Virtual (Internet) Communities

A community is a group of people with common interests who interact with one another, such as an organization (depicted in Exhibit 2.1). A Virtual Community is one in which the interaction takes place over a computer network, mostly the Internet. Virtual communities parallel typical physical communities, such as neighborhoods, clubs, or associations, but people do not meet face-to-face. Instead, they meet online. A virtual community organizes around a common interest, idea, task, or goal; members interact across time, geographic, and organizational boundaries to develop personal relationships. Virtual communities offer several ways for members to interact, collaborate, and trade (see Exhibit 2.2.1).

EXHIBIT 2.2.1 Ten Important Types of Online Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>Description and Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Entertainment</td>
<td>People join for multiplayer online gaming such as Second Life at secondlife.com or</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Social networking</td>
<td>Users join and visit these communities to meet others, such as for dating (Match.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td>getting a job (Monster.com), or finding a business connection (LinkedIn). Users are</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>willing to pay a fee to join these communities, especially if they are large. Some</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sites exist purely for connecting to meet and make friends with like-minded people.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>These include MySpace.com, Facebook.com, and many others.</td>
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<td>3. Trading communities</td>
<td>These communities exist so that users can exchange goods and services. Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>include online auctions in the consumer market (Ebay) and business market (Guru), and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>music-sharing sites (Kazaa).</td>
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<td>4. Education</td>
<td>These communities form around particular education disciplines, such as Elmar for</td>
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<td>communities</td>
<td>marketing educators educational software, or students participating in class or</td>
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<td></td>
<td>university discussion groups.</td>
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<td>5. Scheduled events</td>
<td>When American Idol, the televised competition, invites viewers to vote and chat online,</td>
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<td>communities</td>
<td>or businesses hold online conferences, they form a community for a one-time event.</td>
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<td>6. Advocacy</td>
<td>Nonprofit communities form to influence public opinion. MoveOn.org, formed to make</td>
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<td>communities</td>
<td>a change in politics, used its community to create and pay for television ads.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>According to its founder, the internet is about listening to users, not talking to them.</td>
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<td>7. Brand communities</td>
<td>Firms create customer relationship management communities around their brands on Web</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sites by allowing user posting. Examples include product reviews (Amazon), travel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>experiences (Trip Advisor), and tips for using your electronic gadget (Engadget) or</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SAP software (Sap). Many companies also create branded Facebook pages.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Consumer</td>
<td>Consumers post product reviews on Epinions.com and discuss their product experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td>on Google Groups. What differentiates these</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Employee communities

One example is the large network of former Microsoft employees who use e-mail and a private bulletin board to discuss Microsoft gossip and to network for professional purposes. LinkedIn.com and Xing.com are two important professional networks.

10. Special topics communities

In addition to the others on this list, some sites exist purely for user chat and bulletin board posting on a narrow topic of interest, such as movies, a particular automobile brand/model, various religions, and so forth. Leading this category are Google Groups (the former UseNet), Yahoo Groups, and Geocities.

Source: Strauss and Frost (2011) E-Marketing

Characteristics of Traditional Online Communities and Their Classification

Most virtual communities (also known as Internet Communities) are Internet-based. Hundreds of thousands of communities exist on the Internet, and the number is growing rapidly. Internet-only communities may have anywhere from hundreds to hundreds of millions of members. For example, during 2011, Facebook grew to have over 850 million members. This is one of the major differences from traditional physical communities, which usually are smaller. Another difference is that offline communities frequently are confined to one geographic location, whereas only a few online communities are geographically confined. Also, the Internet allows communities to form with members who have not, and will likely never, meet in physical reality. This has advantages and disadvantages. For more information on virtual communities, see Virtual Community.

Types of Communities

There are several ways to categorize online communities. One classification system recognizes six types of Internet communities: (1) transaction, (2) purpose or interest, (3) relations or practices, (4) fantasy, (5) social networks, and (6) virtual worlds. Another option is to classify the members as traders, players, just friends, enthusiasts, or friends in need.

The following expands on these types of online communities.

- **Associations.** Many physical associations have a Web presence. These range from Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs) to professional associations. Examples of this type of community are the Australian Record Industry Association and American Marketing Association. Another example is a retirement community (e.g. see My Retirement).

- **Affinity portals.** These are communities organized by interest, such as hobbies, technical topic, vocations, political parties, or trade unions. MySpace changed its model in 2010 to become an entertainment social network. Patients like me is an Internet community that provides a forum for patients suffering from different chronic disorders to share details about their conditions, drugs used, etc.

- **Ethnic, gender, or age-based communities.** Many communities are country or language specific. Women.com and ivillage.com, the two largest female-oriented community sites, merged in 2001 in an effort to cut losses and become profitable. Gurl.com is a community for teenage girls and Eeons.com is for baby boomers.

- **Communities of practice.** These can be physical or virtual. Members are professionals and
practitioners who share an area of practice (e.g., professors, physicians, dentists). Members also share knowledge in discussion groups. One example is Linux Online whose members develop codes for the Linux operating system. Other examples are Sermo, a community created by physicians, and ELMAR (EElctronic MARketing) for marketing academics and practitioners.

- **Social networks sites.** These are socially-oriented online megacommunities, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where millions of members can express themselves, find friends, exchange photos, view videos, purchase products, and more. In addition to general-interest communities such as Facebook, special interest-based networks have also emerged, such as networks for dog lovers (e.g., Doggyspace and Dogster) and those for cat lovers as well Catster.

- **Virtual worlds.** These 3-D communities (see Appendix C) include many capabilities found on social networks (e.g., discussion groups) as well as special capabilities (e.g., use of avatars).

**Example for a Virtual World: Sony’s PS3 Community.** In 2008, Sony launched a virtual community service for its PlayStation 3 (PS3) video game network, in a virtual world, with 8 million members. The 3-D service called Home allows users to create avatars, decorate homes, and interact and socialize with other users in a virtual world. Sony considers this an important part of the game-playing experience. Avatars can interact with each other, and users can play games with friends at a virtual arcade. The community is regional due to language and cultural considerations. As an extension, the service allows downloading of content and movies to PS3.

For additional types of virtual communities and issues of participation and design of communities, see Virtual Community.

The most popular type of virtual community is the social network.

**Key Term**

virtual community