

Your customers have evolved into a community. Have you joined?

By [Jon Bishop](#)

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Yes, that is correct. Your customer stopped being your customer a few years ago when they realised that they truly do have the power, thanks to the advent of social media and price comparison sites and the like.



So, in order to reach them, you had to entertain them, turning your customer into your audience (which I spoke about in my [New Media Conference presentation](#)). Now it turns out that your customers have meeting points online where they can discuss your brand/products, **essentially turning your customers into a community.**

Think about it. Only a few years ago, there were only a few very cumbersome ways of discussing a product in public, the most popular being letters to a newspaper/magazine or getting your case featured on a television watchdog-style program. Ever tried getting your case heard on a TV show? Not an easy thing to do and certainly not a great form of constant communication flow.

So what happened to change this?

Well, constant communication flow happened in the form of social media. Social networks, niche networks, micro-blogging (Twitter etc), forums and new era consumer sites such as getclosure.co.za all make it extremely easy for people to talk about anything online with a potential audience of millions. It's like your average dinner party amplified to the power of a 1000, except for one key difference: ultra-niching.



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Ultra-niching

Ultra-niching is another new term born out of the social media revolution that talks to the natural drifting of people towards people of similar interests. In social media you can find people with exact matches to your interests. So imagine online 'dinner parties' where everyone is there primarily to talk about one very specific thing (it could very well be the good and bad points of your product/brand!) and imagine how dangerous it is for these conversations to be ignored by your company.

An example of breaking down an ultra-niche*:

Demographic breakdown	How many people in the world
I am a male	3 billion approx. males in the world.
I live in London	3 or 4 million males living in London maybe?
I love paragliding	Maybe 50 000 males living in London love paragliding. this is a niche
I only enjoy alpine flying	Maybe only 500 males in London love paragliding but only enjoy alpine flying. This is an ultra-niche.

*Numbers are a serious thumb suck.

So, the first thing I am going to do is go find a group on Facebook in the London network that talks about flying the alps. This way, I find a community that shares my passions so I can talk about it with someone that doesn't think I'm nuts (like my

wife or friends do). I'll also check out the paragliding forums, Flickr groups about Alpine flying picture and follow anyone on Twitter talking about Alpine flying.

Managing your community

Now if you're a London-based paragliding tour operator to the Alps, you should be paying serious attention to this group. That way, you'll be in the know about what they are looking for, what they love and what they hate. Ultra-niches tend to be extremely passionate and opinionated about their given subject so it would be good to know what these opinions are. That way, you can offer products that cater to your community's needs (and you get some quality, free market research!). So step one is to listen.

What if it were an ultra-niche about your brand eg male - London - Ford - Ford Mustang - Ford mustang 56 models. Should you be listening to these niches?

But how do I listen to all this chatter?

If you're a decent-sized brand and or you have a few products in the market, there is chatter going on about them at this very moment.

So, in order to keep up with the chatter, you could employ five full-time 'researchers' who can surf the entire Internet all day, probably spending most of their time on Facebook and Youtube. A more sensible strategy would be to start using [Google Alerts](#). You type in the words/brands/phrases you want to monitor and alerts will pop up in your inbox whenever those phrases appear on the Internet for you to click on and do whatever you like from there.

An even better option is to try a buzz monitoring tool such as [Radian6](#) or [BrandsEye](#). The first part of the tool is pretty much like Google Alerts, bringing in alerts when your phrases are mentioned; however, you can be a lot more specific about what you are looking for with these buzz tools as you can configure a lot more options.

The real magic kicks in when these tools aggregate the information into trends and reports, making them great for measuring general sentiment - as well as market reaction to new products, campaigns, price changes etc. And because people will talk about what they see offline on the Internet, you can even measure response and sentiment to offline campaigns. The funky graphs and stats also make it great for high level reporting to you bosses.

I am currently trying out BrandsEye and, as a community manager, I must say that it is one of the most useful tools I have used to date. I liken it to my window into the online world or the online world speaking about my brands and that of my competitors, to be more accurate.

Don't ignore them, respond!

Once you see chatter going on about your brand, don't ignore them, respond!

That's right! Respond, whether the comments are good or bad. If they are Twittering, reply to them; if it's in a forum, add your two cents to the thread; if it's a blog, comment. Also remember to comment in your own style as the online community will sniff out PR talk like a rat that died two weeks ago!

If the comments are negative or abusive, try not to get into a public shouting match as you may just create a blog swarm, which will just blow the issue out of proportion, triple its speed around the Internet, and have most people siding with the individual rather than you, the company, regardless of who is wrong or right. Rather try and pull the debate to private channels such as email, direct messaging (DM) on Twitter or even a phone call.

Lastly, don't just respond to comments or threads; start some of your own. Get involved. Ask your community questions about your brand and about their needs. Make them feel like the most important people on earth. Offer them discounts; give them the lowdown on new products first; say happy birthday to them on Twitter - whatever it takes to make you an accepted

member of the community.

Do I need a community manager?

If all of this sounds daunting to you and you're dealing with a decent-sized brand, then yes, you probably do. The advent of the community manager as a career is another result of the surging forward of social media. Basically, a community manager is a friendly, chatty person who is highly clued up on all things social and online, and is well-wired into all communities and channels that may be talking about their brands and are usually the first point of contact for the community. So essentially positioning themselves as the online brand custodian.

Community managers also analyse and feed back information into the business about what the customers needs are etc and ensure their voices are heard. They tend to be a savvy mix of social media tech, PR guru, brand genius and excessive, coffee-induced, chatterbox. Good examples of community managers are [James Whatley](#) for Spinvox and [Scott Monty](#) for Ford.

• Adapted from [original blog post](#) published 25 November 2008.

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