FEVERBEE

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A FEVERBEE BRIEFING PAPER

Community Marketing

A briefing paper.

A working definition, the main forms of community marketing, and the primary conditions driving its rapid rise.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

In a world where the effectiveness of marketing channels is rapidly declining, community marketing presents a new approach. Community marketing is the distinct discipline of using community techniques to achieve marketing outcomes. Here we outline a working definition, the main forms of community marketing, and the primary conditions that are driving its rapid rise.

SECTION 01

What community marketing is

When you think of brand communities, you probably think of one of two things.

The first is a cult brand. Cult brands, like Harley-Davidson, Supreme, or Apple, have fans more than customers. Those fans ride together, queue outside stores for the latest release, wear the clothing, and advocate constantly out of a deep love for the brand. Through the late 2000s, marketing firms told companies to "become a cult brand."

The problem, as it became clear, is that creating a cult brand is far harder than it looks. The contrarian decisions that help brands earn that status are too difficult for most organisations to take, and it soon turned out there were more books about cult brands than there were cult brands.

Recommending that you become a cult brand is a little like recommending that you write a bestseller. It is great if it happens, but hard to follow a plan to get there. Cult brands are extreme outliers: easy to admire, difficult to replicate.

The second type is the support-centric customer community. These are the communities pioneered almost two decades ago by companies like Autodesk, Dell, and Best Buy. These were places where, if you owned a product and needed help, you went to the community, asked a question, and got an answer.

Many organisations since have found it far cheaper to resolve a question in a community than through a support channel. This is because one good answer can be read by hundreds or thousands of people who then never open a ticket.

This can result in exponential cost savings.

The enduring problem is that once you have your answer, there is little reason to return. Many organisations have spent years trying to encourage repeat visits with limited success. Fundamentally, people in a support community show up only when they have a question, leave once they get one, and do not come back until the next one. That can be next week, next year, or never again.

The key to these communities was search traffic. People searched for answers in Google, found a thread, and clicked through. However, in the last few years that traffic has collapsed. Many communities have seen their visitor count plummet by over 50% as answers are absorbed into search results and AI summaries.

A new breed of brand community

Over the past few years, a different category of community has emerged among many of the top brands. It combines the advocacy of the cult brand with the platform mechanics of the support community. This category is community marketing.

Community marketing —

Community marketing is the practice of using community techniques to build and grow affinity for a brand and the topics it stands for, wherever that community lives, to achieve marketing outcomes.

Community marketing has been pioneered by luxury brands, brands with passionate fanbases, and organisations selling complex, high-consideration products. What makes these communities different is that they are destinations. They do not just offer question and answer; people choose to spend time there, engage with one another, learn what is new, and discover more about the products they care about. You build a carefully cultivated experience that improves sentiment and drives outcomes across the entire marketing funnel. Sephora and Salesforce both run versions of this at scale.

The cult brand	+	The support community	→	Community marketing
ADVOCACY		PLATFORM MECHANICS		DESTINATION COMMUNITIES

SECTION 02

The core challenge

The idea of using a community to drive marketing outcomes is not new. Over the past decade many organisations launched a community they own and control to attract new customers, and quickly ran into the same wall.

THE WALL

The challenge is that most people will not join and engage in a community for a product they do not already buy. That's because they don't have an interest in the product or many questions to ask. And if they did, they often go to Reddit or elsewhere for what feels like independent advice.

This is the central problem of community marketing. How do you create a destination that people who are not yet your customers will actually join and participate in?

A support community is different. There's an obvious trigger for someone to visit and participate in the community. They have a problem which needs an answer. The challenge with community marketing is finding or creating a powerful trigger for an audience to join and participate.

SUPPORT COMMUNITY

An obvious trigger: a problem which needs an answer.

VS

COMMUNITY MARKETING

A powerful trigger for an audience to join and participate has to be found or created.

SECTION 03

Three ways to do community marketing

There is no single approach. Which model fits depends on three things:

1. Your audience's awareness of, and sentiment toward, your products.
2. The demographics of the audience you are trying to reach.
3. The specific needs and constraints of your organisation.

These characteristics shape which of the three models below suits your brand at any given time.

Model 1: Aspirational customers, hosted community

Many audiences will join a community because they are aspirational customers. This shows up clearly for buyers of watches, cars, and luxury clothing. They intend to buy (or upgrade) and want a place to ask questions, get feedback, and feel part of a tribe. This includes status-related products and products tied to hobbies where people already spend a lot of time, such as gaming or reading.

These communities thrive when you build a genuine destination that goes well beyond question and answer, for example:

- Discussions ranked by popularity.
- Relevant links and videos shared from across the ecosystem.
- Access to product experts to ask questions.
- Collaboration with relevant influencers and experts.
- Tips and hacks for getting the most from the product.
- The latest case studies in the sector.
- Lists of top creators and influencers to follow.
- Discounts and promotional offers.

This is not a definitive list, but it captures the principle: these have to be engaging, destination-centric communities, not help desks.

Model 2: Brand-neutral hosted communities

The second model is brand-neutral, hosted communities. These are communities that aren't about the brand, but hosted and run by the brand. This works when the audience cares deeply about the product - typically when the product relates to a powerful status symbol or something they invest a significant amount of spare time in.

For example, imagine you manufacture washing machines. People don't typically spend their spare time talking about washing machines. It's not usually an aspirational purchase. You could build a support community for owners, but it is unlikely that non-owners would join a community about washing machines.

But what if you didn't create a community about washing machines but about the role they perform or the benefits of using them? Your audience may not want to talk about appliances, but they will happily swap time-saving household tips, advice on caring for clothes, or decluttering ideas.

These communities are topic-centric but brand-neutral. They appeal to customers and non-customers alike. Once your audience is engaged, you have many opportunities to move them toward a sale. Whether you are B2B, B2C, or a non-profit, it is possible to build the definitive community for a topic. Everyone who joins is a potential lead.

Model 3: Platform-neutral, audience-central

The third model is platform-neutral, audience-centric communities. These are communities where you don't own the platform, but you're reacting entirely to the needs and desires of the audience. This is primarily targeted at young audiences who prefer to engage on the channels they are most familiar with. Yes, you attract Gen Z folks to platforms you control, but it's significantly harder than attracting any other group. That is why, in these cases, we follow a 'Community Everywhere' approach.

The goal is not to pull the audience to a platform you own, but to engage in the platforms where they already participate. You identify where your audiences gather and decide whether:

1. **You support those channels**, giving existing creators, event hosts, and communities resources, information, and promotion.
2. **You build your own presence there**, launching groups, subreddits, channels, and accounts where the audience already engages.

In practice, this can include:

- Hosting events and activities.
- Promoting and supporting creators.
- Employee advocates running live breakdowns.
- Collaborations and partnerships with others in the sector.
- Responding to discussions, and escalating unanswered ones internally.

This approach is less measurable and less controllable (see owned versus rented, below). You trade measurement and control for participation.

THE DECISIVE FACTOR

Do not take a single-minded approach to community marketing. Adopt an adaptive one, choosing the model that matches the characteristics of the audience in front of you.

SECTION 04

Owned versus rented

So, why should you host and pay for your own community when your audience might already be engaging on Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, and Discord and plenty of other channels?

Don't LLMs pull a lot of their answers from Reddit, Quora, and other independent platforms anyhow? Heck, Google even pays Reddit around $60 million a year to train on its content and surface it in Search.

The answer is four-fold:

01 **Ownership.** On a third-party platform, you don't control the experience. If members post inaccurate information, competitors post fibs about you, or the space fills with spam, you can't do much about it. Your own contributions can be edited or removed without warning. And, in the worst-case scenario, the entire space can disappear without notice.

Reddit, especially, is prone to temperamental moderators removing any posts (and folks) from a brand. Independence is paramount. This makes converting anything from subreddits into new customers difficult. The benefits are also incredibly volatile. Reddit's search visibility rose more than 1,300% in under a year, then gave much of it back on a single algorithm change.

02 **Customisation.** In a hosted community you curate and design the experience around your brand and your goals. On an independent platform you cannot. It is like selling only through Amazon, or running a store that has to look like every other store: the traffic helps, but it comes at a clear cost. The experience has to look like every other kind of experience. There's no way to customise it to your needs or customer desires. You lose anything that makes you and your brand unique.

03 **Data.** The third problem is data (or access to it). In a hosted community, you can collect member names, email addresses, and behavioural signals, and use them to design buying journeys and convert your audience into customers and advocates. You can't do this on independent platforms. Facebook, Discord, and the rest do not even provide you with member contact details. Without that data, you will struggle to measure whether the community is growing, let alone whether members are more engaged or converting into customers. You will always be working in the dark.

04 **Reach versus results.** The final problem is the outcome. Independent platforms offer greater reach than through any other channel. But it doesn't easily convert into results. That's because the results require access that independent platforms don't offer. You can't easily capture and follow up on leads or set an agenda, or even contact the folks who have shown interest in you and your services. If you want to offer a discount to your most active members, tough…it can't be done on an independent platform. That's why it's best to own the experience where you can drive engagement into results.

This isn't a comprehensive list - but it does cover the major benefits of owning vs. renting a platform experience.

SECTION 05

Measuring value

There are plenty of ways to measure the results of community marketing.

But the first step is to decide where in the marketing funnel you expect the community to have an effect.

There are five common areas here.

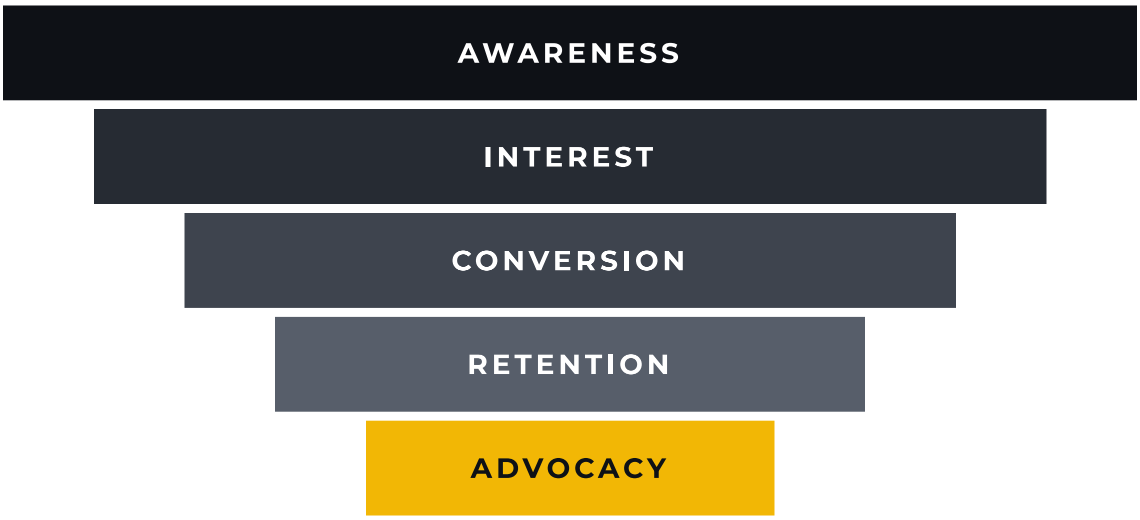
01 **Awareness**: did the community put you in front of people who do not yet know you? I.e., did you reach people who you otherwise wouldn't have reached?

02 **Interest**: is the community moving people toward a decision? I.e., did members read or engage with something that improves their attitudes or sentiment towards your brand or products?

03 **Conversion**: does community engagement improve the percentage and speed of conversions? I.e. did people in the sales funnel receive positive information (testimonials, comments etc.) at the right time?

04 **Retention**: does the community keep customers, and does it cost less than the alternative? I.e., do members feel more loyal when being part of the group or realise your brand is better than others via content and discussions they read in the community?

05 **Advocacy**: does the community turn customers into a growth engine that feeds the first stage? I.e. Are members incentivised to speak positively about the brand and products due to community engagement?



How communities support the entire marketing funnel

Each stage offers metrics you can track. Do not try to measure everything. Decide which outcome matters most to you, then pick two or three metrics within it and optimise for those. It's critical to have a credible measurement model.

The table below separates leading and lagging indicators. Leading (community) indicators can be measured directly inside the community. Lagging (business) indicators are the outcomes that take more work to analyse and prove.

STAGE	COMMUNITY METRICS	BUSINESS METRICS
Awareness	Net new members (customer vs non-customer); AI citation share (ChatGPT, Perplexity, AI Overviews); search clicks on community URLs; referring domains earned	New CRM names, first touch; cost per new name vs paid channels
Interest	Non-customers viewing evaluation threads; question answer rate; depth of member guides; first-party intent signals per account	MQLs with prior community engagement (share of all); conversion rate, engaged vs all visitors
Conversion	Community-qualified lead (CQL) volume; CQL to opportunity conversion rate	Pipeline sourced and influenced; CQL vs MQL close rate; win rate, deal size, cycle length (engaged vs not)
Retention	Accounts with an active member; peer resolution rate; time to resolution vs tickets; deflected tickets and cost avoided	Net revenue retention (engaged vs not); expansion revenue from engaged accounts
Advocacy	Active advocates; answers by members vs staff; user-generated content volume; member-sourced referrals	Referral-sourced pipeline and revenue; NPS difference (engaged vs not)

Select which metrics matter most to you and then optimise community activities to achieve those results. How you would design a community to increase awareness is very different from how you would drive advocacy or improve lead conversion.

LEADING INDICATORS

Community metrics, measured directly inside the community.

➔

LAGGING INDICATORS

Business outcomes that take more work to analyse and prove.

How to attribute, in order of credibility

So, how do we do the tricky attribution part?

Attribution is a perennial problem in every form of marketing. You will rarely prove strict causation, but you should be able to show a clean correlation between community activity and business outcomes. Ideally, you will report this with honest caveats about its strengths and limitations. (i.e., engagement rose here, revenue moved there, and the first is a plausible reason for the second.)

There are plenty of different attribution methods, but here are three to deploy - rated by order of credibility.

01 **Matched cohort comparison.** Compare accounts of people who do engage in a community against a matched set of similar size, segment, and tenure that did not engage. The power of this is it resolves the obvious problem with comparing members to non-members. Those most likely to become and stay customers are naturally more engaged in a community. However, when you match customers of similar characteristics together, you can prove the difference is more likely to be the community.

02 **Multi-touch attribution.** A far easier and more common approach is to fold community touches into the model you already run. Your marketing team will already have some attribution models in place. You can simply fold community into the existing model. The downside here is it inherits whatever flaws that model already has, and it wasn't initially designed for the unique characteristics of community.

03 **Self-reported attribution.** The final approach is the simplest and least precise. You simply add community to your "how did you hear about us" field. This is most useful as a cross-check, not on its own. But it gives you some good, solid, directional data.

There is no single perfect community metric, but there are plenty that both pass the sniff test and provide a defensible argument for the community's results.

Don't neglect this. Marketing budgets have fallen to under 8% of revenue, and most leaders say they lack the funding to deliver their plan. You need to show how the community is driving the results your marketing team needs.

01

MATCHED COHORT COMPARISON

The most credible: compare engaged accounts against a matched set that did not engage.

02

MULTI-TOUCH ATTRIBUTION

Far easier and more common: fold community touches into the model you already run.

03

SELF-REPORTED ATTRIBUTION

The simplest and least precise: most useful as a cross-check, not on its own.

SECTION 06

Why now

So why does community marketing matter now? Why wasn't this as big a deal five or ten years ago?

The answer is two-fold. The first is that many organisations have been engaging in some form of community marketing - often under a different label or without even realising there was a unique term for it. The second is that a lot has changed over the past few years which makes community marketing more important than ever.

What has changed?

If it feels like every marketing channel has gotten worse recently, that's probably because it has.

In the past, marketers had plenty of great channels to attract and convert attention.

In the past, you could publish definitive content for the search terms that mattered and build a steady audience of buyers. HubSpot built a $13bn company doing exactly that.

Likewise, you could buy social ads and quickly assemble an audience.

You could also sponsor events, rent mailing lists, and collaborate with influencers etc. There was a wide gamut of ways to reach new customers.

However, over the last five years, every one of those channels has increased in cost and declined in effectiveness.

For example, email, once the golden child of direct marketing, is less effective than ever. Emails from brands now get automatically sorted into the Promotions tab that fewer users ever check. Even if the audience has implicitly stated they want to receive emails from the brand it's increasingly likely they won't even see the ones they receive.

The paid approach isn't much more effective either. Paid social is more expensive and less effective. Average CPMs continue to climb. Social ads on Meta have risen by 20% in a single year. And trying to reach B2B audiences on platforms they use, like LinkedIn, is increasingly prohibitive for even the largest organisations.

Worse yet, the audience who clicks on ads is rarely the folks who actually buy. Most B2B buyers are simply too savvy to click on social ads. And resistance to all forms of ads continues to rise. Recently, the loss of third-party cookies has inflated acquisition costs even further.

In light of all this, many organisations have tried to earn organic traffic on social media. But now that has collapsed too. Less than one in ten followers now see a branded post. This is down from roughly 16% a little over a decade ago.

It is harder than ever to build a channel people choose to visit. This is partly because of the ever-increasing battle for attention, and partly because the cost of producing content has fallen to almost nothing. Around three-quarters of new web pages now contain AI-generated content. Half the new articles produced today are AI-written. Standing out to attract attention has become harder than ever.

And finally we come to search - the channel that powered so much of this over the past two decades. Today, fewer than a third of Google searches now send a click to the open web. And the introduction of AI Overviews, which show content without people having to click on the page, has predictably reduced clickthroughs by a third to well over half. When your buyers ask a question on search engines or in an LLM, they're increasingly likely to get an answer assembled from sources like Reddit, Quora, and other sites versus your own content.

+20%

RISE IN META SOCIAL AD COSTS IN A SINGLE YEAR

<1 in 10

FOLLOWERS WHO NOW SEE A BRANDED SOCIAL POST

<1 in 3

GOOGLE SEARCHES THAT SEND A CLICK TO THE OPEN WEB

What has not changed

One thing has not changed in this AI-propelled world: the importance of trust and relationships. This is where community marketing thrives. That's because it gives people a destination where they build relationships and arrive through mutual trust. It is a place you own, where no one else decides how the algorithm works, and no one can promote or bury you at will.

One major draw of community is that, amid these changes, buyers increasingly trust peers over brand messaging. 88% of people trust recommendations from people they know above every other channel. Even recommendations from strangers score higher than brand content. In the B2B space, notably, three-quarters of those surveyed say a piece of independent thought leadership has led them to consider a product they were not looking at.

Community marketing fills the gap

As the contour of the AI-propelled future becomes more vivid, it's increasingly clear that communities fill the gap. Community is both a response to the declining effectiveness of marketing channels and an answer to a growing desire for authentic connection in a world filling up with automated content.

Audiences increasingly seek authenticity in a world of AI slop. They want places to learn from one another, exchange independent advice, and feel part of something. That is exactly what a well-run community gives them.

It is what makes community marketing, pound for pound, one of the most cost-effective ways to market a brand today. And it's what makes community the most powerful way to achieve a growing list of marketing goals.

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ABOUT FEVERBEE

FeverBee is a specialist community consultancy. Over the past 16 years, FeverBee has helped more than 350 organisations, including Apple, Google, Microsoft, SAP, and the World Bank, develop and execute successful community strategies.

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ABOUT OUR SPONSOR

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