

Vanilla

2019

**COMMUNITY
PREDICTIONS**



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Welcome friends!

In your hands is the 2019 edition of our community managers predictions Ebook. This year we were pleasantly surprised by the number of community builders who chose to share what they learned in 2018 and what they foresee in 2019.

For myself, 2018, showed me the true power of community. People came to the aid of others both online and offline in ways I don't recall ever seeing. This year, Richard Millington taught me to throw away the word "lurkers" and to categorize these people as learners. In essence, everyone is learning from our communities, even if they don't participate.

As for the year ahead, we will continue to see even more changes in the way we connect online. Many companies are taking a critical look at where they engage their online communities and decisions will have to be made as to what is an acceptable risk.

I expect even more brands to push themselves away from the social networks and onto branded communities where they have more control — especially to give consumers a choice.

In the following pages, 18 community builders have told us what they've learned, and what's coming next. We trust what you'll find what they shared enlightening, thought provoking, and inspiring. We also hope it leads you to your own reflection on your year that has passed and what you hope to achieve in 2019.

To your success!



A black, stylized handwritten signature.

Adrian
Head of Community
Vanilla Forums



Anuj Adhiya

Director of Engagement and Analytics - GrowthHackers



Anuj is the Director of Engagement and Analytics at GrowthHackers. He's responsible for engaging and growing community and is the data analyst on the growth team. His role has him running experiments all the time to understand the drivers of sustainable growth for the business.

Additionally, he serves as Marketing Specialist at Harvard Innovation Labs in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this role he helps startups in the program through their early growth and marketing challenges. He also hosts The Beaten Path podcast where he explores how successful travel startups have grown. Anuj's last degree was in Chemistry and its principles have been surprisingly relevant to his role.

Lessons learned

I learned that you need to always be thinking about the "aha!" moment for your community.

Every person that shows up needs to understand quickly what the value of your community is. They need to like and trust that the community is a space that can help them achieve their goals.

This means understanding the motivations of those that sign up. This gives you the language to communicate the value of the community to the next person thinking of signing up.

Anuj Adhiya

Director of Engagement and Analytics - GrowthHackers

But **I also learned you shouldn't forget your existing members.**

You need to ensure that they are still experiencing the value they were promised. Also, their motivations and needs may have evolved. You need to be ready to serve these new "aha!" moments if you're going to keep your existing members engaged over time.

What's next?

Community managers will have to become more data driven in 2019. The recognition that communities need to be considered as part of the product experience is only increasing.

Community managers will need to look beyond simple engagement numbers. They'll need to understand how the community contributes towards, and grows, the value delivered to their users and customers.

This will mean adopting a product and growth mindset towards communities. **This means getting familiar with growth models, cohort analyses, behavioral analytics and A/B testing.**

It also means learning how to use tools that enable learning and insights about community impact. Only then will community and community managers be looked at as a strategic aspect of the product vs. something subordinate to it.

One way to do this is to advocate for being on growth teams. Such teams are the best way to get practical experience for the skills that will be table stakes moving forward. Your presence here will also ensure that major stakeholders never underestimate the community's importance.



Todd Burry

CPO & Co-Founder - Vanilla Forums



Todd Burry is the chief product officer and founder of Vanilla Forums. He's a leading expert in creating the software that creates thriving communities.

Lessons learned

The year 2018 was another tough one for social media — particularly Facebook. In addition to the ongoing issues around the [Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data breach](#), Facebook saw [two consecutive quarters of declining numbers of Monthly Active Users](#) within the EU and flat growth within North America. This trend seems to continue from 2015 and beyond. In addition, Google+ announced it was completely discontinuing its offering [after massive data exposure](#).

This should give pause to any organization that relies on Social Media as their primary means to engage with their community. These ongoing issues are a liability to brands and their customers' ability to trust them.

What's next?

2019 will be the year that we finally begin to consolidate communities. We know that it's difficult to maintain a strong community when all of the touch points are in so many different places. So the focus will be on building strong, safe, permanent communities that are not affected by the controversies inherent in social media platforms.

Todd Burry

CPO & Co-founder - Vanilla Forums

The move away from social media to real communities provides you with the opportunity to create substantive, lasting conversation, where you can exercise the fundamentals of online community management and provide value to your community members, which, in turn, provides real value to your business.



Katie Paffhouse Bussey

Community Leader - Hearing First



Katie Paffhouse Bussey is Community Leader for Hearing First, a non-profit that supports the families and professionals helping children who are deaf or hard of hearing learn to listen and talk using Listening and Spoken Language (LSL) through Awareness, Education and Community.

Katie has worked in the community space for over ten years. She is passionate about relationship building and has made a career in connecting, training and celebrating people from a variety of backgrounds. When she's not working, you can find her camping, biking, or exploring the world with her family.

Lessons learned

I end 2018 with a refined appreciation of the balance between formal and user-generated content. Often, these (mostly) complementary mechanisms exist in parallel. Formal content, edited, vetted and scheduled, educates members on trends, fills gaps in knowledge, and, if done well, can deepen conversations. Informal user-generated content, while unpredictable, benefits from a sense of urgency that can spark deeper, meaningful engagement.

However, these mechanisms do sometimes cross paths and create confusion for the user. When a brand and a user post similar, but conflicting information around the same time, we risk our members gleaning a message that misses the mark. **By digging into this dynamic this year, I increased my ability to spot where these**

Katie Paffhouse Bussey

Community Leader - Hearing First

convergences may occur and my team refined how we conduct content planning and how we coach our larger audience on posting.

What's next?

In 2019, the trends of privacy, seclusion via social media, and movement towards small-scale communities and messaging apps converge. **Humanity wants to have a close-knit community of authentic people they trust.** They want to keep details about themselves private, may have mediocre conversational skills, and are suspicious of people in 'authority' recommending, well, pretty much anything. We will begin to see our members desires shift towards this new outlook.

We community builders help our members build networks, and our opportunity lies in evolving our approach to be nimble, unique, and scalable. Let's use 2019 to explore what trust looks like in this new landscape and define ways to meaningfully persuade. Let's explore questions like these:

If there is distrust towards the larger group participation, how do we persuade and encourage members to share out?

What does an enjoyable, quality conversation look like in this new landscape?

How do we identify upcoming community leaders when we may not see where the richest interactions occur?

How do we train the next generation of community managers to navigate these waters?

Katie Paffhouse Bussey

Community Leader - Hearing First

Big, exciting questions like these make our field a fun and dynamic one. **Let's jump in, get our hands dirty, and push for technology that can help us and our members adjust and excel in this new world.**



Liz Crampton

Senior Community Program Manager - Fitbit



Liz has worked in community for 8+ years, specializing in mental health and peer-support communities. She joined Fitbit in summer 2017 to help embed community feedback across the organization. She also leads moderation efforts for their 25 million member health and fitness community. Liz is originally from London but enjoys the California sunshine. Like most Brits, she likes a good cup of tea with some toast and marmite.

Lessons learned

This year taught me to get smarter about how I represent the value of community to other teams. It's not (usually) because other teams don't value community or customers, it's because most teams in most organizations are working with limited resources and limited time that everyone is competing for.

I really tried to understand the root cause of the issue, for example, if there aren't enough engineers to implement more community feature suggestions, then no amount of emailing various Product Managers is going to help. I need to lobby high-level execs directly to hire more engineers and demonstrate the value of building more customer suggestions.

I also tried a much broader assortment of tactics to be persuasive and get the resources I needed for the community—talking in metrics and ROI escalating community issues to the executive level, moving colleagues through emotional and inspirational community

Liz Crampton

Senior Community Program Manager - Fitbit

stories or playing phone calls from real customers, speaking at team meetings across the company and creating visually compelling infographics instead of spreadsheets. I also built community panels of real customers so I can speak in their words, not mine.

I learned that community management, like any other field, is really a game of influence and persuasion within the organization, to be heard and get the investment that you and your customers deserve.

What's next?

Automation, machine learning and AI will be increasingly important next year, to both reduce community costs (predominantly moderation) and to reinvest the precious community team's time into tasks that really matter—like content, business integration and strategy.

“Meaningful connection” is also a hot topic, and I think there’s some value there for thinking about connecting people in more innovative ways, rather than just replicating what the social media giants have done.



Emilia D'Anzica

Founder & Strategic Management Consultant -
Customer Growth Advisors



Emilia D'Anzica is a strategic management consultant and founder of Customer Growth Advisors. She works with companies to scale customer success and advocacy teams and programs. After working globally throughout her 20-year career, she has a deep understanding of best practices in building company culture, teams, and programs across e-retail and B2B SaaS companies.

Lessons learned

With companies sharing how branded communities drive an increase in revenue, it is clear that it is never too early to start one. I started small communities with simple emails and open 30 minute meetings with any customer who wanted to talk to our team and to other customers about best practices and trends. This led to justifying a 'real' community with a real purpose and measurable results. Starting a community shouldn't be expensive or hard to justify. Customers are people and they crave engagement with not only your product but also other users.

What's next?

Numbers will drive decisions: Tomorrow's leader is driven by metrics and will make decisions based on customer intelligence. How do they leverage the voice of the customer to make decisions? They create seamless customer experiences on and offline where customers can converge to learn, engage and share with one another.

Emilia D'Anzica

Founder & Strategic Management Consultant - Customer Growth Advisors

Consumers are hungry for best practices and more than ever willing to share their experiences in online customer communities and through social media. By integrating communities with a product, companies are simplifying the customer experience while amplifying their customer voices.

Leaders can now listen to the customer in real-time while aggregating feedback with powerful analytics around engagement activities and with A/B testing. The intelligence behind user interaction is creating the decisions behind the future product and increasing revenue. A [study by the University of Michigan](#) found a “19% bump in incremental revenue from customers after they joined the online community.” Statistics like this will enable community managers to increase their social budgets for branded communities.

Digital Adoption: Everyone talks about automation and bots, but at the core it is about digital interaction with your product and your customers. Digital adoption leads to product loyalty, expansion opportunities and a model that is repeatable.

Integrated communities facilitate that adoption while growing your reach to your customer base and beyond. Today customers trust colleagues and friends more than they trust marketers so it is key that you hire community leaders that will be the customer champion and voice as you consider customer communities as part of your digital strategy for 2019 and beyond.

[Source:](#) 21 Stats about remote work trends in 2018, September 7, 2018

Psst!

You can see more with Emilia in her webinar, The Essentials To Scaling Your Customer Success Program! Learn how to effectively manage customer growth by ensuring customer success.

[Watch It Now](#)



Ed Giansante

Global Community Manager - Dropbox



Ed Giansante is the Global Community Manager for Dropbox, founder and visual storyteller on E-Dublin, largest community of Brazilian expats with over half-million members. Prior to Dropbox, Ed also worked in marketing and operations roles at Telefonica, Intel and McCann Erikson LaTam and led the Global Community Operations at Zynga, where his innovative work earned him 2 Rockstar awards and 5 MVPs.

Lessons learned

The biggest lesson I had is that we will never stop 'community building'. In my 4th year at Dropbox, I still feel that I'm just scratching the surface. There's always something new to do, some process to improve, a different way to engage your members and that little extra love you can give to your ambassadors.

Meeting fellow community managers gives us a lot of insights, but also helps us understand how far ahead or behind we are in our journey. One of the things I appreciate the most when meeting community managers is their openness and honesty with things that they simply don't know or can't "prove" as a success.

Measuring interactions is easy, but giving your community a purpose and following on that for years is a hard thing to do, so stay true to your mission and keep building. It will never end :)

Ed Giansante

Global Community Manager - Dropbox

What's next?

First and foremost, there's never been such a massive landscape for platforms and tools to enable your community.

Thinking back 10 years ago, when I started a Google Groups, I remember that seeing overall activity and member count were the two only things I had access to measure. Things started to evolve, better platforms came in place, new content format started to take over.

Unfortunately it got to a point where companies believe that technology equals solutions. Technology is great and they're facilitators of solutions you want to implement. It's like buying a Tesla with a beautiful dashboard, but having no clue about where you want to drive.

We blind ourselves behind dashboards and great engines, and forget how people are consuming our products and content online. If you look at the attention span and the formats people consume information with, you'll see a trend on vertical information (truly mobile first, how you hold a phone), pace and dynamic of content (we can't bear a 0.09 second load time for a page anymore!), the ability to easily curate (give a heart, reply through audio, through predictive smart-text) and how personalized the information is.

Using signals, speed, and new formats are things that will definitely re-shape how we do communities (already is!).



J.J. Janikis

Team Lead of Educator Communities - Newsela



J.J. is a former 6th grade special education teacher with the NYC DOE. While teaching, he worked with co-teachers in math, science, ELA, and social studies and helped develop 1:1 Chromebook and Google Apps for Edu initiatives. At Newsela, J.J. has led onsite and virtual training sessions with schools and districts across the US in addition to managing the online Community for educators to collaborate and share classroom connections.

Lessons learned

The most important lesson I learned to support our Newsela online Educator Community was to focus on the impact of our forum contributors. Constantly observing the number of viewers and monthly activity was frustrating and often not telling the story of the value of the overall contributions. We shifted the focus of our Community to focus more on teacher created content and less on support. This immediately helped us see the impact on how teachers were making connections for students within Newsela. Our Community now allows teachers to have a more direct voice in our product.

What's next?

Community Managers should observe the influence of their platform on the overall success of their core product.

Are the Community contributors also your most active product users and/or enthusiasts? Empowering the “influencers” within a Community will also grow in 2019.



Carrie Melissa Jones

Founder - Gather Community Consulting



Carrie Melissa Jones is a community leader, entrepreneur, and community management consultant who has been involved with online community leadership since the early 2000s. As the founder of Gather Community Consulting, she consults with brands to build and optimize communities around the world.

Lessons learned

The most important lesson I learned in 2018 is that online communities can be weaponized. Online communities have created some of the most uplifting corners of the Internet, and also some of the most sinister. For many years, we have talked about connection as if it were uniformly beneficial. Common bonds do not always create positive outcomes, especially when created out of anger or fear. Previously isolated people, armed with rage and spurious reasoning, can now connect and mobilize just as effectively as those with good intentions. Online communities can radicalize people faster and more effectively than ever before in human history.

Therefore, we must deploy our skillsets thoughtfully, ethically, and with an eye toward deeper, socially-conscious purposes.

What's next?

In 2018, online communities and social media platforms were in the news at an increasing rate because of how they've been utilized to

Carrie Melissa Jones

Founder - Gather Community Consulting

spread misinformation, how they are moderated and the implications of that moderation on free speech, and how certain online communities have created space for radicalized groups to organize.

Given how online communities have contributed to so much debate in the last year, we should be ready for potential legal policy changes around our work in 2019 as well as changes to the public perception of online communities.

There's more with Carrie!

Carrie shares her community renovation model to teach complex community concepts to teams, develop roadmaps for new and existing online communities, and help community leaders prepare for the work ahead without feeling overwhelmed.

[Watch It Now](#)



Jake McKee

CEO & Lead Strategist - Community5



Community5 CEO, Jake McKee, is a veteran of online communities, founded Community5 to help organizations drive more success with their online communities and fan engagement programs. Jake has been building online communities for nearly 20 years. He has lead community efforts at LEGO and Apple, driven community/social strategy as a partner at Community5, and founded Ant's Eye View, a successful boutique social media strategy agency.

Lessons learned

In the last few years, we've seen a renewed interest in online communities from businesses across the industry spectrum. With it becoming harder and harder to effectively scale digital customer acquisition without significantly increasing costs in parallel, many organizations are looking at how to build a more efficient direct and indirect pipeline of new customers.

Couple that with the rising customer expectations that organizations will provide them a place to engage with other customers at the right parts of the customer journey, and it's a perfect storm to see the normalization and growth of online communities.

2018 showed us that we community practitioners need to move past the "how" and focus on the "why". Without being clear why we are building a community, and how it will specifically impact community members and the organization itself, we are still struggling to create

Jake McKee

CEO & Lead Strategist - Community5(.com)

sustainable, well-funded community projects. As my friend Richard Millington has pointed out, we've been far too focused on proving the ROI, rather than focusing on the impact to the organization and the member base. Community may not be an attributable, direct source of new customers, for example. But community engagement may make the sales cycle faster, more credible, and ensure higher retention. I've been asking my clients one key question this past year:

"How can we flip the discussion to ask how community can impact each department's goals, rather than focusing on a standalone community goal?"

What's next?

As we've talked about for years, community needs to be integrated across the business. But 2018 showed us clearly that without shifting the focus to help support existing missions and goals of the marketing, support, HR, or product development teams, we'll continue to be an island to ourselves. This work needs to continue into 2019. We have to nail this issue in order to open the opportunities for further innovation.

If I had one wish for community management in 2019, I'd wish for more off-site engagement by official community managers. I want to see more organizations putting their community management staff in off-site, unofficial properties to engage customers/users/members where they interact outside the official properties. This type of community managements helps build a deeper, more powerful relationship that puts focuses on the customer rather than the destination.



Todd Nilson

Digital Strategist & Founder - Clocktower Advisors

Todd Nilson is a digital strategist and founder of Clocktower Advisors. He has led transformational technology projects for brands such as Facebook, SAP, Truth Initiative, Schneider National, Steelcase, Greenpeace, and Principal Financial. He specializes in online communities, social intranets, competitive intelligence research, gamification, employer branding, and virtual collaboration. Todd has managed teams and engagements with national and global consultancy firms specialized in online communities, including 7Summits and FeverBee. In addition to his consulting work, he actively volunteers his time with local entrepreneurial programs and is a core team member for Advancing AI Wisconsin.

Lessons learned

Corporations still have a strong appetite for online community building in 2018 and they are getting smarter about it. They are creating communities for their customers and they are increasingly opening up their thinking to enabling social platforms internally.

The challenge with community building internally is the proliferation of social features on many apps. There's a tremendous overlap in functionality that's confusing to employees.

Where should I go to comment on this document? Where should I store it? How do I launch a project space? There are often five or six perfectly viable choices for any digital task.

Todd Nilson

Digital Strategist & Founder - Clocktower Advisors

Community building for organizations is about giving employees a playbook that answers these how-to questions and providing regular training options. For internal community builders, the lesson is to provide clear guidance about how to get work done, shut off overlapping features, and make sure you can measure adoption across your apps, not just your social intranet.

The biggest challenges around building external communities is about making sure the concept of the community, what it provides, is highly valuable.

Brand-based communities that “rah-rah” about their products inevitably struggle and usually fail. Health support communities have an advantage because of a strong social need for connection and information. They are far more likely to succeed if they are managed actively and enhanced by a community management team.

Cause-based and hobby/special interest communities are more likely to thrive on Facebook where they can garner an audience willing to invest extra cycles of free time. Growing memberships in these sorts of communities on Facebook is easier but keeping them attentive and engaged is far harder.

What's next?

What trends does 2019 hold? We still seem to be teetering on the edge, flirting with next-generation technology like machine-learning, chatbots, and predictive analytics. Vendors in our space don't seem likely to bite on these when many of them are struggling to keep their core platforms ticking along.

The more likely trend is increased migration away from Facebook Groups by companies either due to GDPR requirements, or a growing distrust by the public of social networks. Why invest in a

Todd Nilson

Digital Strategist & Founder - Clocktower Advisors

platform that constantly changes its terms and functionality for business and which is embroiled in data breaches and scandals?

Executives will see greater value, engender more trust, and ensure more consistency in private community platforms.



David Spinks

Founder & CEO - CMX

David Spinks is the CEO of CMX, an organization dedicated to helping community professionals thrive. CMX provides teams with research-backed frameworks and strategic feedback to ensure their communities are successful.

Lessons learned

My biggest lesson was that to be successful building community for an organization, you can't prioritize "community engagement" as a success metric. Unless your core product is a community, your program has to impact another clear and specific objective for the organization like support, growth, or innovation. Don't build a community and THEN look for value. Start with a goal in mind, and build a community that achieves that goal.

What's next?

The community industry is reaching a tipping point. We're seeing more and more stories of community leads growing their teams and budgets by clearly communicating the value they're creating for their organization. There is more energy and money being poured into community by hot industries like blockchain and the whole decentralization movement. It will get easier to convince companies to explore investing in community, but there will be high expectations that you can deliver, and communicate business value.



Jim Storer

Co-Founder - The Community Roundtable

Over the last 15 years, Jim has built and managed communities and consulted with both start-ups and large enterprises on how to effectively build lasting value with community and social business solutions. As a social business/community strategist he's advised a wide range of clients including Cisco/WebEx, Deloitte, EDR, iRise, Aetna, GSA, BASF, CSC and Black Hills Corporation.

Lessons learned

While organizations have been using communities effectively for decades, we're seeing enough momentum across such a wide range of industries and use cases that it suggests they've reached mainstream acceptance. Enterprise stack software companies are jumping in too, validating that community is a critical component to an organization's communication/collaboration strategy.

But with success comes expectations and we've seen several prominent community programs lose funding despite showing promising results. In each case, it had less to do with their numbers and more to do with executives losing confidence that the community (and their metrics) really mattered. The communities in question (and the practitioners who developed and managed them) were unable to be seen as a critical, strategic component of the organization's vision for the future. Ouch.

What's next?

But there's hope. As communities move more and more into the

Jim Storer

Co-Founder - The Community Roundtable

mainstream conversation in organizations, it's critical for community practitioners to be able to articulate the value they deliver. Finding and embracing a simple, straightforward way to communicate your community's value is critical. Whether it's The Community Roundtable's ROI Calculator or something else, proving to executives that our work is valuable should be at the forefront of our work in 2019. This imperative touches a lot of the work we do on a day-to-day basis.

- **Find metrics that matter.** Focusing on growth metrics that can't be tied back to improving a business process or saving the company money will no longer be tolerated. Make certain it's impossible to say "so what?" to your metrics.
- **Build dashboards that quickly convey value.** An executive's attention is valuable and your dashboards will only capture it with quick-hitting content. Screenshots of valuable community behavior with supporting metrics often hit the mark.
- **Develop content and programs that support valuable behavior.** Each community has specific behaviors that generate significant value (in support communities it's often "asking and answering questions"). Understand what the most valuable behavior(s) are in your community and design an editorial calendar to support them.

This is just a start, but you get the point. The health of your community is tied to how it supports the health of your company. Proving that link day in and day out is the best way to ensure that your initiative continues to be funded well into the future.

A note to executive sponsors: Expecting a community to return value in the first year or two is often a fool's errand. They will show

Jim Storer

Co-Founder - The Community Roundtable

promise and begin to approach the breakeven point during the initial year(s), but it takes time to generate the kind of exponential value we see in established communities. Your job in this initial phase is to keep trigger-happy executives at bay, allowing the community and its team to grow and develop into a value-producing machine. Good luck!



Arielle Tannenbaum

Community Strategist - Buffer



Arielle spends her days building the global Buffer community and designing meaningful experiences for people to connect, learn and grow together. She has grown community in many settings: through founding a dance festival, running a co-working space for tech startups, teaching workshops on healthy living, and hosting strangers for dinner parties. Always exploring, Arielle enjoys dancing, being outdoors, cooking, traveling, attempting to grow vegetables, and is studying to be a yoga teacher.

Lessons learned

I feel like I learn the same lesson on a yearly basis: that a community is made up, first and foremost, of relationships. I'm constantly learning and re-learning that my role and value as a community builder is to facilitate these relationships being built, not to talk at our community. When people feel connected to others in a community, they begin to feel an identity with that community—and your brand—and that's a powerful thing. People are craving meaningful connection and online communities can truly connect people—across cultures, experiences, age, and mindsets—who can support and learn from one another. Businesses have a special opportunity to facilitate these connections.

What's next?

In 2019, I would love businesses and community builders to get deeply rooted to what communities are and what they're not. A community is not the same as a platform and it's not one-directional

Arielle Tannenbaum

Community Strategist - Buffer

– it's vibrant, connected, alive, full of human emotion, and always moving. That is what people around the world are craving and that is what makes a community impactful. I also think we'll see more communities being mobilized to make change.



Charlotte Hamilton-Warr

Community Manager - Wave HQ

Charlotte joined Wave in 2015 on the CS team. Along with her team, she successfully launched the Wave Community in 2017, heading it up as Community Manager. Her passion is customer empathy, and she's persistently focused on learning how to leverage community to help prioritize the customer's experience internally. On the customer side, she's focused on continuous improvement: learning how to deliver more value for community members all the time.

Lessons learned

In 2018, our Community blossomed from its inception to a place of steady growth and increasingly interesting value. The most important lesson our team learned is that our jobs must in many ways be responsive. We must work to understand what brings value to our members, but let them drive us forward and shape the conversation. This is challenging when you are in the build process, particularly if you're working with a wonderfully creative team.

In the latter part of this year, we took on a renewed focus on research—talking to our members directly about what they understand the value of our community to be, and how we can make it work for them. This approach has proved to be extremely useful, and as a result, our community is more engaged and more engaging to visit.

Charlotte Hamilton-Warr

Community Manager - Wave HQ

What's next?

One of the most significant happenings we see on the horizon is organizational. We continue on the path to understanding where Community fits within our organization.

Often, community projects and programs intersect with customer support, marketing, and product, and beyond. Customer centricity is a not a new trend, but understanding how to activate the potential of a customer focus is where community builders will really shine; we'll thread through different departments and groups to figure out how proximity to the customer can strengthen other initiatives, and how bringing customers together can make their relationship to us more beneficial, productive, and long-lived.



Sarah Judd Welch

CEO & Head of Strategy - Loyal



Sarah Judd Welch is the CEO & Head of Strategy of Loyal, a community design and strategy agency founded in 2012. Sarah believes that community is the future of economy and society. With over a decade of experience in community design and digital strategy, her areas of expertise span community-driven insights, design thinking, and product management. Sarah's clients include Google, General Electric, Pepsi, Hearst, National Geographic, MetLife, The Wing, Grammarly, Meetup, American Medical Association, and many more. Sarah's work and words on community strategy have been published in *Harvard Business Review*, *DigiDay*, *FastCompany* and more. Previously, she led the NYC market for TaskRabbit and in past lives worked for Hillary Clinton and Goldman Sachs.

Lessons learned

My biggest lesson in 2018 is that a community must be supported by the organizational strategy. In the past, we've focused a lot on the community strategy supporting the organizational strategy (business goals, etc.), though the reverse must also be true! For example, many companies may need to restructure their teams and even reconsider what they culturally value and prioritize as they build a community. Does the company legitimately believe that hearing from their community members is worthwhile? If so, what are they doing to ensure that this is true in practice? If not, why invest in a community in the first place?

Sarah Judd Welch

CEO & Head of Strategy - Loyal

All in all, it's past time for companies to put communities and customers first. If a company is unable to make this cultural shift, they're losing ground to the competition.

What's next?

I believe I said this last year, though again, the relationship between community and research is more important than ever. Every community strategy should be validated by research with the community. Similarly, the existing community should be included in research when considering critical, strategic decisions.

I predict that we'll see more community managers move into organizational design roles. We've seen a lot this year just how closely tied community design and org. design are; community managers are uniquely positioned with their expertise in community building and in their customers to take on this challenge.



Colleen Young

President - CY Connect



Colleen Young, president of CY Connect, is internationally known for building patient communities that thrive. She specializes in helping health care institutions and patient non-profit organizations to realize the potential of connected patients and the value of their sharing their experiential expertise.

Colleen is the community director for Mayo Clinic Connect, an online community connecting patients with each other and to Mayo Clinic medical expertise. She frequently speaks about communicating the experience of illness in the digital age and the social web's impact on health and health care. Colleen is a tenacious connector of patients.

Lessons learned

Start small. Build activity. Demonstrate value. This is the mantra that every community manager uses to build a successful, thriving community.

In 2018, I reaped the rewards of applying that same principle to garnering support from within.

Often community is the responsibility of one department. We all know that involving allies from other departments increases a community manager's capacity of getting things done. Aligning your community goals to the organization's strategic priorities results in sustained success.

Colleen Young

President - CY Connect

To do that, apply the same mantra: start small by finding your allies. Understand their needs and find or build community activity to support their objectives. Demonstrate the value of the community to help them achieve their priorities. Then show that success to your next ally. You'll see support for your community snowball up, down and across the organization.

What's next?

Community managers who think strategically and who are able to demonstrate value will prevail. **We have to get better at defining value tailored to the goals of our respective organizations.**

The value of patient communities reaches beyond merely connecting patients with similar conditions. Patient communities have the ability to improve healthcare outcomes, to change how healthcare is delivered, and to advance science.

The year 2019 and beyond will see a growing understanding by medical professionals and researchers of how to ethically adopt and engage patient communities to create a collaborative healthcare culture.



Adam Zawel

VP of Strategy - Leader Networks

Adam Zawel is the Vice President of Strategy with [Leader Networks](#), a research and consulting firm that helps companies use digital and social technologies to gain competitive advantage.

Adam is a veteran online community leader who helps organizations develop and grow their online community initiatives and is an experienced research analyst. He served as Director of Palladium Group's online community (XPC) and was Chief Collaboration Officer with INmobile, where he built and managed a community for the most influential executives in the wireless and telecommunications industries. He also was a Research Director at Yankee Group. Adam is the creator of [Network Activator](#), a toolkit for community facilitators.

Lessons learned

This year, I launched three professional communities and advised 10 organizations on their community strategies, in industries ranging from education to technology. Through these experiences, I have come to understand that branded communities contribute a critical competitive advantage during times of industry disruption.

Change within a company—such as the execution of a digital transformation strategy—can be threatening. It can disrupt relationships with suppliers, partners, and customers.

Adam Zawel

VP of Strategy - Leader Networks

But the collaboration and engagement provided by the company's branded community serves to assuage the concerns of these constituents, which enables the change being introduced to be accepted. Furthermore, the community can actually serve to strengthen loyalty between community members and the company by serving as a forum for open communication and relationship building.

A branded community thereby provides critical support to the company during periods of organizational changes.

Companies are increasingly recognizing the positive role communities play during industry transformations. This has become clear to me with a community my team recently launched: [The Israel Industry 4.0 Community](#). Its mission is to help member organizations deliver disruptive solutions to manufacturing challenges. The group is growing exponentially, with participation from start-ups, multinationals, investors and government.

What's next?

Tech disruptions are proliferating across many industries, providing valuable opportunities to create communities, and engage customers and partners in collaborative discussions.

Even busy executives may be more willing to take part in a community during a period of instability and change. Community managers must recognize this potential and capitalize on the increased willingness of professionals to get involved with the community.

In addition, organizational innovation often brings new relationship potential with clients. Customers may be genuinely excited by the new technologies and may be eager to speak with their

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peers. Community managers must be at the forefront of creating a communication channel for customers, and foster positive interaction and excitement.

Also, automation tools for community managers are improving. Whereas it once took three hours a day to go through the standard community management tasks (welcoming new members, posting content, etc), now it might take only an hour. As community platforms and plugins focus on the needs of community managers, their workloads are lightened, allowing them to focus on higher level activities that drive organizational value.

Community managers play key roles in organizational change, as they are the ones on the front lines presenting the change to the company's customers and partners. Unencumbered by time-heavy responsibilities, community managers can step up to become "change agents", leading their organization's digital transformation initiatives and occupying a strategic position of influence within the organization.



Luke Zimmer

Manager, Educator Community - National Geographic Society



Luke Zimmer graduated from Indiana University with degrees in journalism and anthropology. He has worked with associations and non-profits for more than 5 years with a specific interest in social media and online communities.

In addition to his work with the National Geographic Society, Zimmer also volunteers with the American Society of Association Executives where he is chair of the ASAE communication section council. He is also a frequent speaker at ASAE events in addition to contributing to the ASAE newsletter, Associations Now. Zimmer has also spoken to webinar audiences for the National Association of Bar Executives, and AssociationSuccess.org.

In his free time, Zimmer also blogs on community management, social media, and technology news and issues at Skariphos.com.

Lessons learned

Patience. There are lots of great community platforms out there now, and there are more emerging every day. I would definitely recommend playing the long game when finding a new platform. Make sure to do an RFP and your due diligence. If your platform research is more than a few months old, you probably need to take another look at the market too.

Luke Zimmer

Manager, Educator Community - National Geographic Society

What's next?

Personalization will be both our friend and foe. On one hand, managers of niche communities will probably see an influx of users who no longer want to engage through large social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. However, privacy regulations like GDPR will simultaneously pressure marketing and community teams to provide more nuanced communication options and track more detailed communication preference data about our users.

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