Consumer branding papers

People powered brands: How companies can inspire consumer action

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Abstract
This paper explores the ways in which brands have evolved beyond creating connections, to inspire deeper levels of emotional support from their audience. Building emotional connections used to be considered abstract and subjective, and was therefore dismissed by many in the industry, even until today, as being a ‘nice to have’ quality for a brand. But as the impact of traditional media weakens, and the value of earned media strengthens, marketers must evolve their perception of value if they are to truly understand what matters in the connection between people and brands. The rise of social networks and Big Data enables marketers to have not only a better understanding of the life interests of consumers, but also how emotion can inspire advocacy into becoming action. The authors explore three different levels of community that form as a result of the emotional engagement in a brand. They discuss the motivating factors and illustrate the differences in engagement and impact through shared case studies. Their work focuses on defining the benefits of these communities for both marketer and consumer, and the unique characteristics that can empower shared interests to evolve from the marketed message, to becoming a transformative social movement. They draw from proprietary WPP research, academic studies on social and community behaviour, and over 40 years of combined experience in emotional branding.

Keywords
big data, consumer action, earned media, consumer engagement, emotional branding

INTRODUCTION: THE SHIFT AND SEARCH FOR CONNECTION
There is no question that brand marketers have experienced dramatic change in their business environment. Just 20 years ago, the proliferation of media began to unravel the predictable patterns of viewership. The launch of special-interest networks and programming was just a hint of what was to come. The internet threw marketers another new ‘channel’. Most brands were sceptical, and somewhat
hopeful — that audiences would choose to stay watching television over spending more time with a computer.

This pervasive view underscores the transformation that was taking place within marketing. Brands were looking for viewers, and viewers were becoming active not just in regard to their media consumption, but also in how they were seeking information, engaging and connecting directly with people, business and brands.

By the mid-1990s, there was significant growth and support within the marketing industry for building brands in ways that connect emotionally with people. While it was still the early days for online marketing, big brands were building flagship stores as a way to welcome consumers. The quality and duration of the experience was becoming valued in media terms. Nike, Disney and later Apple were investing in high-end experience stores that encouraged interaction with products and brand properties over purchase.

Beyond entertainment, there was another way to experience brands at retail that leveraged a more social approach to building emotional connections. Brands such as Starbucks offered consumers a socially enriching experience that introduced new rituals, encouraged consumers to stay, and a reimagined approach to creating local public space. Such support of customers’ emotional and social needs has allowed brands such as Starbucks to integrate physically and emotionally into people’s daily lives.

In the USA, by the year 2000, the direct correlation between emotional, social, and community growth and impact, had become clear. This dynamic was most obvious in US politics, beginning with the Howard Dean presidential campaign in 2004 and later in the Obama presidential campaign of 2008. These campaigns were pivotal for their ability to go beyond awareness to motivate action. While such examples were about politicians, their marketing efforts inspired business and brands thereafter. These campaigns demonstrated how community strength can be further amplified, and even activated, when combined with a direct marketing effort. Unlike traditional campaigns that relied on marketing via a mass media approach, these campaigns attributed their success to their grassroots efforts, and their ability to connect to people on both a human and emotional, as well as local and physical level. They nurtured interest into becoming engagement, and engagement became amplified through local community-building efforts. These campaigns were especially impressive in their use of social considering that such networks were still relatively niche. Both campaigns leveraged a combination of direct marketing tools such as e-mail, door-to-door in-person campaigning and local grassroots events. Such successes proved that growing advocacy and community is not dependent on medium, but rather on the quality of relationships formed and the degree to which action is enabled.

**EMOTIONAL CONNECTION = COMMUNITY RESPONSE/PURPOSE**

‘In most other realms of human behavior “culture” matters and since the 1970s anyone who has looked at the cultural effects of the internet has picked the same key element: the victory of affinity over geography. The like-minded can now gather from all corners and bask in the warmth of knowing you are not alone.’ (Clay Shirky, Professor for Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at NYU)

Today, the internet and the proliferation of digital/technology and social networks
has given people, business and brands a
greater ability to build emotional response,
action and advocacy. Whether interest and
support is expressed for an executive, busi-
ness or brand, consumers now have more
opportunities to engage and to use varied
ways to show their support. From becom-
ing a brand fan on Facebook, to par-
ticipating in a crowd-sourced contest, or
even creating a parody video as homage to
one’s favourite brand. The level of interest
that people feel for a brand becomes self-
evident through degrees of social engage-
ment and the nature of their response. The
growth of social networks, ease of access
and pervasive use of new technologies to
communicate and connect has enabled ‘communities’ to become the physical
manifestation of emotional interest.

However, ‘communities’ as a term has
become so broad in meaning that its emo-
tional value has become diluted. The real
opportunity when building a community
lies in the ability to inspire audience emo-
tion into becoming response and action.
Active fans tend to impart a positive influ-
ence on others by encouraging shared sup-
port, whether it is in support of a cause, a
movement or even a brand. The stronger
the emotional connection, the stronger the
engagement and thereby, the stronger the
relationship formed between brands and
people.

This paper focuses on the three most
prominent levels of communities involv-
ing emotional and social connections to
a brand. For purposes of this paper, the
complexity and range of emotions have
been simplified to illustrate the major
trends and differences. The three levels
have been ranked according to impact
of emotional investment. The higher the
level, the greater the share of immediate
reward for consumers.

The first level of community is powered
by ‘engagement’, and is the starting point
for most brands in building relationships
and community support. This level strives
to build awareness and interest through
the use of incentives, promotions and con-
tent marketing. The second level of com-
munity is powered by ‘co-creation’ and
represents an iterative process whereby the
independent efforts from brand fans play a
more integral role in building brand advoc-
cacy and creating share-worthy content.

The third level of community is driven by
‘empowerment’. This level of community
strengthens emotional connections with
a brand by way of empowering commu-

nities and advancing the social causes/
interests that mean most to people and
endorsed by the business/brand. Each
level represents varying degrees of motiva-
tion, engagement and group dynamic. The
examples shared in this paper have been
selected based on their ability to show a
range of effort, impact and opportunity
for businesses and brands.

LEVEL 1: ENGAGEMENT-POWERED
COMMUNITIES

‘We need to reimagine ourselves as a social
business system, a great network through
which ideas can travel quickly. Forget silos.
Powerful ideas that spread around the world,
that are adaptive and agile and inclusive,
built brands and build business.’ (Joseph
Tripodi, Chief Marketing & Commercial
Officer, The Coca-Cola Company)

The first level of community is powered
by ‘engagement’ and strives to invite public
interest and participation in a brand, with
hopes of building awareness and sustai-
ning longer-term interest. Crowdsourcing,
contests and promotions are exam-

ples of how marketers today are using
engagement-powered communities to
build a brand’s social and emotional value.
People are given opportunities to engage
directly with a brand via shared content, feedback and participation in promotions and contests. Businesses leverage campaigns and content as their call-to-action and catalyst for building social interest, broader awareness and hopefully, longer-term brand advocacy.

As technology becomes easier to use, people have become more confident and creative in how they communicate and express themselves to others. When a brand’s social and community experience is both useful and emotionally rewarding, people have more reasons to engage with and lend support to a brand.8

Despite the ease of use and technology options made available to businesses/brands today, the dynamics that power this level of brand/consumer relationship make this level the most challenging and fragile. In lieu of fan-generated content and community conversations, brands have the sole responsibility for creating reasons for people to connect and the content that is deemed worth sharing with others. Earning social credibility and creating ongoing reasons for people to engage with a brand requires a constant and consistent social presence. As with all newly formed human relationships, a consistent investment of time, effort and action is required to earn the attention of others and nurture engagement into becoming enduring and mutually beneficial relationships (level 2: co-creation). In a socially networked world, when brands fail to connect emotionally and socially with people, the weaker their community growth and impact potential.

According to Christian Crumlish, author of ‘The Power of Many’, consumers who participate in a contest or contribute responses are driven not only by their interest in a prize. On an emotional level, such opportunities offer people a chance to build social credibility and access new experiences that can be entertaining as well as challenging.9 In order for brands to sustain consumers’ social interest beyond the occasional participation in contests and promotions, they need to create meaningful connections.

Examples: Level 1 — engagement-powered communities

**GE Ecomagination Challenge**

This crowdsourced initiative was launched by GE in 2010 as a US$200m innovation experiment. The contest was designed to invite participation from varied forms of businesses, entrepreneurs, innovators and students. The prize was funded by GE in partnership with venture capital (VC) including Kleiner Perkins and RockPort Capital. The objective of the challenge was to create new solutions as to ‘how to improve our energy future’.10

Participants were given different ways to win a range of prize awards depending on evaluation criteria. Entrants could submit ideas to a judging panel comprised of GE executives, leading academics and technologists. Evaluation and filtering criteria for shortlisted winners was based on: (1) VC investment or commercial relationship; (2) potential for research and development (R&D) collaboration; and (3) monitoring and assessment of industry/market need. Winning ideas were then awarded prizes according to the viability of business models and even their ability to generate the highest number of votes. Vote winners received US$50,000, while finalists received US$100,000 and were offered job opportunities within early-stage VC-funded start-ups.

This open innovation approach was a unique challenge for GE, given its traditionally closed R&D business and operating model. The awarding of job
opportunities to top finalists was never part of the original plan for the contest, but was added at the suggestion of VC partners while the contest was in progress. So the evolving nature of the ‘win’ was an unexpected bonus for the winners and fuelled greater excitement and social interest among followers and the broader community.

Wendy’s Pretzel Bacon Cheeseburger

When Wendy’s tested the Pretzel Bacon Cheeseburger in select US cities, consumers immediately took to social networks sharing loving reviews of the sandwich. Consumer comments were so emphatic, they sounded more like love songs than reviews. With the national launch, Wendy’s digital agency of record, VML, crafted the #PretzelLoveSongs campaign to amplify the social behaviour that happened organically in test markets.

The campaign encouraged consumers to share their loving reviews of the sandwich on Facebook and Twitter. Then, VML leveraged those consumer comments to create five love song videos written entirely out of consumer comments. The videos were shared on Wendy’s Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages throughout the course of the campaign.

Over the summer of 2013, Wendy’s teased each upcoming release with a social post enticing fans to tune in and watch the next video. Who will be the talent? Will your comment be featured? Fans tuned in with anticipation.

True to motivating factors such as building social credibility, the videos included the contributor’s name, user handle and profile photo. The #PretzelLoveSongs campaign engaged and rewarded avid fans with crowd-sourced content and offered them an entertaining opportunity to participate. Importantly, this offered fans the ability to become recognised within a broader community of like-minded ‘pretzelmaniacs’. While not at the level of co-creation, Wendy’s clearly made an emotional bond with its fans and far exceeded expected sales.11

Within a few months, the campaign achieved high marks:

- 212 million media impressions;
- 1.8 billion PR impressions;
- media buy was more than twice as efficient versus comparable quick service restaurant campaigns;
- 5.8 million video views across Facebook and YouTube in less than five weeks and over 8.1 million video views to date.

#PretzelLoveSongs was relaunched in the summer of 2014. The final video, ‘Let it Live’, announced that the Pretzel Bacon Cheeseburger is now here to stay as combo #11.

LEVEL 2: CO-CREATION POWERED COMMUNITIES

‘But just remember: a future in which the consumer is in control is not a future in which brands have lost all control. The role of brands in this future continues to be one of creating top-of-mind awareness — the cognitive shortcuts that drive repeat purchase. Additionally, marketers will not only need to listen for feedback, but also implement pathways that can feed such reviews and comments directly into the organization’s product development processes. This will become a requirement, as consumers who take the time to share feedback may become increasingly unhappy (and vocal) if their comments are not acted upon.’ (Kris Chronister, CEO, Pearls.com)12

The second level of community is powered by co-creation and is characterised
by an iterative process of collaboration between fans and business/brands. This level of community is even more emotionally rewarding for fans as it recognises their contribution and/or the role they play in building brand perception, experience and/or advocacy. The most pervasive example today of co-creation powered community efforts is customer product reviews. Consider the following:

‘The current top 10 reviewers on Amazon are responsible for more than 15,000 reviews and, in many cases, these connected consumers have shifted the balance of power away from the best-known brands and their multimillion-dollar ad campaigns. While a readily identifiable brand is still an asset on sites such as Amazon, it’s little more than the cost of entry. Beyond that point, product success is increasingly in the hands of the consumer.’13

The efforts of brand fans at this level are voluntary as with Level 1, but there is a higher level of personal involvement and independent motivation. Fan participation, content creation and unaided endorsements are the most authentic and valued forms of social currency for a brand. Beyond consumer reviews, one can see how a stronger emotional connection between fan and brand can inspire advocacy such as the creation of unofficial Facebook fan pages, Twitter streams, blogs, videos and music.

Level 2 co-creation means that brands benefit from the additional content, interest and engagement produced by brand fans. Building brand advocacy can now become a shared responsibility proudly assumed by the most supportive and active fans.

When fan contributions shape, inspire or enhance a brand’s social and emotional value, it is important that such effort be recognised and celebrated by business/brands. Such recognition is not only good social and customer service etiquette; it is the emotional reward fans seek in exchange for their efforts and support. Utilising content, ideas or feedback from brand fans validates their role and acknowledges the impact of their contributions. Moreover, when business/brands take the time to listen/notice and honour a fan’s efforts, such recognition fuels greater social interest from others within the community. The failure to recognise a brand fan’s efforts can ultimately lead to a change of heart, apathy, or even disappointment that is also shared socially.

Examples: Level 2 — co-creation powered communities

**PepsiCo: Mountain Dew — Dewmocracy**

PepsiCo’s Mountain Dew saw that its young, active brand enthusiasts were inherently involved in social media. In early 2008, the brand launched an online game called ‘Dewmocracy’ to involve brand fans in developing new flavours. In 2009 the campaign switched from a game to a broader social media campaign. Mountain Dew asked its fans to tell them why they should be selected to help create the next new flavour. In the first phase, 50 winning brand fans were sent test kits of seven new flavours and asked to create videos for their favourite. This resulted in three new flavours, yet to be named. The testers and DEW Lab participants were organised into three ‘Flavor Nations’, each with Facebook and Twitter accounts. They became responsible for naming, designing and marketing the new products. Mountain Dew set up Flavor Nation accounts on Facebook and Twitter and then had its digital agencies pitch to each of the Flavor Nations. This put the brand enthusiast in control of creative direction.
Comedy sites like The Onion and College Humor also submitted video pitches of why their sites should be selected to promote the new flavours.

The three new flavours were then named and designed. ‘Distortion’, ‘Typhoon’ and ‘White Out’ were each available for purchase over a limited time. Road trips were organised and the voting began. Fans voted on the brand website, by text and also through Xbox Live. Based on votes (the company claimed that sales figures were not a factor), the winning flavour, White Out, was declared the winner. Passionate Dew fans were not just given a say in the direction of the brand, but were empowered to co-create content and determine the outcome of a new flavour launch.14

Parle Agro: Hippo

This case demonstrates how consumers have been called upon to act and how their actions fuelled not only advocacy but sales growth. In India, the 2009 launch of a new packaged snack, Hippo Baked Munchies, was so successful that the product became difficult to keep in stock. The parent company, Parle Agro, had a nascent distribution system, which could not identify the empty stores. Consumer demand, coupled with the difficulty of distributing across India’s highly unorganised retail market, posed a tremendous challenge. With the timely rise of mobile penetration, the brand empowered its fans with social media based tools to help plug the distribution gap. Consumers were asked to tweet reports of out-of-stocks. The company then followed up with tweets back to confirm that the product had been delivered. Fans who tweeted the most were rewarded with free products and a handwritten thank-you note. With the power of a fan-based inventory tracking system, sales reportedly increased an impressive 76 per cent.

This particular case shows how people can delight in the opportunity to help, and in the impact they can have when given an essential role and shared responsibility in ensuring that a brand fulfils its mission. While not a cause-based initiative, the brand has a tongue-in-cheek philosophy that ‘hunger is at the root of all evil’, and gives the call to action, ‘Don’t go hungry’. Participatory brand language is also key in building connections and inspiring action from a community. Hippo’s down-to-earth language offered an inviting way to promote co-creative collaboration. In this case, the result was access to Hippo snacks for all.15

The Coca-Cola Company: Coke Zero

Coke was an early player in crowdsourcing, and as social media platforms have advanced, so have Coke’s collaborative initiatives. Back in 2002, the company launched ‘My Coke’, a videogame platform that inspired branded content and music. More recent initiatives such as the Accelerator Program fund innovation from individuals around the world through an active community.

A number of global campaigns have shown that involving communities in the co-creation of brand content has the effect of democratising creativity. After success with video contests in Singapore in 2009 where Coke put out a call for video and animation to capture the tagline, ‘It’s possible’, Coke Zero launched a global ‘Make it possible’ initiative that redefined the brand’s marketing process. When speaking of the brand’s numerous social media platforms, Jonathan Mildenhall, VP of Global Advertising Strategy, said he viewed every community member as a marketing director for the Coke Zero brand. This particular
campaign, run by Ogilvy & Mather Paris, kicked off with the creator of The Legion of Extraordinary Dancers announcing that the brand was looking for a hot new dance to express the theme. Jon M. Chu encouraged dancers of all levels to participate. Choreographers and dancers from around the world uploaded their favourite moves to the website. The community commented on and debated about their favourites and offered encouragement. An American street dancer’s ‘Toe Tappy’ dance won the most votes. Then a casting call was issued to perform the dance with a similar selection process. Coke Zero flew the dancers to Los Angeles to produce film versions of ‘Toe Tappy’ with a French dancer named Keego as the lead. It begins with the story of a boy with a rough childhood confronted with parents who do not support his artistic passion. With community support, he finds joy through dance (a narrative loosely based on the personal story of the New York street dancer who created ‘Toe Tappy’ (Figure 1).

The process and storyline of the final video amplified the ‘Make it Possible’ theme with continuous co-creation and input from the communities. The reward was in the participation and accomplishments of those who contributed. Like most of these examples, Coke inspired consumer action through social media in advance of the more traditional media campaign.

Fiskars: Fiskateers
The most evolved example of a brand’s efforts to grow a co-creation-powered community comes from the Finnish brand Fiskars. Founded in 1649, it is Finland’s oldest company. About fifteen years ago its US business was in jeopardy due to weak brand equity and the commoditisation of its signature product, the Fiskars scissors, by knock-off generics nationwide.

Instead of taking the usual marketing/storytelling approach about how great its products are, Fiskars celebrated what its customers were most passionate about...
when using its product: arts and crafts. This insight fostered a deeper emotional/social connection between Fiskars, craft fans and scrapbookers.

Beyond understanding, Fiskars expressed support for brand fans by empowering their voices. Starting in 2006, it created a loyalty reward programme and website especially for, and powered by its brand fans, the Fiskateers. The Fiskateers programme quickly grew beyond loyalty and became a true community, both on-and-offline. This programme initially launched as an independent website separate from the Fiskars corporate site. The website was shaped by the Fiskateer community members who generated most of the content in the form of posts and shared ideas. The role of the Fiskateers website has evolved over the years, but Fiskars has remained committed in providing its fans with the tools and support required to stay connected and inspired. Today, the Fiskateer community prefers use of social platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and Instagram. Staying true to its original commitment to its fans, Fiskars follows their lead and facilitates community emotional and social connection wherever possible.

What makes this programme truly co-creative are the following:

- **Members have a role**: Members are inspired by other members. Lead Fiskateers attended tradeshows and lead local classes and social events;
- **Inclusivity**: With over 5,000 members, all 50 US states are represented;
- **Members are empowered and trained**: Over 1,000 members were trained and have received certification as demonstrators. Fiskars invests three days of training, with one part of the training spent on why they should not be promoting Fiskars within the community.
- **Constant loop of feedback**: Fiskateers will regularly feed product ideas to Fiskars R&D and provide feedback on products in development.
The result is a stronger brand, stronger sales, and endless authentic stories being created and shared by both the people and retailers rather than the brand or business.

LEVEL 3: EMPOWERMENT-LED COMMUNITIES

‘People are willing to give brands a greater role in their lives, only if they empower them, and do so without imposition or fanfare.’ (Nigel Hollis, Chief Global Analyst, Millward Brown)\textsuperscript{18}

The third level of community is fuelled by ‘empowerment’. At this level, the efforts of business and brands are characterised by active and industry-leading advocacy for social issues/injustices, movements and worthy causes. Unlike level 2: co-creation and level 1: engagement-powered communities, the primary benefactor of level 3 communities is the people and the causes they support. Business and brands play more of a supporting role in advancing the interests of the community by empowering their ability to create positive social change.

Businesses have a vested interest in supporting this form of community, especially when a community/cause aligns with a business/brand mission. So rather than contributing to worthy causes by issuing monetary contributions, businesses can instead choose to embolden causes and movements to promote positive social

Figure 3  Ideas are shared by trained members on the Fiskateers website
change by empowering the people and communities leading the effort. Additional benefits for business can also be realised if viewed as a longer-term investment. It is in the best interest of every business to do what it can to build stronger, more socially and environmentally sustainable forms of community and local economy. Empowering the efforts of a level 3 community gives businesses a way to become more active and effective citizens in promoting positive social change.

Not unlike the way stronger emotional engagement and support from brand fans results in greater impact for building brand advocacy, here the impact of emotional response is similar, but with the exception that the roles are reversed. A business/brand's passion and commitment to a community and/or cause becomes self-evident through its actions, shared sense of responsibility and commitment to growing support and awareness for a community, its purpose and/or cause.

Beyond providing monetary support, businesses can empower the success of level 3 communities by lending a more powerful and influential voice when building awareness and support for social issues. Additionally, businesses can contribute time, in the form of volunteers to help boost community activity and inspire engagement. Resources can also be shared by businesses with communities and cause-worthy initiatives in the form of shared infrastructure, talent and development of the tools needed by communities to amplify their effort. These are just a few examples of how businesses can become more involved in building support for community interests and causes.¹⁹

According to the Reputation Institute, corporate social responsibility (CSR)-related efforts such as this can have as much as a 40 per cent impact on a brand's reputation.²⁰ Aside from the benefit to perception, it is a sustainable investment in the health and growth of local communities. Although the immediate benefit goes to the community and cause, business/brands will also benefit exponentially, given that level 3 efforts can fuel and inspire both level 1 and level 2 social interests and brand advocacy. The benefit of this level of community may seem purely philanthropic. In reality, however, it is the most potent strategy for aligning corporate mission directly with community passion.

Examples: Level 3 — empowerment-led communities

**Unilever: Dove Real Beauty**

Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ demonstrates how a brand can take a social position and use media investment to promote a cause. By introducing a new definition of beauty, one that celebrates natural physical characteristics, the brand inspired women to have more confidence and be more comfortable with themselves. Following the 2004 launch, there have been many iterations and a number of videos that have gone viral. Ogilvy & Mather has extended the campaign with videos posted to the Real Beauty website. In 2014 Dove introduced a video called ‘Dove Real Beauty Sketches’, which used a criminal sketch artist to draw images of women as they described their own features. The artist then created a second sketch of the same woman based on the description from a stranger who had just met her. The stranger’s description was consistently more positive and resulted in what most would see as a more beautiful image (Figure 4). The most emotionally powerful moment is when the woman is shown both images of herself. The viewer sees the woman confronted with both her self-image and the
Dove’s commitment to championing self-esteem and personal beauty across the globe strikes emotions as it amplifies a significant gender issue.\textsuperscript{21}

Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ achieved success as follows:

- 135 million views;
- 25 languages in 110 countries;
- over 4 billion PR and blogger media impressions.

OfficeMax: AdoptAClassroom.org

Taking on causes can have a tremendous positive impact beyond the target audience. OfficeMax in the USA (recently acquired by Office Depot) became aware of a serious lack of supplies in classrooms across the country. In many instances, teachers were spending thousands of dollars from their own salaries to help. In 2004 OfficeMax partnered with an existing organisation, AdoptAClassroom.org, which was struggling to match supply with demand. OfficeMax stepped in with a comprehensive programme that engaged its vendors, customers and employees. Employees were asked to deliver the surprise boxes of goods directly to the teachers’ classrooms. As the programme grew, photographs of the teachers’ shock and joy were posted. Bloggers promoted the positive impact on behalf of the teachers and students. Customers were encouraged to make donations. A company survey found that 97 per cent of employees felt the programme was the most important activity of the company and made it more meaningful for them to work there. Ultimately the CMO of OfficeMax, Bob Thacker, moved to AdoptAClassroom.org. The OfficeMax initiative, ‘A day made better’, has received a groundswell of support, reaching over 8,000 teachers and 250,000 children.\textsuperscript{22}

Ben & Jerry’s ice cream: ‘Linked prosperity’

Ben & Jerry’s is a 35-year-old ice cream company that has proved that purpose and profit can indeed co-exist (Figure 5). It was among the first to adopt progressive management principles that have since become best practice standards in business today. For example, in 1991 it became the first publicly traded company to offer benefits to the same-sex partners of its employees.

Co-founder, Ben Cohen, stewarded the negotiation of terms for the sale of the company to Unilever in 1999. He succeeded in establishing a unique set of agreements that not only preserved the brand’s commitment to pursuing linked prosperity, but did so in a way that was far more empowering for the communities it supported and impactful for the causes it has led. For example, in the mid-1990s
it financed a campaign against bovine growth hormones that has since been credited as the saving grace for countless family farms.23 The brand’s commitment to community, justice and cause is evident in its continued activism and support of civic rights and social equality.

Ben & Jerry’s founding philosophy represented its shared belief that everyone and everything the company touched should benefit from its profits.

It is no wonder that today the company is recognised as being a global leader in CSR. All of the ingredients used by the company are Fair Trade certified and free from genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Its dairy farmers follow the strictest guidelines. True to the Ben & Jerry’s founding philosophy of ‘linked prosperity’, the company helps the farmers evolve and keep pace by absorbing the costs attributed to meeting new and stricter CSR standards. Growing business and brand by enriching the communities it serves benefits all levels and forms of community. It is important to note that Ben & Jerry’s inspired deep levels of emotional support from consumers and company stakeholders well before the advent of social media.

Beyond its commitment to causes, Ben & Jerry’s has always celebrated an irreverent culture true to its motto ‘Peace, love & ice cream’. A visit to its Instagram page conveys the range of light-hearted observations of things fun, strange and often political, if not controversial. The brand has translated its voice into social media with apparent ease. After the State of Colorado legalised marijuana, the company tweeted ‘Breaking news: We’re hearing reports of stores selling out of Ben & Jerry’s in Colorado. What’s up with that?’ (Figure 6). The brand continues to demonstrate agility in this space with a lens on what both inspires and amuses its fan base.

**KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

‘Companies can become a force for positive change while enhancing their long-term business, their customers and society at large. In the long term, a shared-value approach can improve the way companies are perceived by consumers, foster innovation by thinking about products and markets in new ways, and open up new markets. By creating products and services to meet the needs and budgets of very low-income consumers, brands have a huge opportunity...
to add new revenue streams and to create a virtuous circle, where employed locals become aspiring middle-class consumers.’

While brands benefit from a Level 1 form of community engagement, achieving recognition as a Level 2 or credibility as a Level 3 community is not a straightforward or predictable process. Note that most of the Level 2 and Level 3 examples that were shared were not only innovative and creative, but bold in their commitment, and fearless in their ownership and support of programmes and/or ideals. In order to be a ‘people powered brand’, businesses should include the following questions/requirements as part of their due diligence, strategy and planning:

- Will the programme be led by executives and personally embraced by the chief executive officer?
- What is the tolerance for risk?
- Is there clarity of corporate purpose?
- How can the community mission align with business objectives?
- What is the corporate track record for support and longevity of commitment?
- What are the most emotionally unifying CSR priorities?
- What is the commitment to additional resources, tools and knowledge?

The key benefits associated with the empowerment of a level 3 form of community include the following benefits to business:

- strengthened and favourable reputation for corporation and brands;
- greater likelihood of audience loyalty and preference due to shared interests;
- enriched credibility and authenticity of story;
- greater social substance and reasons for people to engage and share positive mentions regarding corporations via social networks;
- increased pride from current and future employees and thereby increased employee retention;

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Figure 6  Ben & Jerry’s irreverent tweet following the State of Colorado’s legalisation of marijuana

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• community content and engagement provides a sustainable source of content and share-worthy materials for brand and marketing teams;
• a more focused approach to the allocation of philanthropic or cause marketing-related funds;
• shareholders/investors able to see how foundation or philanthropic efforts can have an indirect, yet positive impact on business performance.

CONCLUSIONS

‘If you’re in the business of building long-term brands, you should involve all stakeholders in the process. And if you mean to pave the way for long-term profitability, you should know that “doing good” is good business.’ (Sir Martin Sorrell, Chairman, WPP)24

The brands that benefit from the active support of fans are those who have understood, long before most, the dynamic that forms between emotion and action. These brands can claim an exponential growth of fan interest and advocacy, not so much for what they have promoted about themselves, but on the basis of what they have enabled and inspired in others.

Unfortunately, today, most brands have maintained a limited and literal perspective of ‘community’, thereby obscuring the opportunities for growing businesses and brands. There is more to ‘community’ than brands having a social presence, and engaging and collecting followers or fans. Communities are not defined or limited to platform, geography or medium. They are powered by affinity, emotional engagement and active support.25–27

So, although strengthening people, communities and cause may at first seem like an indirect and illogical approach to meeting investor and market expectations, leaders such as Ben & Jerry’s prove that the emotional support of people and society can offer far more exponential returns for both business and brands.

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