Developing an Online Business Community: A Travel Industry Case Study

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Abstract

Many businesses are now using online communities to interact with their customers and to realise the many benefits such communities offer. However, there remains little understanding of how such communities should be developed and maintained. A case study of Lonely Planet examines the way in which the travel publisher has established a vibrant online community with more than 250,000 members. Analysis shows that the company has integrated the elements of a socially constructed community with those of a business one. Lonely Planet has increased the value proposition for their customers while nurturing a sense of social belonging. An examination of a successful business-sponsored online community contributes to more understanding of how such communities can be developed.

1. Introduction

In the early days of the Web there were opposing views on how businesses should address the new environment. In the early stages of online business, controversy was raised by Canter and Siegel's statement that 'it is important to understand that the Cyberspace community is not a community at all' [1]. In contrast, Hagel and Armstrong [2] supported the idea of community and proposed the development of virtual communities within the business context. Their arguments have prevailed and the development of business generated online communities is promoted as a wise strategic move by influential consultants such as McKinsey [3, 4]. The potential benefits of market research, relationship building and branding are widely promoted [5-7].

The travel industry was one of the early movers in the adoption of information technology (IT) and travel players were quick to adopt the Internet as a tool for enhancing information dissemination and online sales [8]. IT has significantly changed the industry environment and together with deregulation and changes in consumer trends the tourism industry must adapt to new challenges [8]. Industry players need to find new ways of interacting with their customers and to be more flexible in their approach to both consumers and trading partners. The Internet is a powerful tool capable of supporting the peculiar nature of the travel industry with its social connotations, wide variety of offerings and dependence on rich information sources. It also brings problems in that consumers in the online environment have extensive sources of information and an overabundance of choice. This has led to site hopping behaviour as consumers search for information and bargains. Travel organisations must seek ways to develop and maintain relationships with these "empowered fruit flies" [9 p. 1]. The business sponsored online community model is a potential solution.

Hagel [3] used an online travel community, developed by Travelocity, to illustrate his arguments for the adoption of the virtual community as a business model. There are several such travel communities now evident on the Web (e.g. Travelocity.com and Fodors.com). One of the strongest brands is the online travel community maintained by Lonely Planet. This company is a publishing firm rather than a classic intermediary within the tourism industry. However, they are one of the largest

publishers of English language travel guides and have established a powerful brand both on and offline. More recent additions to the Lonely Planet site indicate a move towards business to business (B2B) solutions. This paper explores the Lonely Planet website to identify how a business can run a community site that positively self-reinforces their business and yet provides all the assets of a good community site. The contribution of this paper is to analyse the constructs of online communities found in the Lonely Planet site to identify why the site is considered so successful in the business environment [10, 11]. This will further inform gathering arguments that online business communities can succeed where the correct balance of social ties and economic considerations is achieved [12].

2. Defining an Online Community

The term online community means different things to different people [13]. The imprecise term lacks a defined meaning even amongst sociologists [14] although there is consensus that it involves a group of people sharing a common interest. In the physical context, Hillery argues that every community has social interaction, a shared space or location and common obligations and responsibilities [15]. For the virtual world, Preece [13] adds computer systems to the criteria identified by Hillery. These four criteria are well recognised in other research addressing the nature of an online community [14, 16].

The work of Rheingold has been instrumental in establishing ways in which others define an online community [17]. He argues that virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on a discussion long enough to form personal relationships. This view remains recognisable in what Preece [13] calls the e-commerce perspective of online communities. The early arguments for regarding virtual communities as a marketing tool [2] took a Spartan view of what constitutes a community [14]. Hagel and Armstrong contend that the community integrates content and communication in a computer mediated space. They put an emphasis on member-generated content; a perspective that may have influenced views that 'any chat or bulletin board' is regarded as a community by businesses [13 p.16]. The development of an economic perspective to online communities may be frowned upon by some, but there has been a surge of interest from businesses eager to gain advantage from building relationships with customers [18].

The range of business communities now seen on the Web further complicates the definition of an online community. If it is more than a bulletin board, then the boundaries of the shared space and the nature of the interaction have to be identified. In an example of an embedded business community, Preece examines Rei.com [13 p.68]. Rei.com has a link from its homepage to its community page. The Lonely Planet community is more embedded in that it has no separation between community space and sales space. Jones [14] argues that information exchange is not a sufficiency for a community. This paper takes the perspective that the virtual space of the website constitutes the shared space of Lonely Planet's community. This accords with the view that the business community is more than the interchange of information between customers, that information interchange is in itself insufficient to form a community and that the company itself draws no borders but integrates all its information sources.

3. Online Business Communities

Despite the different definitions of communities, here is agreement that a significant characteristic of an online community is its reason to exist; that is the common goals or interests of its members. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar [16] describe the different characteristics of various communities, but they also highlight the commonalities that can be found. These commonalities were defined by a multi-disciplined group of academics in 1996 [16]. An online community displays:

- A shared goal, interest or need
- Repeated and active participation by members with strong interaction and emotional ties
- Accessibility of shared resources and policies governing the access
- Reciprocity of information, support and services
- Shared context of social conventions, language and protocols

Members of such communities feel a sense of belonging, a shared history and develop ongoing relationships. There is a growing body of literature on why people contribute to online communities [16, 19, 20]. One factor is the concept of the gift economy prevalent in the early days of the Internet [21] that leads people to freely contribute. (Werry [1] sees the hijacking of the early 'gift economy' for business purposes as an exploitative move.) The theory of self concept adds to the motivation debate by supporting the view that people contribute for reasons of status and prestige; that is reputation based rewards [19, 20]. A further factor is the simple desire for entertainment; that people participate in communities for enjoyment [21].

The characteristics of online business communities show some of the commonalities described above, but they also encompass characteristics that relate to the underlying strategy of the site owner. The development of business communities is a relatively recent phenomena. When businesses first began to look to the Internet, the prevailing thoughts were that communities were non-existent [1]. It took the failure of many business models and the work of such authors as Hagel and Armstrong [2], before communities became a desirable feature of online business strategy [1]. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar argue that the prevailing pragmatic view that businesses display in developing the concept of community as a

means to promote commerce often leads to failure [16]. Businesses, they argue, ignore the complexities of community in favour of a market driven approach resulting in 'ghost town' sites that fail to attract members. Walden [22] contributes to the debate with a description of the many uses of online communities across a variety of disciplines. His arguments against online communities in some areas of commerce, however, are based on the disadvantages that may develop from consumer to consumer interaction. Hagel recognises the need for firms to develop a new mindset to overcome a common aversion to customers talking to each other. The benefits, he argues, of business promoted online communities are significant and numerous. Customers will be attracted to these sites, despite their commercial nature, if they can extract more value from the products and services offered by the firms. The value proposition lies in the ability of customers to see benefits in their participation. The business model must therefore:

- Bring people together with common needs and interests
- Integrate published content with discussion forums
- Recognise the value in discussion forums
- Support aggregation of competing vendors and publishers to maximise the selection available to ensure best value for members in transactions relevant to their area of interest
- Recognise the commercial motivation for the site and plan revenue return on resources expended through enough customers

Hagel further argues that previous social models failed to enhance the value proposition of business communities, although Walden asserts that a sense of social belonging is essential for members to encourage them to interact. This latter view is reflected in the broader literature on socially constructed online communities [5, 16].

From a business perspective, Bughin and Hagel [4] see the benefits to be gained from communities to be potentially extensive, although they caution that cost effectiveness will be a slow process. Nevertheless, there is potential for diverse sources of revenue to be gained and information available to members can be both interactive and cheaper than conventional forms of marketing such as television. Narrow targeted segments for marketing and sales are complemented by the ubiquity of the Web enabling the extension of niche markets to more geographic areas. A key aspect of these communities is their ability to generate traffic beyond the scope of average websites. McKinsey's research in this area has shown that member retention can be as high as 18% of visitors in contrast to an average 1% for other websites [4]. By developing online communities firms can foster relationships between customers, reinforce brand recognition, use customer feedback to develop products and services more effectively, accumulate customer information, improve pre and post transaction

services and test new products [6, 7, 16, 22]. In essence, a business supported online community is an effective tool for Customer Relationship Management (CRM).
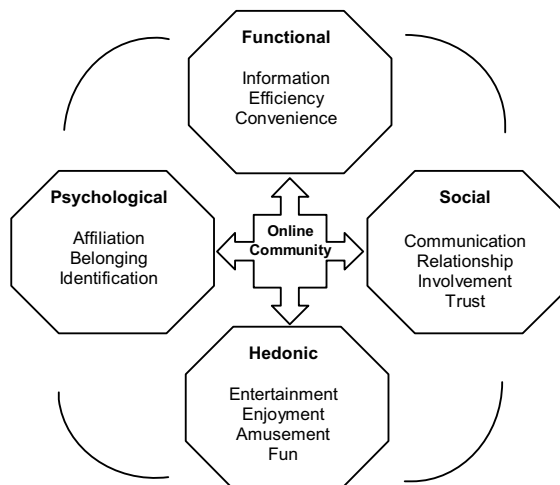

Figure 1: Measuring online travel community needs (Source, Wang & Fesenmaier 2004)

The travel industry would seem to be well suited to the notion of online communities. The industry was an early mover in information technology use, is highly dependent on information and has a diverse customer base [8]. In addition, the social elements inherent in leisure travel would likely encourage interaction between travellers eager to share experiences. This is borne out by Hagel who uses a leisure travel community to illustrate the advantages of a business sponsored online community [3]. Travelocity was an early developer of its community site which supports travel directories, flights, chat areas and transaction capabilities. Further research in the travel industry records the emergence of numerous other online travel communities [21]. Wang and Fesenmaier [21] assert that such communities have revolutionised the way participants communicate and access resources and that they have changed the rules for conducting business. They discuss the influences that affect people's participation in online communities and present four constructs that relate to member needs within a travel community (Figure 1).

Large numbers of customers can communicate peer-to-peer without time and geographical barriers. They can obtain travel information, find travel companions, seek tips and suggestions and have fun relating experiences of travel. It is this last element that is often overlooked in considering factors that drive a community.

The benefits of an online community would therefore seem to be extensive. However, there is a division of opinion as to which constructs of a community model should be applied to a business site. There is disagreement as to whether the social complexities of communities can be or should be considered in a commercial context [3, 16, 22].

One of the most popular travel community websites is owned by the travel publisher, Lonely Planet [23]. The community site has evolved and expanded over the ten years of its existence and additional facilities have extended the business model to include B2B facilities. Using the Lonely Planet site as a case study of a business community website has several advantages. The site has been well established for ten years and is perceived to be a successful example [10, 11, 23, 24]. The company has added business to business content and as a travel site it attracts a wide range of people to its community.

4. The Research Design

The research design is based on the method of Netnography, an extension of ethnography that has been adapted for the purpose of studying online communities [5]. Ethnographers seek to understand the organisation of social action in particular settings, based on observations [25 p. 123]. The method enables an understanding of how conversations or texts depict reality rather than an assessment of whether they are true or false. The environment of the Internet, which is still in a period of innovation, experimentation, and rapid change, leads to new requirements in addressing questions and "requires adapting ethnographic methods to new technological environments" [26 p. 461].

Netnography is 'based primarily on the observation of textual discourse' [5 p. 64]. If the posting of text in a computer environment (an online community) is in itself a social action as described by Wittgenstein, then the study of the 'conversational act' becomes valid. Netnography allows for flexibility, but provides rigour in the analysis of conversations conducted through the computer medium in text form [5].

While described as a tool for market researchers, netnography enables "important insights into the more mainstream consumer behaviour of tomorrow." [5 p. 70]. This supports the examination of online business sponsored communities that are developing greater interaction with consumers.

4.1. Data collection and analysis

The collection of data from a website community requires that some decisions regarding the method of collection be taken. In this research the emphasis of data collection is moved from the perspectives of the initiators and users of the website in favour of the more objective online perspective [27 p. 234]. This approach focuses on "what is online" from the perspective of what the users experience.

One author has been an observer of Lonely Planet for more than a year. The second author came to the project with no previous knowledge of the site. Observations for this paper took place over a period of three months with virtually daily access by both authors. Access was carried out independently and supported by frequent discussions

to analyse what was found. In this way analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection.

The analysis of textual data must take into account the cultural/holistic perspective of the Website community. For this reason a purely content analysis approach that quantifies the number of codings is not sufficient. Silverman [25] cautions against the problem of confining categories when addressing the analysis of text. His arguments support calls for a more holistic approach using categories of meaning to allow for a broader interplay of techniques such as 'noting patterns, seeing plausibility, making comparisons etc' [28 p.204]. To guide the categories of meanings, a range of questions were applied to the analysis (Hammersely and Atkinson in [25]). These questions are drawn from the literature regarding the key characteristics of socially constructed communities and business constructed communities (Table 1).

The questions were applied to an examination of the website independently by the researchers. Where content was judged to accrue to one of the constructs, notes were made. For example, following the discussion on the death of a member of the discussion board, both researchers deemed the messages to belong to the constructs of strong evidence of social belonging and emotional ties. Cross checking of notes between the authors followed the initial independent assessments. Finally, a joint application of the questions to the website was then made to validate meanings and seek plausibility. (Unfortunately, for ethical reasons the authors are unable to quote from customer contributions to the site.)

Table 1: Questions for analysis of text

Question	Construct	Source
Is there evidence of a concept of social belonging?	Social	[22]
Is there exchange of information, support and services?	Social	[16]
Does the community share conventions, language and protocols?	Social	[16]
Does the community display a shared interest?	Social Business	[2, 3, 16]
Is there evidence of active participation, strong interaction and emotional ties?	Social Business	[3, 16, 21]
Does the community meet the psychological, functional, social and hedonic needs of its members?	Social Business	[21]
Is published content integrated with discussion forums?	Business	[3]
Does aggregation of information from a range of sources ensure best value for members?	Business	[3]
Is there evidence of a commercial motivation for the site and plans for revenue return on resources expended?	Business	[3, 4]

5. Lonely Planet – The Case Study

Lonely Planet travel guides were established in 1972 with their first publication describing an overland trip from the UK to Australia by the owners. A second book followed in 1975 and the company became well established with the publication of a guide to India in 1981 [11].

Today, the company has over 400 employees in four countries. It has more than 600 titles in print, total sales in excess of 6 million copies and now accounts for one quarter of all English language guidebooks sold [11].

A survey of bookstore owners in the United States [24] found that Lonely Planet was one of the most recognised brands with the widest global coverage of any guide book series. The company dominates the Australian travel book market, is a leading brand in the UK and is 2000 was ranked third in the US [23]. The guide books are predominately aimed at independent travellers, both of the backpacking type and those that like to travel in far remote destinations.

The company established itself online in 1994 and the site now has a loyal community of 250,000 registered members and receives more than 5.5 million visits a month. The online bulletin board, The Thorn Tree, received over 1500 postings a day [23] in 2000 and this has risen to more than 5000 posts a day in 2005 [29].

The Lonely Planet website gained further recognition in the press following the 2004 Tsunami. A section of the community site was devoted to reporting 'missing and found' people who were visiting or living in the devastated countries at the time of the disaster [29]. The website continues to give updates on the restoration work in each of the affected countries and provides links to organisations such as Red Cross, Red Crescent and UNICEF.

In 2004, Lonely Planet launched a content service to provide in-depth content for B2B players in the travel industry. The content can be integrated with booking engines or customised according to the business customer needs. The company has also invested in mobile technologies in partnership with Nokia, Orange and Gate5 to offer city guides and tour maps via mobile phones. In addition Lonely Planet has developed a number of other business initiatives such as television programme production, online ordering for booksellers and a photographic library.

The concept of Lonely Planet as an information source and community site for travellers is well recognised. The influence that the company has had on the travel industry is difficult to estimate, but is seen in some quarters as extensive: 'the world's largest single influence on tourism' [23p 19]. The first generation of Lonely Planet travellers have moved on in terms of income and lifestyle and it appears that these early customers demand more comfort and organisation in their travel, but retain a sense of adventure [10]. This is reflected in recently recognised trends in the travel industry that include more demand for experiential travel, an increase in ecotourism and more educational/nature orientated holidays [30].

6. Community Site Content

There is a wide range of people contributing to the Lonely Planet site. Many of the sections are managed by the Lonely Planet team and provide direct information to travellers in a structured and informative way, although the tone remains light and non-judgemental. Several sections are written by freelance travel writers and some by contributors to the community site. Links to travel service providers are given, taking prospective customers directly to the providers' own websites. There are no advertisers on the Lonely Planet site, but several other links are provided to a wide range of interest and information groups covering topics such as health, planning, activities and news.

The breadth of content providing dedicated travel information is impressive and addresses numerous areas that are of interest to travellers. The site is well laid out and information is easy to access. The frequent changes to the information makes for a recurring curiosity to see what is on the site and maintains interest levels very effectively. The weekly question to the 'expert' covers a wide range of subjects from 'who to trust on a solo journey' to recommendations of how to plan a trip to Asia. There is a significant section of author blogs, that invites contributions from visitors. There are usually four blogs running at one time, which alternate as a main feature on the home page virtually daily.

There are two main sources of peer to peer interaction on the website. The first is the discussion board, The Thorn Tree; an extensive resource covering a range of subjects listed under four headings:

- The Tree House with currently 7 branches addresses less travel orientated subjects such as sport and culture.
- The Newstand (2 branches) covers more recent events such as the 2004 tsunami
- The Lobby (17 branches) addresses specific sections of the community such as gays, children, women, diving, sailing etc
- The Departure Lounge has 22 branches and addresses geographic regions of the world

The second main source of peer to peer content is the Postcard section. The content comes from "the mountain of mail" that Lonely Planet receives from travellers on the road. Topics range "from how to get a summer job in Guatemala to how to find a cold beer in Timbuktu." Readers are cautioned that the content is not moderated and the company takes no responsibility for its authenticity.

Lonely Planet makes it clear that they welcome submissions from consumers and at one point had a section on the home page describing how travellers could aspire to become travel writers. In this way they keep a

flow of submissions open and encourage travellers to contribute well written articles.

Mobile services are also on offer and details are displayed on the website. The services are run in conjunction with Nokia, Orange and Gate 5 and offer city maps and guides to places of interest in specific cities.

The B2B part of the site was developed more recently in 2004 [11]. The site provides details for booksellers and other companies about the products and services available from Lonely Planet. The development of a data warehouse or knowledge base for the company [23] has changed its ability to reconfigure content in a wide variety of ways. The company has made full and imaginative use of this flexibility to offer customised products to other companies, such as the Motorola European Phrasebook. It offers these products in print or digital form, together with support services to ensure quality of product. Further offerings in the business to business field include customised content integration (for example, into an organisation's portal or booking service), maps, photographs and corporate gift services.

Lonely Planet also has a television production company that produces travel series. The website invites ideas and resumes from interested professionals in the same spirit it remains open to authors' submissions. Booksellers are also addressed in the site and are offered a range of services from ordering books online, catalogues, and sales information. Although Lonely Planet offers its books for sale via the community site, they do not offer discounted prices and charge for postage and packing. This ensures that the books are available world wide but does not undercut their retail customers.

7. Discussion

The definition of an online business community used in this paper is supported by the Lonely Planet website. The site shows no discernible border between the website and its community. This approach to a community site is more familiar in a socially constructed community where activities additional to the community rarely exist. In a business owned community site, the web pages are multifunctional and the community is often accessed via a dedicated link to the home page. The encompassing approach to the community encourages visitors to browse the site. Rather than click through to specific areas, the site invites users to view the content.

The identified constructs in Table 1 are discussed within the categories of social, social & business, and business. There are, naturally, overlaps in this rather artificial division of the discussion but it enables clearer understanding of how the community has taken the social online community structure into the business environment.

7.1. Social Constructs

The constructs that are found predominantly in the literature on social online communities address the concept of social belonging, information and services and shared conventions. The Lonely Planet site contains a substantial amount of information. This comes from Lonely Planet employees, community members, freelance authors and photographers, all of whom contribute content from every 'continent and backwater cranny' (Lonely Planet website). It is not always possible to discern the individual provenance of the information as emphasis is placed on the richness of content rather than its source, although short author profiles are sometimes given. This broadness of content enhances the strong sense of social belonging that is evident on the Website in that extra emphasis is not placed on the paid-for content. This sense of belonging is evident through postings to the discussion board (The Thorn Tree). Members often refer to themselves as 'TTers' and there is frequent recognition of usernames and references to previous postings. The informal nature of the language also contributes to a sense of inclusiveness and underlines the perception of a community with not only similar interests but also similar views. These similarities are evident in Lonely Planet's strong brand. Their brand image is variously described by the company, the contributors, and the literature as irreverent, informal, open, sharing, caring and honest. The brand attracts people who see themselves as independent-minded, travellers rather than tourists, with a passion for travel that is shared within the community. There is a supporting ethos of environmental awareness and of commitment to a humanitarian approach to peoples and cultures shown by the links to charities and to information on how to volunteer for projects in developing countries. It is perhaps not surprising that the concept of brand image, a key business strategy, is very evident in the strong concept of social belonging. The tendency for people to attribute anthropomorphic values to a brand with which they identify is well known in the business world [31]. Lonely Planet underpins the brand with the nature of the content in the site such as the author blogs which describe the travels of independent travellers. This in turn is reinforced by tales from the Thorn Tree contributors further entwining the sense of belonging with the brand.

The social construct of shared information, support and services is evident in the community and accords closely with the business construct of integration of content with discussion forums. Author blogs, and postcards are interlinked through other content areas to provide extensive coverage of the different countries profiled on the homepage and in the sidebars. Occasional links to specific content on the discussion board also support the range of content devoted to one topic. The company encourages input from contributors through the discussion board and postcards, as well as providing feedback opportunities through the contact link. Support services are offered through the Subwwway area of the site.

7.2. Social & Business Constructs

Common interests or shared needs are seen as essential for both a social and a business sponsored community site [2]. This is closely related to the sense of social belonging where the sharing of interests enhances the sense of belonging. The very broad subject of world travel is addressed by dividing the world into regions on the discussion board. This attracts active participation in the form of considerable customer-generated information through feedback and contributions. The postings from contributors interested in specific areas are thereby collated and there is evidence that regular posters achieve status as authorities on local conditions. Lonely Planet reciprocate by frequently renewing the home page, and links to this information, to keep it fresh and interesting. They enhance the website with new content, but retain easy-to-follow links to recent coverage. Links to other sites are well maintained and appropriate to the brand image.

From a business perspective, common interests are also evident in Lonely Planet's business relationships. The travel service providers that offer booking services to the community are established tourism industry players. There are similarities in the feel of these businesses that make them likely to appeal to community members. For example, World Travel is a tour operator that specialises in adventure trips such as trekking in the Andes, rather than more conventional tour offerings.

The community site has the capability to meet the functional needs of members; that is those seeking to fulfil specific activities [12]. In the case of Lonely Planet those activities are centred on the retrieving or giving of information, but may include online purchases of travel guides. The exchange of travel information in a community is made more efficient and convenient by the online environment. This is borne out by the Lonely Planet site where the range of information offered is extensive and well structured. Travellers can easily access information about health, visas, transport, accommodation and public holidays for virtually any country that allows tourists. An element that has rarely been addressed in the literature is the need for hedonic rewards [21]. Wang and Fesenmaier argue that the need for entertainment, enjoyment, amusement and fun are essential elements of a successful website. Thorn Tree postings support the recognition of the hedonic construct as an important factor in a vibrant community travel site.

Lonely Planet are keenly aware of their customer base and show a strong understanding of who their customers are. They foster a community that contributes to the concept of the shared goal, a crucial construct of an online community [16], and gain input that enables them to adjust their products and services in a changing world. For example, the company is well informed as to the current most popular travel destinations, they track trends to predict future destinations and types of travel and they accumulate content that supports the re-issue of their guides every two to three years.

It is not possible to see to what extent the company filters content from contributors although its stated policies acknowledge that some minimal moderation of content takes place. Filtering of content does not appear to impact on the perception that content is shared and that all contributions are of equal value to the community. Lonely Planet is effective in drawing the community into cooperative encouragement and support of travellers and would-be travellers. (From a user view of the website it appears as though some of the members were more armchair travellers rather than active journeyers.) Information is available in Lonely Planet's comprehensive range of travel books and effectively supported by contributions from a range of links within the site. The mutual support network is enhanced by the enthusiasm of the Thorn Tree contributors who encourage fellow members to report back on their trips, offer advice and show a high level of interaction and strong emotional ties [16]. These ties are evident in the recognition of user names in 'conversations', supportive messages to those discussing illnesses and, in a particular example, the high number of postings following the news of the death of a long term member of the board. The psychological needs of affiliation, belonging and identification [21] in a travel community are recognisable in these ties.

Wang and Fesenmaier [12] argue that trust is essential for relationships to flourish in a community. The social needs of members are met by the ability to communicate and develop relationships, exchange ideas and share experiences. Members increase their involvement and activity as they develop trust in the community and this trend can be identified through the user profiles available in the discussion board. The veracity of experiences is rarely challenged although inappropriate or ill advised postings receive instant rebuffs from members. Feedback from travellers indicates that advice and tips from fellow members are often acted upon supporting the presence of trust in the community.

7.3. Business Constructs

The business constructs of an online community are not recognised in a conventional social community. The use of integrated content, aggregation of information and commercial motivations are specifically addressed in the business community literature. [2,3].

Integration of content is a key feature of the site with references to the discussion board appearing alongside news items on the homepage. There is a cross referencing that ends in suggestions for buying the appropriate guide for the topic under discussion. Content comes from a wide variety of sources, but is presented in aggregated format as value-added services to community members. The commercial motivations of the Lonely Planet website are not overt. Booksellers are not challenged by online sales from the publisher who offers few discounts. The presentation of business to business activities is not obtrusive, with pages open to general browsing and well presented with graphics and descriptions. Only the

Images section, with online sales of photographic images, requires registration. This openness is an important factor in maintaining the community feel of the website in that members of the community are not excluded from areas of the site. The commercial section, with its potential to be a significant revenue source, is kept low key but effective. Lonely Planet has succeeded, so far, in maintaining the community site while recognising the commercial potential enhanced by the development of their content management system [23]. The potential for B2B sales promoted through their site is very significant with the ability to customise content for other businesses in print or digital form and to interlink that content with customers' existing online systems. The B2B section was only added in 2004 and it remains to be seen if the current integrated website/community format continues to be used.

8. Conclusions

In considering the success of the Lonely Planet community, it is evident that the parties involved gain from the site. Visitors to the site can find a wealth of information on a range of travel related topics. Those that choose to register and become members can gain a strong sense of community and have many opportunities to share their experiences and interact with other members. They gain opportunities to make relationships through the discussion board and a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people. Contributions from members indicate that they achieve enjoyment and a sense of fun from participation and gain value from Lonely Planet's site.

Lonely Planet realises several benefits from the community. They have a constant flow of information, albeit unstructured and often effusive, and feedback. They develop and maintain a high level of loyalty from a substantial community membership that reinforces brand recognition. The opportunities to accumulate customer information and to build customer relationships are extensive. More recently, Lonely Planet has added an extensive business to business site that has the potential to add significantly to the company's revenue streams.

Lonely Planet has developed a business community site that addresses the key characteristics of success noted in the literature [2-4, 22]. The company has integrated its content well, and offers a wide range of information to support their members' interests. They have devoted resources to ensuring that customer needs such as involvement, entertainment, information and identification [21] are met. They offer services and resources that add value to members' travel experiences and have succeeded in drawing a critical mass of members to the community site. The company has not ignored the commercial motivations for the site and have developed services that have the potential to bring substantial revenue streams.

A key element of Lonely Planet's success is their acknowledgement of the social complexities of communities. Their site incorporates recognised constructs of socially composed community websites. There is evidence of the concept of social belonging and shared interests, extensive exchange of information, with shared conventions and language and strong emotional ties. The company does not take a pragmatic view of business opportunities or neglect the community complexities as described by Preece and Maloney-Krichmar [16]. It enhances the value proposition to its customers [3], but is well-structured and thoughtful in its approach to developing a sense of social belonging [22]. This has been supported by the company's recognition and understanding of its customer base; a process enhanced by the years of community site interaction with those customers.

Lonely Planet's move of adding business to business activities to its community has not, to date, affected its ability to maintain a successful community. They have proceeded slowly taking ten years to reach their current position and may present a community model that can offer characteristics of interest to other firms.

9. Applicability of the Case

The use of a case study to examine the development of an online community arouses issues of generalisability. While generalisations to the population cannot be made, case studies should 'be seen as explanations of particular phenomena derived from empirical interpretive research in IS settings, which may be valuable in the future in other organisations and contexts'[32 p. 79]. It also allows for a view of a situation to be given that can inform the 'what is' and 'what may be' of a given situation [33]. The use of an established community like Lonely Planet therefore, contributes to the ability to generalise the findings as a view of possible ways that business community building can progress. The business community model examined in this research resides in the tourism industry where communities are numerous and social interaction is a common desire of many consumers. The tourism industry is information rich and the case study company does not focus heavily on business to consumer online transactions. Therefore the advantages of the shared goal and interaction evident in this case may not be evident in other industries. Nevertheless, significant benefits have accrued to Lonely Planet through their community and the advantages of committing to a socially constructed community should not be overlooked by other industries.

10. Limitations and Further Research

The research was conducted from the perspective of a potential user of the site. A participant study of an online travel community would enable further interpretation of the needs, characteristics and goals of both community members and the community owner. Unfortunately, Lonely Planet maintains a policy of excluding academics from such interaction. Identification of similarly

successful communities is ongoing. Further research to empirically test the findings of this paper is essential to identify how such communities are developing.

11.   References

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