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THE SUMMARY

John Wiley & Sons, 2023

Introduction

Back in middle school, I struggled to fit in as a child of Jewish immigrants. Despite being strongly drawn to other people and wanting to be a part of social activities, I would get turned away by the groups I cared most about, which made me deeply depressed.

The internet was where I first found a sense of belonging. I ended up finding my community in an online video game, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*. I found myself more addicted to the social network on the game, than the game itself. Along with a couple of friends, I started a clan and soon launched a website and forum too, which became one of the most popular online communities for that game. For several years, I learned how to manage this actively growing community, hosting competitions, creating content, dealing with trolls and spam, and interacting with people. From that point on, I was hooked on community building.

It was at college that I started to connect community building to the world of business. As a business administration major, I felt that our program was outdated, and I could foresee the social revolution about to take place thanks to the internet. It seemed to me that soon enough businesses would all be driven by online communities and social spaces. Years later, the

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stats proved this to be spot on, as 80% of startups today are already investing in community building and 28% consider it to be critical to their success.

Now there isn't a human out there who would argue that community isn't important. The questions now are, how does a business build a legitimate community that creates authentic belonging for members, while also driving business outcomes? This is exactly what I've set out to answer. Let's get started.

Chapter 1: Why Community Is the New Competitive Advantage

What does it mean for a business to build community? To answer this, we first need to define the term "community".

The problem is that community is a really broad term. If you ask a hundred people what community means, you'll get a hundred different answers. It's a shared identity. It's a shared passion. It's people who care about each other. The range of definitions can vary widely. However, the one theory that has always resonated most with me, and the one that has been most influential on recent research as well, is called the *Sense of Community Theory*, created in 1986 by social psychologists David McMillan and David Chavis. It states that a sense of community is "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together."

These four factors mentioned in this definition: membership, influence, integration/fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection can be used to understand the strength of community that a group of people might have. To create a true sense of community, we need to focus on each of these four aspects. That's what will make them care enough to contribute and what will unlock a ton of business value as well.

When you give people a true sense of community, it motivates them to want to get involved and contribute. Motivate enough people, and community can help you achieve incredible scale. Let's look at an example of a company that did exactly that: Duolingo. Having launched in 2012, they now offer nearly 100 different courses and have a user base of over 300 million! This is because this language learning app does everything with a community-first mindset. Much of the content and translations that make the actual courses are contributed by their community. Moreover, their most motivated members organize local events where learners come and practice their language with each other. The scale of this idea today? Over 2600 events per month worldwide. It's the kind of scale companies dream of, and it can only be achieved by taking a community approach. By allowing your customers to connect with and support each other, you can deliver exponentially more value at a fraction of the cost of traditional business tactics.

When talking about the value of community, people often focus on customer retention. This is a big value and shouldn't be ignored. However, the larger competitive advantage comes from how you activate your loyal customers to contribute their energy, knowledge, and skills. It's their contributions that unlock scale.

It sounds simple enough but is a massive shift in mindset for most businesses. Companies that build engaged communities have access to exponentially more people who contribute to their mission and objectives. Make your community an extension of your team. Empower people to contribute, and then let them. This means trusting them, which isn't an easy pill to swallow for most companies. They are afraid of a loss of quality, or a

misrepresentation of the brand. But consider this: by giving up some control, you remove a massive bottleneck to growth.

Lastly, building a community creates value, belonging, and emotional safety for members. So it's not just good for business, it's also good for humanity.

Chapter 2: The Fundamentals of Community Strategy

Now that you know what community means and why it's important for your business, let's move on to what a community strategy looks like, and how to measure any business value that you can gain from community.

First things first, if you want the community to be something that your business makes a real investment in, you have to be able to point to the measurable impact the community is having on your business. Most companies, when investing in community, focus entirely on engagement as a measure of success. However, engagement on its own is not a measure of business value.

In the world of business, some investments are core to the business, and then some investments are "for good" that don't contribute directly to the business. As long as the community lives on the purely "for good" side of things, it will fail to get the resources it needs to be successful. Our research today shows that lack of resources is the number one reason community programs fail at business. Not lack of engagement. Lack of resources, which is rooted in the inability to prove the ROI.

That doesn't mean that ROI is the only thing to measure. I don't want you to think that measuring community health and engagement isn't important. Instead, the key is to communicate how community engagement is also achieving business goals that impact revenue and growth. They both matter. Business goals without a focus on building an authentic and healthy community will result in low engagement and trust. Community engagement goals without a focus on achieving business goals will result in an underfunded, unsupported community team.

Over the years we've developed a simple system for measuring your community strategy called "The three levels of community strategy."

1. **Business Level:** How your community program will drive revenue for your company.

2. **Community level:** How your community will grow and become more healthy and engaged over time.

3. **Tactical level:** The specific initiatives and improvements you work on to build a healthy, engaged community, and achieve the business outcomes.

What you need to do is have distinct goals and measures for each of these levels to track success. A good idea is to start with the end in mind, identifying the outcomes for each level that you're aiming to achieve through community building.

Our team has built a framework to help businesses understand the different types of measurable outcomes that are driven by communities. The "SPACES" model has been used by thousands of companies to identify the key business objectives and revenue drivers for their communities.

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1. **Support:** *Customer service and support.* The goal is to improve customer satisfaction, improve support efficiency, and reduce support costs by empowering members to answer questions and solve problems for each other. Some companies might fear that if they open up a space for customers to share problems, it will be negative and toxic. To that, I need to remind them that any negativity that people feel toward your product is already being shared, just not in spaces where you have access and influence. It's much better to be able to own the space where these conversations take place, so you can hear what people are complaining about and can proactively respond. By continuing to show up and solve problems, over time you can develop a culture of positivity and optimism. Making your customers feel heard and addressing their concerns with honesty and transparency is the key to brand loyalty and increased satisfaction.

2. **Product:** *Innovation, Feedback, and R&D.* The goal is to improve your products by creating spaces for members to share feedback and discuss ideas that they'd like to see you apply to your products. Successful product development is all about listening to customers and doing research and development to understand their needs so you can innovate and stay ahead of the curve. By creating a space for your community to share feedback, insights, and ideas in a social setting, you as a company can observe those conversations and identify the most important needs. It will also help you win the trust of your customer base when they feel like they're being listened to and have an impact on the product and business.

3. **Acquisition:** *Growth, Marketing, and Sales.* The goal is to increase brand awareness, grow market share, and drive traffic and leads through online and offline community spaces and/or empower ambassadors to advocate on your behalf. By connecting with your most loyal customers, you have the opportunity to empower them to organize and manage community spaces, which will result in an increased potential for growth. You can choose to run content-driven programs, event-driven ones, or both depending on the type of your business. These programs have the chance of being a "first touch" in the buyer's journey or become a way of consistently engaging active leads.

4. **Contribution:** *Collaboration and Crowdsourcing.* The goal is to motivate and accelerate the contribution of content and services on your platform, marketplace, or social network. The internet, at its core, is a collaborative environment. Lots of today's largest websites are open spaces that anyone can contribute to. Anytime you see a platform where the content is being generated by members, there's likely a community program sitting at its core.

5. **Engagement:** *Customer Experience, Retention, and Loyalty.* The goal is to increase customer retention and increase loyalty by giving them a sense of belonging through authentic community experiences. When customers feel like they're truly part of a community, and not just transactional customers, they're much less likely to switch to a competitor. They're getting social value as well as practical value. Going back to Duolingo's example, through their thousands of community events, they provide their members value way beyond just the courses themselves, and empower them to continue to be engaged with their platform. A problem that you might face when trying to increase engagement is getting the data necessary to measure the business value of the engagement in their community. To do this, you need to be able to connect your community data with your customer data. Track community engagement and touchpoints to see how it's playing a role in the customer experience and renewal rates.

6. Success: *Customer Success and Advancement.* The goal is to make customers more successful by using your product, by empowering them to teach each other, help each other skill up, and grow in their careers. You're simply facilitating education created by your members, for your members. This takes customer support to a more proactive approach with a bigger focus on improving skills and strategic abilities. You need to communicate to the customers that your community isn't just about selling them more products. It's a partnership. By making your customers into experts and investing in their careers, you'll undoubtedly create more passionate advocates who then want to give back to the community and company. Invest in the success of your community members, and they'll be motivated to invest in yours.

This framework can be applied to all sorts of companies and businesses, even when the primary member type is not "customers." The core outcomes remain the same.

Chapter 3: Creating a Social Identity

In this chapter, we're stepping up our community strategy to build a highly engaged and healthy community. To do that, I use a powerful tool called the "Social Identity Cycle." It explains how a member will go from being a "lurker" to becoming deeply invested in your community. Design the right social identity and you won't be able to stop people from joining and participating in your community.

At the heart of every community is its identity. Humans form much of our identities around the shared identities of the groups we participate in. When you build community, you're essentially creating a social identity. You're creating and reinforcing a set of beliefs, expressions, and actions for your members to adopt and engage in. The extent to which a person adopts the shared identity will play a big role in how strongly they feel a sense of community. A running joke among community builders is to measure the success of their community by how many members get the logo tattooed on their bodies.

The point is, when someone loves their community, they want the world to know it. What we want to do is develop a compelling social identity and bring anyone who shares that identity consistently over time. Of course, when someone first joins a community, they don't feel a strong sense of belonging to that group. Over time, as they participate more and feel validated by the group, they adopt the social identity more strongly. This is what the "Social Identity Cycle" is all about: Identification, Participation, and Validation.

Now, of course, not all members will go through the cycle successfully. They might find that they don't align with their social identity at some point, and drop off. And that's okay. Drop-off is completely normal. Your community won't be right for everyone. But there are also steps you can take to help members through this cycle and increase the chance that they become more engaged.

Most importantly, you need to create a clear and compelling social identity for your community. You need to have a strong theory of who your community is built for from day one. The following questions will help you define the social identity of your community:

- *Who are we?*

- *What do we believe in?*

- *What do we do?*

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Sometimes, it's obvious, and sometimes it takes some work to hone in on who your community is and *isn't* for. When in doubt, get more specific. The more specific the social identity, the more likely it will be that the people who share that identity will need community. They will be more likely to have a lot of common goals and challenges with each other. Specific identities are more meaningful, and so will the community tailored to that identity.

Another important thing to remember is that every community can't serve everyone. Being focused lets you create welcoming, safe spaces for specific groups of people. That doesn't mean your community won't be inclusive, but inclusivity doesn't mean including everyone on earth. All communities are exclusive in some way. Don't feel guilty when excluding people, because it's the exclusion that makes members feel safe, knowing that the people in the room are those they can trust, and whose values they align with. Do make sure to exclude with empathy, however. Be intentional and moral.

Even more important is to make sure that you're not excluding the right people. Communities are one of the most powerful tools we have for fighting systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of social discrimination and exploitation. So make sure that diversity and equity are a priority of yours from day one.

Chapter 4: Mapping the Community Participation Journey

Now that we've covered the first stage in the Social Identity Cycle, let's move on to the second stage, participation.

This stage is all about understanding the journey that a member goes through when taking part in your community. In the start, they might participate in smaller and more passive ways. Over time, they'll become more committed and participate with greater time and energy, taking on larger roles.

Now, it's your job as the community builder to facilitate that experience for your members. You need to understand all the different ways someone can participate in your community and using the cycle, move them along that journey. A useful tool for mapping out this journey is called *The Commitment Curve*. The concept was developed by Darrel Conner and Robert Pattison in 1982 as a tool to explain how an individual adopts organizational change over time. It was later adapted to communities to understand how an individual becomes more committed and participates more. The main idea of the *commitment curve* is that over time, your member's level of commitment will increase. And as it increases, their willingness to make larger and larger contributions will also go up.

What we can learn from this is that we need to only make smaller asks of members at the beginning of the curve, and increase the ask as they move up the curve.

We can divide community members into 4 different buckets of participation:

Passive members are the people at the start of the commitment curve. They'll participate in smaller, lower-commitment ways, mostly consuming content, learning, and listening. Someone we would call an audience member or lurker. They won't contribute any content or engage in any discussion, they just want to listen for now.

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Active members are the people who participate by joining in the discussions and creating content. They are a bit further up the commitment curve.

Power members are much more committed to the community and they contribute at very high rates. They show up to every event and might get a distinct identity inside the community.

Finally, the **leaders** are folk who take on roles like moderating spaces and launching a local community chapter. They are now creating and facilitating spaces and experiences for other members.

Now it might be tempting to think that the best way is to motivate all the passive members to become active or power members. But the truth is that all 4 of these roles are critical to communities. Ultimately, you need members in all 4 stages at all times for a successful community. An engaged community is made up of people moving up and down the commitment curve over time.

Moving on, the first step would be to attract some members in the first place. How does one get started with that? The important part is: *plan on no organic growth in the early days.* We like to think that if we can just set up the right circumstance – the right message, in the right space – then people will flock to our community. That's not true. They won't come. Almost all communities have to work extremely hard to get their first members in the door. Simply put, hope for organic growth, but plan for manual growth. Start small, with personal outreach, and be hands-on with those first members.

A counterintuitive approach to recruiting members is to create intentional barriers to entry. Making it a bit more difficult to join your community, or to reach a certain status within it will tend to create a stronger sense of social identity and belonging for members.

It's important to not go too far with this approach though. Even the simple step of adding an application to join the community can achieve this purpose.

Once a member is recruited, you need to get them onboard by welcoming them to the community. Don't miss this opportunity to make a great first impression by sending a bland automated email. You need to make them *feel* welcome. Moreover, onboarding isn't just for new members. Every time a member levels up into an active user or power member for example, you have an opportunity to onboard them again.

Now that you've recruited and onboarded members, it's time to motivate them to move up the commitment curve. The first step would be to simply remove any obstacles that might add hindrance to this process, and make it as simple and easy as possible to participate. A major reason behind reluctance will be simply not knowing *how* to participate. So take the time to talk to your members. Provide them with all the information that they might need, such as community rules and regulations.

Now to learn how to actively motivate members to move up the commitment curve, let's move on to Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Validation, Rewards, and Incentives

Let's start by establishing a fact. People will not come back to your community if they don't feel validated, and experience a reward or value for simply showing up. Most people leave this stage to chance, hoping that

members will feel rewarded automatically for their contributions. However, we as community organizers need to make *sure* that they do.

The first step to achieving that would be to create habits with rewards. To get members to come back and participate again and again, we need to make them feel rewarded. The reward can be anything that the member perceives to be of value, and if they show up to your community and are consistently rewarded for this action, it will form a pattern in their mind, which will prompt them to come back organically, without you needing to ask them. This works the same way that social media platforms guarantee user retention. However, social media addiction can be unhealthy and I'm not advocating for creating unhealthy habits that members can't break. I believe that if you've created a truly safe, authentic, and valuable space for people to gather, then it's unlikely that their habit of participation will be unhealthy.

Moving on, let's first understand how motivation works. There are two forms: intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic motivations are things you do to earn a reward or to avoid punishment, both provided by external people or systems.

Intrinsic motivations are things you do simply because you enjoy and value doing them. It's driven by three things: competence, relatedness, and autonomy, all three of which are found in communities.

Both forms of motivation can be very powerful, but of course, communities work best when members are primarily intrinsically motivated. For meaningful and true communities, this is a requirement. However, that doesn't mean external rewards can't be effective. They are very powerful but need to be used wisely.

Making members feel socially accepted is one of the most powerful forms of extrinsic motivation you can provide through your community. It's this kind of validation that will make a person want to come back and keep participating. You don't want to overdo it though. Giving someone too much praise for taking a minimal action will reduce motivation. You need to carefully tie rewards with the actions they are granted for, and make sure they are balanced.

Chapter 6: Designing Community Spaces and Experiences

Now that you have a general idea of who your members are, how they will participate in your community, and how to validate and reward them for this participation, you are ready to move on to the tactical level of community strategy.

We'll be discussing the spaces and experiences that you're creating for your community and what you'll do day-to-day to improve these spaces and experiences, making them highly engaged.

First of all, all community experiences fall into two categories: synchronous or asynchronous.

Synchronous experiences are where members participate live, at the same time, usually at an event or a meeting. They can be in-person or virtual; think workshops, conferences, meetups, etc. They're great for allowing members to form deeper connections, have meaningful conversations, and create serendipity.

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Asynchronous experiences are where members interact without needing to be present in the space at the same time. Think forums, groups, message boards, etc. These experiences are mostly online-only and focus on members' connections with the community. They're important as they are more accessible and convenient, and allow you to collect a wider variety of feedback and insights.

Most great communities need a combination of both. You need to offer asynchronous spaces so members can connect daily and engage in discussions. Then synchronous spaces will help complement these discussions and engagement through live events and gatherings. Remember, asynchronous experiences provide breadth. Synchronous experiences provide depth.

The key is repetition and consistency. You need to create standard, recurring experiences by, for example, keeping the overall experience the same and hosting it at the same time every week, month, quarter, year, etc. This will make it easier for your members to develop a habit of coming back and they'll know exactly what to expect and how to participate.

For each of the timeframes mentioned above, brainstorm ideas about events. Your goal is to have experiences hosted at all, or almost all of these frequencies. Moreover, a general rule is that the less frequently the experience is hosted, the bigger the production will be.

The key here is consistency. Make sure that each event in these time frames takes place around the same time each interval. It needs to be predictable so that people can have it on their calendars and look forward to and plan for it. Another thing you can focus on is recurring events, so that people can know what to expect when they are attending a certain event. You want to try and strike a balance between recurring and predictable experiences that your audience is comfortable with, and new and exciting experiences that will keep them coming back for more.

Moving on, allow me to share with you a standard set of pillars that we use when designing any shared experience: The 7 P's.

1. **People.** Who are we gathering? Our target audience.

2. **Purpose.** Why are we gathering? The cause and the benefits attendees will receive.

3. **Place.** Where are we gathering? Physical or online locations.

4. **Participation.** What will the attendees do? How will they fulfill the intended *purpose?*

5. **Policy.** What rules do we need to set? Guidelines, code of conduct, and values.

6. **Promotion.** How will we market to potential members? How to specifically attract *our people*.

7. **Performance.** How will we track the success of our event? How to identify our strengths and weaknesses through feedback to constantly improve.

The 7 P's can be used whether you are launching a new forum or creating a new kind of event for your existing community, etc. You'll find almost all these points apply to your specific needs.

Convene

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Chapter 7: Activating Community Engagement

As we wrap things up, I would like to share some of the key lessons I have learned in the community-building field along with some inside tips and tricks that have worked for me.

My first big lesson is that engagement is all about trial and error. You need to try different things, and you will likely fail many times before you find the approach that works best for you and your community. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, and that's okay. Don't be afraid of an event not working, or a post getting no replies. *Expect* things to not work on the first try. Keep trying and innovating, and when something works, keep doing it, but don't stop the innovating part.

Next up, the most powerful tool in your toolkit might not be what you expect: personal invitations. Many of us tend to avoid this approach as it takes more time, and is hard to scale. But remember, when you're just getting started, you're not focused on scale, your focus should be on building a strong foundation of quality and community. That's exactly what a personal invitation does.

Lastly, remember that a community organically taking off from day one is the exception, not the rule. Keep your energy high, and Go Forth and Build Community!