

Metaphor

THE UNION OF ART & TECHNOLOGY

Community Experience Development™

*Empowering Sharing, Participation, and Fellowship
Among a Body Politic by Ran Mullins*

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**Community
Experience
Development™
(CED)**

*Empowering Sharing, Participation,
and Fellowship Among a Body Politic*

An Executive White Paper

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Executive Summary

This paper outlines a business philosophy centered on the paradigm shift of the branding “push” mentality to the community “pull” concept, resulting in planned consultation methods and technological implementation for both the corporate and non-profit sectors.

Community Experience Development™ (CED) combines the essential elements of technology, brand strategy, and inclusion to deliver an absolute marketing environment. CED is a comprehensive consulting method utilizing tools for creating, managing, and tracking brand communities online and offline, including: visitor profile databases, content submission and management, site-building, and personalization tools for cultivating, fascinating, and illuminating the target audience.

Cultivate: Attract and nurture community members, develop a comprehensive strategy for defining roles, and create demographic and ethnographic profiles.

Fascinate: Engage members with creative and informative content relevant to the community core and track the effectiveness of new products, services, etc.

Illuminate: Educate community members to the organization’s new offerings through eLearning environments for mature levels of sophistication.

The core CED principles involve leveraging intellectual properties to position each community creator as the expert in their industry. Achievement of CED objectives results in the evolution of the brand community as the destination point for the given topic. This document describes the problem area of access to a unified community experience on the World Wide Web, which is common to non-profit and corporate groups alike.

Internet Advancement and Community Experience Development™

The World Wide Web has developed as the primary medium for sharing information around the globe. Strangely enough, there seem to be more and more users who don't own a computer, instead gaining access to the Internet through personal digital assistants (PDAs) and cellular telephones.

The increased adoption of devices that connect televisions, telephones, and PDAs to the Internet demonstrates the continued embracing of the new economy by the mass US and international markets. According to Nielsen/NetRatings there are currently 174.6 million Americans online.¹ More importantly, this intense interest in constant communication via the Internet signals the establishment of the global digital village.

Now that our society is saturated with technology terms and the presence of the Web, we are left wondering if and how the Internet is going to change the quality of our lives. We have received promise after promise of what this “new economy” is supposed to offer us. Where is that Holy Grail that we were told to expect?

It is becoming increasingly apparent that we have reached the point of user revolution. Finally, what we get is being determined by what we want, rather than what we are told to want. The big brands will never stop telling us what we should like, but, now that we are aligned in unified communities, the big brands are beginning to pay attention to our wants and needs. User revolutionaries gather research rapidly and then immediately make demands by creating and tracking “buzz” through tools like Intelliseek's Planetfeedback.²

¹ <http://pm.netratings.com/nnpm/owa/NRpublicreports.usagemonthly>

² <http://www.planetfeedback.com/>

The technology and the strategic methods are now available for community implementation on multiple levels within every organization. Many businesses are simply unaware of the possibilities—and limitations—of the Internet applications available for properly managing and presenting an interactive community environment to their online audience. They are just as unaware of how to cultivate that audience in the first place.

Community Experience Development™ (CED) combines the essential elements of technology, brand strategy, and inclusion to deliver an absolute marketing environment. CED isn't merely about branding. Nor is it simply about Web site design. It's about defining a sense of community through the development of the experience. According to articles in several industry trade journals, including *Information Week*, *CIO* and *Business 2.0*, online community development is still in its infantile stage. Many organizations have yet to tackle the identification of their brand community offline, and the opportunity to begin this process through a single Web-based solution is a powerful, but largely unrecognized, prospect.

Due to the great technological innovations being made in Internet application software and the impact of the Internet on everyday life, many small and mid-sized organizations are finding themselves overwhelmed by the possibilities that these new Internet tools offer for cultivating and managing their communities. The need for cultivation is evidenced in the fact that the core community members of many brands are becoming increasingly involved with like-minded individuals in the community periphery. From a psychological perspective, the attraction of these kindred spirits is based upon a need to feel accepted, but this word-of-mouth, one-to-one marketing also represents, to the organization, the means of gaining or losing a valuable community member.

We should be careful not to rest too comfortably on the assumption that the fear of rejection is a natural weakness of the human condition. Although our contemporary society has transformed this individual fear into a community-building strength, the opportunity for the individual to rebel against this attitude has been heralded as a heroic endeavor. Acts of rebellion in the Internet age take the form of testing the boundaries of undefined laws in this ungoverned space.

Rap music provides a clear example of a community that has grown out of defiant attitudes, eventually entering the mainstream Musak of pop culture advertising. Just try counting the number of television commercials in which a brand has not been urbanized. This rebellious behavior actually benefits the organization when it is anticipated and steps are taken to advance the behavior within the life cycle of the brand community.

In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida states that “Individuality, self-expression and openness to difference are favored over the homogeneity, conformity and ‘fitting in’ that defined the organizational age.” Furthermore, he states that communities now require a plethora of gays and rock stars if they are going to prosper and attract the knowledgeable workforce we are seeking.³

Although these rebels may reject traditional norms, they are still seeking acceptance within their peer groups. These bold individuals are searching for their place to belong, even if it happens to be a virtual community that exists only online. The Western village has devolved into the suburban sprawl, and this generation would rather be anonymous on the Internet than compete with the Joneses next door.

³ Richard Florida; *The Rise of the Creative Class*; Basic Books, May 2002; <http://www.creativeclass.org/>

Nowadays, people are being judged less for the clothes they wear or the cars they drive, and more for their ability to converse in acronyms and buzzwords on a given topic. Let's face it, sitting behind a monitor requires less energy than going out and feigning a smile all evening with geographically close acquaintances. The geeks of previous eras are today's economic heroes without the traditional strains of business etiquette. As more creatives pick up the Web, we are also seeing a transformation of the "techie" profile into the "visionary" with the tech savvy to achieve business objectives online.

Tomorrow's brand community begins by utilizing technologies that can edit, track, and manage content in today's Web browsers, PDAs, and cellular telephones. Thanks to public Internet access provided by libraries and technology resource centers, individual community participants can come together and share perspectives regardless of geographic location, social status, hierarchy, or time. Increased virtual connection also demands personal accountability for professional content managers and organizational Web teams that have been assigned the task of delivering hard numbers to their superiors for dollars spent on marketing.

We have yet to experience even a glimpse of the Internet's true potential for satisfying individual needs. The fact is that the mass audience is just beginning to use the Internet in a serious way on a daily basis. The digital divide is ultimately less about class, education, and racial boundaries than it is about creating a sense of community for the individuals we are trying to target. This attempted control of global information is irrelevant to the millions of people who are still not engaged with the Internet. Much of the technology that has already been developed is still waiting for its audience to arrive.

The good news is that within the past twelve months, Web usage demographics have evolved dramatically. Originally the province of younger males, WWW usage has become incredibly diverse regarding gender, age, race, and language. Usage in the home is competing with the amount of time spent on other forms of entertainment.⁴ With this shift in demographics, interest in community-focused Web site content is flourishing. As Internet usage becomes more prevalent in previously non-computer homes, Web sites that provide personalized local community information are now leading the pack.

Empowerment is the key to community development for both the participant and the governing body of the community. Personalization translates to the ability of community members to control their own content. This capability presents the community organizer with the opportunity to provide custom content on a regular basis from a wide variety of content providers. The result is a win-win-win situation for all parties. The organization invests marketing dollars in new technologies, an action that benefits the community members as well as the content providers. In turn, the organization reaps bountiful rewards inherent in the ability to track the success of the new products, services, and information being offered.

In a January 29, 2001 brief entitled, “Listen Up -- eBusiness Communities Are Talking,” Daniel P. O’Brien of Forrester Research wrote that, “Emerging online communities of customers and partners are precursors to full-time eBusiness networks. Companies that listen, participate, and distill community insights will improve product development, marketing, and customer support.” The relationships that early communities create survive far into the future. Think of the story of Coca-Cola in the realm of the soft drink.

⁴ <http://pm.netratings.com/nnp/owa/NRpublicreports.usagemonthly>

This concept of community is certainly not revolutionary with regard to earlier “push” technologies, but as you read on, you will see that it is *evolutionary* when applied to the small to mid-sized organization with fewer resources that still must overcome the hurdle of cultivating a virtual community in order to build and maintain positive brand awareness. What company wants to be known as the organization that doesn’t “listen, participate, and distill community insights” because they haven’t embraced technology? The user revolutionary acts as the catalyst for this natural evolution of “pull” technology.

The growth of online communities is beginning to provide clues to how the individual user has been affected by the communal Internet experience. There seems to be a direct correlation between the State of the Union and the individual user’s increased requirements for a sense of community inclusion online. In fact, following the national tragedy of 9/11 the country used the Internet to come together, and we saw record numbers of Internet usage.⁵

⁵ <http://www.usatoday.com/life/cyber/tech/2001/11/13/internetuseup.htm>

Cultivate: The Community Experience Defines the Brand Experience

Every great organization relies on the brand experience encountered by each community member. Traditionally, companies have utilized television, radio, and print advertising and one-to-one marketing as branding tools to create the core of their communities. The flaw with this logic is the fact that the branding tools themselves are as ephemeral and fleeting as the members' wants and needs.

Conventional advertising methods have only recently been relegated to the periphery of the community by emerging technologies. The IT Director is now subordinate to the Marketing Director as the sales, print, radio, and television marketing tools begin to revolve around the nucleus that is the Web site. Go figure. You have two experts on staff who must work together, but they can't seem to agree on anything. Many companies are actually experiencing the same dilemma with their advertising agencies.

While advertising firms are able to identify the solution to almost any marketing challenge for a client, they still grapple with managing Internet professionals. Agencies went from gobbling up Web design firms to spitting them back out once the relationship soured. The emergence of professional services firms with creative and Internet expertise threatens to fill a niche for the agencies and the clients they represent.

The technology has advanced to the point that the focus has moved from "How does it work?" to "How does it feel?" The Marketing Director and CIO are finally allowed to ask the question, "What is the user's experience?" The focus is less on the technology and more on the strategy behind the dollars being spent. It was never a good idea to implement an online community prior to devising a strategy for the experience.

The paradigm has shifted, and the new center of the organization's brand experience is the Web site community. The Web site community experience has the ability to transform interested onlookers into valuable customers, clients, and patrons. The ever-present Web site now serves as symbol and representative of the activity of every organization. This fact remains regardless of whether or not that organization has embraced Internet technology.

During the second half of the twentieth century, communities were created around motivational speakers, thought leaders, and new business methodologies such as Six Sigma.⁶ Associations, networking events, and a multitude of "experts" have materialized with countless books written on experiential branding, but none that truly defines the centralized heart of a community experience.

A central figure or conceptual thought is the vital component of every healthy community experience. In every community there must exist a focus of attention that draws new members in and keeps current members captivated. This practice requires an ever-evolving central theme that continues to be explored and is forever filled with discovery.

Just as brands and signage have become a part of the contemporary Western landscape, the Internet too is a part of our lives in a way that we still cannot fathom. As a global consciousness we are educating ourselves in technology at breakneck speed. We are spending as much time learning what to do with the technology we have created as we are in understanding and developing it for future use. The value proposition of the Web is readily apparent, but the skills necessary to master this medium are still being discovered.

⁶ <http://www.issp.org/>

Regardless of how professionally and financially beneficial they may be, online communities are currently too complex and out of reach for many organizations. There are numerous books dedicated to defining both the online brand and intuitive interface design, but not one that approaches the cultivation of a sense of kinship through strategy and experience. The fact that the community experience defines the brand experience has still not been explored as the means to encourage, empower, and nurture an audience.

Corporations and other large institutions have subscribed to enterprise-level programs to encourage this inclusive customer involvement and to support their employees. The news and entertainment media have chronicled each new technological model relentlessly without identifying the purpose of discovering a new community.

Yahoo!, Excite, and Netscape have all built portals attempting to define the solution to cultivating a unified community. Oracle, PeopleSoft, SAP, and many others have created powerful enterprise portal software for empowering their customers, but their clients do not realize that the technology is less than half of the battle. In fact, the myriad turnkey products now available only serve to confuse the strategy for most executives.

The advantages that the World Wide Web provides for organizations seeking to increase their client recruitment are the abilities to track community involvement and to distribute desired content to their community members. These advantages are certainly not a revelation to those organizations with millions of dollars devoted to the research and development of technologies and strategies that can accomplish these tasks for them, but for many mid-sized organizations the solution to achieving control over their online community is still out of reach.

These companies are unable to effectively represent their brand on the Internet due to a lack of understanding of the technologies and the absence of a comprehensive strategy for defining roles and creating profiles of their community members.

The answer to managing these complex brand experience issues is to find individuals who possess creative marketing prowess coupled with skills, understanding, and technological capabilities that provide a breadth of knowledge and applicable experience. Proven and applied community-building strategy is just as important as the ability to focus on future technological strategies and implementations.

The experience has progressed into the development of an immersive community environment. The cross-industry result is the hybrid firm that encourages the union of art and technology to accomplish experiential goals. In the end, the control of the experience provides the opportunity to cultivate targeted prospects.

Fascinate: Monitoring Reality Through Community

We will never understand the human inside the monitor any more than we understand the “man in the moon.” The mystery remains appealing to us only as long as we continue to discover new and extraordinary myths to surround the technology. To some, a friend that keeps us company, to others, an enemy that eats our time, the monitor has taken hold of our lives like nothing ever has. Technology is the Pandora’s box that fascinates us into believing that it is impossible to turn off the monitor once it has been illuminated.

Technology provides profound experiences for a variety of individual personality types. The monitor relates to us poignant stories and delivers news as well as entertainment. Our lives would not be the same were it not for the experiences we’ve lived through watching the glowing screen of the television and the computer monitor. We have become desensitized to the presence of this wealth of information that is always at our fingertips, and yet it has been used to cultivate multitudes of communities through individual members and their endless hunger for content.

The computer and our intimate interaction with the monitor are providing us a condensed glimpse of our culture’s continuing infatuation with television. The computer mouse has taken over the role of the remote control by providing access to selective information on demand. We seek to have power over every aspect of our lives by obtaining control of our experiences and inevitably telling our own tales through our own choices. Spontaneity is still extremely rewarding for those of us who allow ourselves to be surprised as the narrative develops instead of writing every scene in the script. Storytelling in current society is particularly primitive when seen in this light.

We hold the torch to technology in our search for every last speck of knowledge that can be discovered. Seeking fact or fable, we are indelibly linked to our precious network in an attempt to understand and participate in the world around us. The evolution of the human narrative continues to be at the heart of our romance with the technological cave.

As monitors both grow and shrink we are forced to acknowledge technology as a new member of our community, due to the influence of the content that we seduce from within the glowing box. The enlightenment this information provides, not only casts our shadow on the wall of the cave, but also serves to inform us that we are not alone in that cave. Our community exists whether or not we actively participate as a member.

The world is continuing to evolve regardless of each community member's level of energy and participation, but the primary community principle relies on the fact that people feel the need to be inspired by other people. Just as figurative painting has been and will always be a relevant form of human experience, so will oral and written communication be forever relevant to human experience. Our society is in such a hurry to move on to the next level of evolution that we forget to truly revel in and experience the story of our current state. Quality of life is forgotten in our rush to form new revolutions in the light of the display.

We must first evolve before we can comprehend the changes we are undertaking in our abstract exchange of information. Identifying advanced methods of interacting with, and including one another in, our communities is the key. This is the only chance our society has to overcome mental, geographical, and prejudicial barriers to achieve a true global consciousness.

This global community is undergoing an evolution that continues to develop. In fact, with a focus on instant information and countless places to vent and seek answers anonymously, the World Wide Web is actually becoming a support mechanism. We literally have affection for the monitor because of the importance of the information that it delivers. Steve Jobs and Apple certainly understand the level of intimacy necessary to keep a loyal brand community fascinated. From the beginning of personal computing the Mac OS interface has smiled in greeting us.

People are increasingly turning to the Internet when searching for a place to belong. In addition to providing tools and resources for researching virtually any aspect of information, the Web offers new ways to find others with similar interests. “The Internet has become the neighborhood,” says Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families & Work Institute, a New York non-profit research organization.⁷

The Internet provides twenty-four hour accessibility to captivating content and it allows community members to share information based on their own individual preferences. The World Wide Web acts as the energy well for those individuals seeking kindred spirits to help recharge their batteries. Users welcome this digital stranger like a friend, but the truth remains that the Internet may just as soon restrain us as liberate us.

Advertising-driven interactive television is the unavoidable future. The computer monitor and the television are predestined to be joined. My computer is my phone, is my remote control, is my garage door opener, is my organizer, and they all fit in one device in the palm of my hand. Or is that a “chip” in the palm of my hand?

⁷ Business Week. January 22, 2001 - <http://www.businessweek.com/>

The Internet is an evolved method of sales and communication for today's businesses and community participants. What began as a new publishing medium has transformed into an interactive broadcast media environment. Our interest with the content inside the monitor is increasingly serving as a metaphor for the lives we live.

As business becomes more technologically advanced and routines are increasingly automated we are provided the opportunity to push our mental capacity beyond our physical capacity. It has become progressively more important to recognize the need for creative content. Once the audience is thoroughly engaged, we can begin to measure the value of the content presented to them. Leading communities by providing an abundance of information for fascination sets the stage for this "pull" technology.

A community that is regularly fascinated with content will also regularly recruit new members. These information-hungry community members are seeking advanced levels of sophistication. Oftentimes our most treasured assets—our community members—are directly under our collective noses, and we simply have to educate ourselves to their needs in order to provide them with the necessary education to take our organizations and communities to the next level. Interaction with custom content will certainly provide a more sophisticated audience, which, once actively engaged, will be prepared for illumination.

Illuminate: Community Management in the Realm of Online Learning

Blended learning through multiple media has been hailed as the savior for large corporations looking to provide education, training services, and constant care for their community members, both customers and employees. For mid-sized companies the solutions are not so readily apparent or affordable. Most of these organizations have not even overcome the hurdle of learning to attract a large audience. These companies would welcome the challenge of educating their many site visitors. However, it is difficult to establish a case for spending a significant portion of the company's budget on alleged turnkey software that may create more complex instructional issues than it solves.

Enterprise educational portal solutions and a variety of “push” technologies have proven semi-effective for the corporate giants, but the rest of the industry has been unable to follow their lead due to limited resources and a limited understanding of the positive impact. Executives often base software acquisitions on personal experiences and philosophies. Many managers who are deciding which software is necessary do not understand how their own staff members live their lives. They have no idea how difficult it is to just “get by” without being burdened with continuous technology education. Don't forget that people have to first learn and then use this software.

In an effort to coerce adoption, previous systems and processes are abandoned due to restrictions of turnkey software. Allowing the technology developers to guide your business processes and strategy is like allowing the dog to drive your car. It's difficult to understand the reasoning behind jumping on the technology bandwagon and leaving your business plan behind. I'm not trying to add insult to injury for those of you who are mourning a dot-com. I'm simply stating why it didn't work. Weak strategy.

When were community members given a choice to take this electronic leap? Before the world was so swept up by the amount of money that could be produced by automating processes, did anyone ever question what it all means and where the eBusiness is headed? The “shock of the new” is enough to keep many executives distracted from the limits of a shortsighted vision.

Maybe the process wasn't automated because it wasn't worth implementing. I hope it didn't become a “priority” simply because it was profiled in the media and included in the latest “best of breed” applications. Companies developing applications based on their specific needs will not only prosper, but also thrive, by using homegrown solutions.

We are seeing mass message delivery meeting the requirements of community members today with continued acceptance and growth into the future. The accessibility to anyone anywhere is a powerful tool to be leveraged since education of community members no longer relies on a specific schedule or geographic location.

Companies are now poised to leverage the potential of Community Experience Development™ illumination through innovative and proven technological methods. These services provide members with positive support and resources that enhance involvement and develop a long-term vision for online learning success.

The importance of training community members to improve communication ability, to increase skills while overcoming obstacles, and to advance knowledge cannot be overstated. It is imperative, however, to develop advanced instructional design prior to undertaking an eLearning initiative. Technology is intelligent, but it only represents what we put into it.

As the technology industry engulfs us, our society is flocking in droves to learn what we can about these automated approaches. People feel the desire to be a part of something larger, and the Internet is the global standard. This seemingly cold and unapproachable technology has been positioned as particularly seductive and exciting by the media. Every possible opportunity is being provided for individuals to learn these new skills and become new consumers.

However, at times it seems that society is responding much like sheep being herded together. Communication is tracked at every interval and that is supposed to be comforting due to recent acts of terror. While this personal scrutiny may feel intrusive to those of us who would prefer to think of ourselves as autonomous within the global consciousness, it represents a necessary surrendering of our freedoms. There is a definite advantage in allowing the companies we patronize to understand our habits in order to serve us more effectively. I certainly feel as uneasy with these developments as anyone who cherishes privacy, but I'll do my duty if it allows me to keep my 1-click™ settings on Amazon.com. My time is more precious than my online privacy.

Certainly, an essential component of effectively integrating these solutions is the presentation of an online source for all community education. Offers of information, products, and services unique from all other educational opportunities are appealing for current and future community members. Content that is up-to-date and easy to navigate and utilize is essential for clients seeking new members. This methodology is applied to the business community when seeking to sanction employees with a strong community intranet and personal portal for continuing education and training.

The concept of education is relative when querying a broad cross section of a community. The tone and mood of the language and images are often altered when presenting to a specific audience. Companies are continually diminishing their brand in order to allow their community members to choose their own styles, colors, typefaces, and font sizes. Each member's personal experience is defined by a set of individual preferences, and this encourages increased interaction with the provided content.

The providers of these options can now learn infinitely more about the psychological and personality profiles of their audience than they would have if they had simply served up their own set of brand preferences. Is the brand dead? Of course not. Is the brand experience altered? Absolutely. These concessions are often essential in preparing members for a community learning experience. Interactivity can serve to open their minds to additional possibilities that they may not have otherwise encountered. They will be storing knowledge before they even realize that they are being educated.

The empowerment of these educational experiences translates into positive connotation, and that is what keeps the members returning. The degrees of user freedom provided by competing organizations determine the members' emotional reactions and attractions to the brand. Consequently, companies whose Web site communities offer more personalization options achieve the highest return on their community investment.

Conversely, frustrations resulting from removing application options that were once offered can discourage the user who is trying to learn and result in the loss of a valued community member. "Give the people what they want!" is the new online mantra, but everything should be practiced in moderation.

The development of interactive educational applications that not only assess aptitude and memorization skills, but also provide demographic and ethnographic information to the organization will naturally augment the return on investment. The integration of valuable educational data with the individual's community membership profile and personal characteristics behind their actions further increases the significance of this reported information.

When following the progress of this member's educational interaction it will prove useful to also follow their involvement with other community resources. This information gauges the effectiveness of the community with regard to the achievement of desired results. Ultimately, all marketing, educational, and sales methods will be tracked and delivered in detailed reports at regular intervals. It's not too difficult to recognize the return on investment when the growth is so clear. New members are cultivated while existing members experience an increased level of sophistication from the company's new offerings. Traveling this route results in illumination for the member as well as for the community organizer.

Community Evolution and Convergence

Communities are formed when two individuals interact over a common interest. There is the global community, and there are societal communities, cultural communities, and as many other types of community as there are brands. Every brand is a community that can be cultivated, fascinated, and illuminated through Community Experience Development™. A brand community can even be a centuries-old neighborhood that is being brought back to life through the infusion of today's technology.

In February of the year 2000, I decided that there was a need in Cincinnati, Ohio's historic Over-the-Rhine community for a clearinghouse of information. The strategy centered on a Web site where all interested parties could share information at will, and the entire Greater Cincinnati area could listen in at the click of a button.

The result was iRhine⁸, a pending non-profit organization with the mission to develop a central community focus of communication for multiple agendas and information, serving as a conduit and catalyst for the many diversified offerings in the historic Cincinnati neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine.

iRhine supports and encourages social and economic development for the Greater Cincinnati Region. iRhine's information, programs, and services increased the community's capacity to:

1. Accelerate economic development through educating the public about the history, local industry, and culture within Over-the-Rhine.
2. Operate proactively by providing the necessary communication resources.
3. Promote initiatives aimed to reduce crime, litter, and unemployment in Over-the-Rhine.

⁸ <http://www.iRhine.com/>

In the world of business, communities are built around industries, companies, divisions, departments, committees, and teams. These communities are not always made up strictly of like minds and kindred spirits; in fact, healthy competition between community members is often supported and encouraged as a means to increased productivity.

The common thread running through the creation of all these communities is an act of leadership. Whether it is the belief that established the community, or the group that continues the mission of the community, the guiding principles are pronounced and certain to change the world. The leaders of these communities are the individuals we must empower in order to create and manage an expert knowledge base, but too few of these members express their integrity of thought in a way that defines them as leaders.

An expert knowledge base provides the key ingredient for cultivating an audience. Companies have invested their dollars in developing intellectual properties, and this proprietary knowledge will finally pay off through more avenues than the education of additional human resources. The Web communities that are now developing around the sharing of such fascinating content are consistently contributing to the knowledge base that defines the company. These community members aren't even on the payroll!

Since the need for Community Experience Development™ is increasing, the demand for tools, training, and education is also growing. Whether implementing licensed software or a custom method of providing these tools, people managing communities are realizing that defining the need is not enough. There exists a necessity for a long-term strategy that is focused on concrete goals and objectives. The ongoing cultivation and engagement of an audience provides the human interaction necessary for a community to thrive.

Primary objectives of this strategy are focused upon building awareness of existing communities through the general public and professional business networks. These online community-building tools persuade the audiences to utilize products and services, encourage them to visit the central Web site often, and convince them that this is the authoritative source for a particular topic on the Web. These methods achieve maximum results for those companies seeking increased community involvement.

Companies that listen, learn, create, and communicate effectively will make efforts to reward their audiences with a sense of consistency in the non-linear experience of the online environment. Empowering each individual with an experience of sharing, participation, and fellowship is the sign of a truly successful community. Allowing the community members to make their own choices and to have a voice in the common purpose of the community will increase the community's knowledge base and create a positive brand experience. Clear and consistent communication will lead to education and the opportunity for meaningful community involvement.

It is time to move beyond the typical marketing-speak and reach the point of action. I'm the first to admit that these concepts have been talked about before, but we are all regularly subjected to the failure of small to mid-sized organizations to effectively implement them. We experienced the demise of a number of large communities like Garden.com, eToys.com and Pets.com, in spite of their efforts to create reliable brand communities. They built wonderful sites, but there were simply not enough visitors to pay the bills and the investors. Community growth can be planned, but the accelerated strategy does not always take into account the personal characteristics of the members.

For years the word community has been used online to define the threaded discussion group or message board. Forums actually allow Web site visitors and intranet users the ability to post messages and to receive feedback. These applications typically limit the opportunity for a complete community experience, but when used in conjunction with additional applications supporting involvement, they have proven quite effective in building an audience surrounding a given topic.

The chat mechanism and instant messaging functionalities are finally evolving into real-time conferencing that provides written documentation of quick and efficient conversations online. Advanced prototypes for high bandwidth users are beginning to provide audio and video for a completely interactive meeting experience.

In the case of the online journal or workbook, predetermined criteria are presented in a question-and-answer format. Hundreds of exercises with related follow-up questions present automated answers that alter the user's path through the information. Instructional design and eLearning companies have provided incredible leaps in education utilizing this technology. Of course, there is also the daily "blogging"⁹ that is an online journal and personal message board fusion providing individual users the ability to build communities around their written personalities.

Varying accessibility and role definition are key components to providing a customized membership experience. Knowledge of the demographics and specific requirements of the community member prior to delivering content provides endless opportunities for unique delivery of specialized content.

⁹ <http://www.blogger.com/>

Necessary provisions for an easy and intuitive process that community ambassadors can use to post related materials and resources are key to keeping the group up-to-date on images, files, PDFs, and new content uploads. This also provides increased accountability and management automation for organizations with limited human resources.

Making participatory opportunities available for members to interact with experts and thought leaders will inevitably guide the way to increased interactivity and involvement. Online communities such as iVillage¹⁰ assign a multitude of experts to a variety of topics to keep their visitors informed and entertained. The vital aspect of this component is of course the likelihood for inclusive behavior and the opportunity for mentoring. A key value point is the building of relationships through intelligent dialogue.

At the core of the community is the tracking of members and their profiles in relationship to the whole community. Multiple opportunities to query the profile database in increasingly meaningful and revealing ways provide the necessary information for disseminating relevant content to the appropriate members. The brand strategy is now properly integrated due to an understanding of client satisfaction.

Active community members often require the capability to input information and provide the content that keeps the community up-to-date. This is an extremely important aspect of any healthy community. Often this is the only way to keep the content timely and relevant, and to instill in the members a sense of ownership. Napster¹¹ is an extreme example of community members providing valuable content (as sad as its fate may be).

¹⁰ <http://www.iVillage.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.napster.com/>

From subscriptions to newsletters and regular mailings, to feedback and content purchasing, the many database input fields provide entry points for the core information necessary to build an intelligent visitor profile.

Consumers weigh buying decisions based on the emotive impulse that makes photography, visual representation, intuitive ease-of-use, and trust of primary importance. These methods yield the highest value and require the largest investment due to the importance of eCommerce. Business purchases are based on facts, but fear of a bad decision plays into emotion, and certain brands symbolize quality to community members. As Boyd Clarke and Ron Crossland write in their book *The Leader's Voice*, “Business leaders who often speak on just the factual channel and then don't understand why their messages didn't resonate must understand that constituents will always put the message through their own emotional and symbolic filters.”¹²

Databases are becoming increasingly complex and require many advanced search features that allow members to pinpoint and share information effortlessly regardless of the complexity of their queries. The philosophy behind this investment rests in the fact that the sooner the members find the information they are searching for, the happier and more satisfied they are when they tell someone else where they found it.

Seminars, workshops, and coaching for online learning require advanced application features. Attentive administration is required to manage the community. Organization, specification, and the experience of all participants are critical when establishing a destination for administering and retrieving knowledge.

¹² http://www.tompeters.com/implementation/solutions/leaders_voice/

Let the user choose! The sense of community is strengthened when members are provided the capability to select subject matter from personalized content areas along with a simple and easy way to store and retrieve the information they have chosen. This allows the Web site's organization to deliver content consistent with the members' wants and needs. Educational efforts are most effective when the member is actively engaged with the information on a regular basis.

The customer's wants and needs were in the front of Michael Dell's mind when he founded Dell computer. "What makes Dell Computer unique is not what it sells, but rather how it sells it. Dell was first in the PC industry to pioneer the direct-selling model. By cutting out the intermediary and creating a direct link between manufacturer and customer, Dell was able to provide customers with computers that cost less and that were more apt to meet customer needs."¹³

Community Experience Development™ is not limited to the professional business market, but also focuses on non-profit organizations that are seeking new members and seeking to retain current memberships. For groups to truly benefit from Community Experience Development™, they must invest in their audience's sense of belonging. In addition to radio and television publicity and advertising, a focus of considerable efforts on providing written content to various print media sources (e.g., white papers, articles, commentary, local stories, etc.) is still important to the success of any branding effort.

¹³ Michael Dell, Catherine Fredman (Contributor); *Direct from Dell*; HarperCollins; March 1999

Steve Case has attempted to create America On Line (AOL) as the absolute community destination for years. AOL's mistake is thinking they can define the community and force users to subscribe to their "push" technology. While AOL is spending more and more money toward this model, their prospective members are off creating the village they wanted all along. These non-AOL users are finally revolutionizing the Internet community for themselves.¹⁴

¹⁴ "The Online/Offline Dichotomy: Debunking Some Myths about AOL Users and the Effects of Their Being Online Upon Offline Friendships and Offline Community" by Robin Hamman <http://www.cybersoc.com/mphil.html>

III. Appendix A – About Community Experience Development™

Community Experience Development™ (CED) is a business philosophy that focuses on the proprietary consulting strategy of Metaphor Studio, LLC, utilizing Internet methods for revolutionizing brand communities. CED includes cultivating, fascinating, and illuminating the target audience through personalized and non-personalized membership communities. The core CED principles involve leveraging intellectual properties to position each community creator as the leader and expert in their given community. Achievement of CED objectives results in the evolution of the brand community as the destination point for the given topic both online and offline.

IV. Appendix B – About Metaphor Studio

Metaphor Studio is an advertising and technology agency providing brand consultation, project management, graphic design, user-experience technology, interface design, and information architecture since 1997. These individuals have been brought together to raise the level of aesthetic and functional sophistication in the digital landscape through the union of art and technology. Business communications programs include Community Experience Development™, Brand Strategy Integration, and Web Site Application Development and Maintenance.

V. Appendix C – About the Author

Ran Mullins is the founder and CEO of Metaphor Studio. He is a consultant and advisor on branding and Web site strategy integration to corporations and community organizations. In addition to being an artist and entrepreneur, he is a resident, business owner, and community advocate in Cincinnati's historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. Mullins earned his Bachelor's degree in Communication Design from the Art Academy of Cincinnati and has exhibited his paintings in galleries and museums across the country.