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What Branding Has in Common with Nature



The best brands build an ecosystem around them.

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For nearly a decade I have asserted that seeing brands as communities is vital in the digital age, a proposition I covered in [Who Owns Your Brand \(2003\)](#). My view is that you don't own your brand. Rather, you are in a relationship based on a set of expectations your brand is required to meet. Should you successfully meet those expectations, that relationship forms a community of followers—customers—who are loyal to your brand, and your role is to nurture the community so it can grow and sustain itself.

As the web has evolved, this brand-community insight has prompted me to explore the challenges marketers face in fulfilling their roles as stewards. Successful marketers develop a flexible, coordinated and evolving go-to-market approach, one that invites the community into the brand narrative while encouraging followers to engage with and share that narrative with others. That approach is called an online ecosystem.

What Is An Online Ecosystem?

As you might recall from high school biology, an ecosystem is a community of living, breathing and active organisms interacting in conjunction with the non-breathing, inert but essential components of their environment. When you see your brand community in this context, it makes sense that it needs a robust, self-sustaining ecosystem to keep it healthy and growing.

An online ecosystem is an essential brand community-building approach that leverages customer-focused content via online delivery platforms to create multiple customer touch points. These include everything from your website and your blog and e-newsletters, to your social media pages and pay-per-click search marketing ad campaigns.

If done right, those elements form a virtuous circle that keeps the flow of brand messaging moving through your brand community and, via their advocacy, out into the bigger world to engage new followers. Multiple points of contact and interaction enrich your customers' understanding of your brand, enhance their loyalty to it and encourage their active engagement and sharing of your content, such that growing the brand community becomes a self-fulfilling reality.

LISTEN: [Sorry—Your Website's Not Good Enough](#)

The Rules Of Content

Developing an online ecosystem doesn't mean abandoning your traditional, non-digital advertising. It means that you must coordinate all aspects of your brand communication efforts, with an emphasis on inviting and welcoming people into your virtuous circle. That circle thrives on kick-ass online content so audiences can learn more, love more and share more about your brand, at a time and place of their choosing.

It's not all about your website. You need to develop and deploy content on a variety of other digital platforms, including relevant social media, so people can find you in places they like to visit. Once that is in place, you can explore outreach elements like a regular e-newsletter, or offer e-books, webinars, slide shows or videos. But all these forms of content must be consistent with your brand's character so it continues to resonate with your loyal followers.

Adventurous brands run contests that engage users and invite their content. The most outlandish efforts from big name brand include creating feature films (as Volkswagen [did](#)) and television programming (as Chipotle [has experimented with](#)), or dragging a big red [fridge](#) around the world to create brand stories that capture attention and enlist people to comment and share.

Finally, you'll want to invest in traditional and online paid media to reach out to the wavering masses and invite them to explore your brand to see if they want to move into the community. Certainly, an online brand ecosystem is about giving your community members content they will talk about within their own personal social networks. But it's also a viable way to enlist influencers, including celebrity bloggers, YouTube stars, and even traditional media pundits, all of whom can add traction to your brand content.

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Make Content That Moves People

Smart companies build ecosystems where the product, and how it is presented, evolves into value-added content and engagement opportunities that are measurable, so they can be optimized going forward. Molson, Volkswagen, Nike and others have embraced the ecosystem approach by creating engaging user experiences that appear either out in the world, on TV, or online. They then leverage the user experience to broaden the appeal and the impact of the content, event or promotion.

When Nike enlisted female runners to tell their stories for their [She Runs](#) promotion, they were doing something more brands will do going forward—framing the message according to the users' experiences, and showing how the brand adapts to meet the community's needs.

That is how an ecosystem should work: proactively, symbiotically and compassionately.

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Measure, Optimize And Redeploy

One major benefit of embracing an online ecosystem fueled by value-added content is that you can quickly measure its impact. From click-through rates on e-newsletters to viewership rates on blog posts, to pay-per-click analytics and overall website performance metrics, the ecosystem system benefits from scrutiny. See what works and what under-performs. Optimize and get better content out there. Fail fast but keep rolling. Most importantly, get help. With so many balls in the air, and some that may be out of your skill set reach, this is not a great DIY project.

But the overall benefits are enormous. An ecosystem allows you to focus your brand communication investment on the most appropriate audiences and through the most effective platforms. It ensures clarity of messaging by getting you closer to your core brand community so you know what will energize and motivate them. And it generates real results you can measure and use to optimize going forward.

If you have a brand, you have a brand story. Developing an ecosystem to champion that brand story and, by extension, encouraging your brand community to share that story, isn't even a new idea. Back when you were in biology class, it was called word of mouth. Of course, that was before the Internet made it possible for everyone to share their story. Make sure you get yours out to the people who want to hear it most.

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