and work with you on building your community. Talk with your customers to find out what they want from you. How you can help them is as important as how they can help you.

Most of all, have fun, and see you around the playground real soon. ●

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