Putting Business on the Path to Social

a bloomThink whitepaper
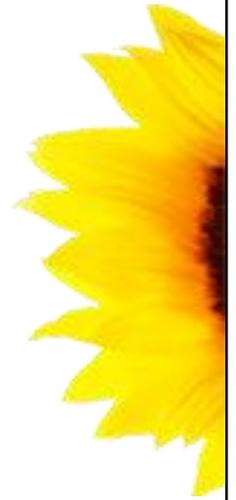
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Executive Summary

As businesses embrace social media technologies, the ability to interact with communities has dramatically increased. Enterprise 2.0 may have started as a way of linking people to each other but has quickly expanded into a way to engage entire communities. This is both wonderful and terrible. It is wonderful because of the vast potential that communities offer in the way of collective wisdom, idea generation, purchasing power and message amplification. It is terrible because of the huge risk that comes along with attempting to engage a community and falling flat. Sometimes the community backlash can be worse than not having done anything in the first place.

To develop a strong business strategy and avoid common mistakes there are 3 aspects of community, 4 principles of interacting with them and 5 steps of discovery that businesses on the path to social need to understand.

The three aspects of community are: communities are more than social networks, communities are engaged by definition, communities based in real-life are different than those based in the online world.

The four principles of interaction for businesses on the path to social are: realize you're already doing it, enable communities in the real world to interact with you virtually, enable virtual communities to interact with you in the real world and don't jump in without a strategy – the risks are too great.

The five steps of discovery along the path to social: find a starter group, within the group focus on one set of operations, identify the metrics for those operations, map the processes those metrics measure, deploy the social technology to solve a specific problem, inefficiency or hurdle within those processes.

While there is no shortcut to these steps, principles or aspects, they are vital to understand and important to execute. Without them you are unable to effectively harness the energy and guide the trajectory that social media promises.
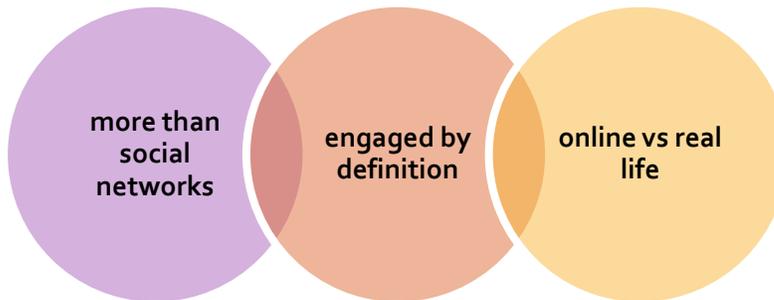
COMMUNITIES ARE MORE THAN SIMPLE GROUPS, TEAMS OR SOCIAL NETWORKS.

Communities are people with a common bond[i]. Where social networks are characterized by loose ties and incidental interaction, communities are characterized by strong ties and interaction that is sought out, set up and prioritized. This social bond at the core of a community can be anything. It may be a belief (JAVA is better than .net); a preference for a brand (Apple over Google and Facebook over them all); a big geography (what country are you from); a small geography (where do you sit in the building); a shared experience (Google Wave was awesome / awful); a common goal (launch the product on time, find a bone marrow match). The active sharing of experiences and information around that core is a key aspect of community.

This means that business cannot effectively engage communities by simply setting up a Twitter account, Facebook page or corporate blog. Technology plays a part but it is not the most important part in effectively engaging communities.

Business on the path to social should understand that communities are not people who *can* share with one another but rather people who *do* share with one another.

COMMUNITIES ARE ENGAGED

The second key aspect of community is that engagement is assumed. Community members are engaged with each other around the topics, experiences, opinions and goals that define the core of the group. Think

of it as a charter or mission statement for the community. It may not be explicit but they all have one. *This neighborhood community exists to have fun, share tools and watch each other's pets. This technology community exists to share SharePoint tips and tricks and award reputation to members who provide valuable help. This passionate brand community exists to upload fun photographs and coupon codes for the brand they all love.* These are the community-values.   Communities prefer to remain focused on their core purpose and actively try to prevent dilution of their identity. They become good at spotting inauthentic messages and interlopers. Shared values within a community lead naturally to a shared view and engagement with messages heard by members of the community.

Social businesses should strongly desire to engage with a community because, if successful, the communities will accelerate and amplify the messages, products and services or the business[ii]. The question is not whether or not communities will engage but rather what kind of engagement will they act out. Pointedly ignoring lame attempts at injecting an advertising message into the community is the equivalent to a vote of no confidence. It raises the barrier for subsequent attempts at engagement by you, the outsider. Conversely, communities are quick to give new things a try. Proving that your participation delivers something of real value to the community brings you into the fold quickly.

> *"The rise of online communities and communication has dramatically increased the potential for significant and far-reaching momentum effects. In the mobile-phone market, for example, we have observed that the pass-on rates for key positive and negative messages can increase a company's market share by as much as 10 percent or reduce it by 20 percent over a two-year period, all other things being equal." McKinsey Quarterly, "A new way to measure word-of-mouth marketing" April 2010*

Fortunately, businesses sit on a treasure trove of information, creativity and incentives that can deliver that value to the community. Giving away sample or starter code to developer communities is a great start for tech companies. Creating simple yet curiously interesting content is another way to spur community interest. While there is definitely an art to the effort, it is a likely bet that there are many creatives in your organization waiting for an invitation to use more of their talent.

Once businesses on the path to social understand what communities are and how they operate they are ready to engage them.

But beware; communities are very good at spotting inauthentic messages and pretenders.

Businesses on the path to social should work hard to identify the core values of the communities they wish to engage and then make sure that all interactions with the community are creatively oriented along those trajectories.

COMMUNITIES BASED IN THE REAL WORLD ARE DIFFERENT THAN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Communities are very different if they are primarily virtual or primarily actual. Research shows that 79% of US. internet users can identify at least one virtual community in which they regularly participate[iii]. The line between virtual and real world communities is blurry since virtual communities are still real people whose interactions are brokered by social technology. However, communities that exist and interact primarily in real life tend to be synchronous and event driven. This is true for communities of co-workers or a local book club. These communities tend to be personal, immediate, collaborative, conversational and human oriented. This means that culturally governed mores are important. Greetings such as "how are you?" or "What's new?" serve as introductory guidelines that must be adhered to before the "real" business of the group is addressed.

Conversely virtual communities tend to be asynchronous, technology and virtual-location driven. The interactions between members of virtual communities are often topic threaded, time-shifted, conversations and informal information exchanges. Think of online community forums. People interact with what others have posted, not with others directly (trolling notwithstanding). Virtual communities have all or most of their interactions brokered by a technology – keyboard, browser, webcam (maybe). Virtual communities tend towards virtual locations where they can engage with others. Websites, game forums and collaboration systems are the destination[iv].

Signs point to a shift for virtual communities. They are becoming more like actual communities. As broadband and computing power increases we are able to have more life-like and synchronous interactions with others across distance. Online console gaming (e.g. XBOX 360, PlayStation3, and Wii) is a good example of this. However, even real-

Virtual communities are becoming more like communities in real life.

With increases in broadband and computing power, interactions with others over distance are increasingly life-like and real-time.

time interactions are still brokered by our avatars, characters and the constraints of the game itself.

These differences provide important guidelines for social businesses seeking to engage communities that already exist. It is a lot of work to provide meaningful interaction with a community in the real world. You must show up, conform to the mores of the group and authentically add value to the conversation, work tasks, products and information exchanges of the group. However, the act of showing up and participating can go a long way to establishing credibility with the community.

Virtual communities can be even more complicated. While the barrier to engagement is low – often just sign in and start posting – the ability to get recognized and have your message taken up by the community is substantially greater. This is because there are so many other voices that the group filters kick in immediately. You might be "participating" without showing any results.

Two strategies may help here. The first is to slog it out. This means actively participating in and with the community and building up credibility and reputation over time. This is a long term approach but is very powerful at the end where credibility is high and reputation is widely acknowledged. The second strategy is to cultivate a small cadre of existing community members, persuade them of your value and then let them spread your message more widely within the community. By bringing your message together with others, especially if those others are already key influencers within the community, your message can enjoy much larger exposure and uptake. The downside to this is that the focus is your message, product or service. It is not you. This might work well for viral marketing but you will need to do the same thing all over with a new group of influencers the next time and the time after that and so on.

Once businesses on the path to social understand what communities are and how they operate they are ready to engage them. There are four principles that the social business should keep in mind.

FOUR PRINCIPLES OF INTERACTION

Ready or Not: You Are Already Doing It	**Enable IRL Engagement for Virtual Communities**
Enable Virtual Engagement for RL Communities	**Set Strategy First Before Jumping In**

Community Interaction

REALIZE YOU ARE ALREADY DOING IT

Communities are the groups into which people naturally organize. If you're engaging with people, you're interacting with communities. You may not be doing it well or even on purpose. But you cannot ignore it. You can get better results though, by identifying the communities that you are interacting with. Here are some good starters:

Which communities already exist inside my business? Got anyone doing Race for the Cure? Do you have a skunk-works project, team, or workbench? These are communities of passion and shared experience that can provide a way for you to raise awareness both inside and outside of the organization.

Do you have internal micro-blogging or a wiki or blogs? What are people saying there? And more importantly, what are they commenting on and repeating? Those people, by engaging with topics on your internal systems, reveal a common thread in those topics. Why not empower this interaction? The result is crowd-sourced business intelligence that already exists – you simply have not empowered the nascent community in a way that allows them to share those insights with you.

What information is most accessed on your company intranet? If it is the cafeteria schedule why not create a new employee community for foodies? The result is a happier and more engaged workplace.

Which communities exist outside your business? Talk to your Business Development teams. Who are they talking to and what do your partners want? Talk to sales and marketing. What do the customers want? Talk

Find the communities that already exist in your business. Charity teams, employee forums or wikis, skunk-works R&D groups.

Ask them what works, what doesn't and what they would like.

to support. What do customers complain about the most? Why not use your extranet and social media to be more proactive with customers, prospects and partners? Do you have a customer advisory board? Why wait to interact with them until they all fly to your office? Engage them now and incentivize the participation with rewards, early access to beta product, ability to provide early feedback, an "I got it before you" badge for their conference lanyard at your next trade show. The result is a more active and passionate advisory group which yields better insight to your business strategy.

Businesses on the path to social must realize that they are already doing it. They're at the dance. They need to figure out what they're wearing, if it's appropriate for the crowd, how to dance and if they even want to continue to be there. Wallflowers have no fun.

ENABLE COMMUNITIES IN REAL LIFE TO ENGAGE WITH YOU VIRTUALLY

Provide immediate, valuable and convenient digital linkages to your real life communities. For example use RFID, QR codes and NFC technology to bring real life interactions to the web and enhance and expand the real world interactions. Most organizations have a wealth of information and marketing that is well suited for snippet delivery to social sites like Facebook and mobile devices via tools like Vimeo and YouTube. Even if those snippets wound up on the cutting room floor during your last big marketing advertising spend, think of it as the deleted scenes of your business. If you sell consumer products, enable customers to access your "expanded universe" via the mobile technology they already have in their pocket. Allow them to comment on it, rate it, share it with others and engage with you about it.

Businesses on the path to social should make it easy for their communities to bridge the virtual and real worlds.

ENABLE VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES TO ENGAGE WITH YOU IN REAL LIFE

Get those virtual communities interacting with each other at live events, conferences, local user group meet-ups. Remember that communities

Empower communities with technologies that foster interaction.

Deliver content that inspires interaction.

Give people a reason to engage with one another.

are not networks. You might have a strong network of people who follow you on Twitter or have liked your Facebook page. But communities engage with each other. Foster that and create a community out of your network. Don't let them keep shoe-gazing. If you sell business software to the IT crowd, bring them together to share their stories of late night and weekend work. Call it a story swap and start the evening off with something posted on the message board they all read. Have free food and beverages – it provides a draw – and then let the conversations roam. If you have larger groups and a more formal conference setting, have ad hoc games of werewolf (google it if you are unfamiliar with the game) between break-out sessions[v]. Spur the interaction and listen to what is shared. Get people interacting with each other and forming stronger bonds. That is incredibly valuable intelligence for you and your organization.

Businesses on the path to social should work hard to turn loose ties of networks into strong ties of community. It has already been started for you, why not take it to the next level?

DON'T JUMP IN WITHOUT A STRATEGY – THE RISKS ARE TOO GREAT

This is not a job for your college intern. While they may be a whiz at navigating through social media tools, the tools are the channel not the message. Studies by the 2.0 Adoption Council and ReadWriteWeb show the median salary for social media workers is $114,000[vi]. This is not an intern or entry-level position. It is better aligned with Director levels and up. It is also not only an IT position. While IT is certainly involved, it is increasingly the business units who are responsible for keeping up engagement. IT rolls out the technology. Business builds and engages the community.

Make sure you have a strategy to not only set up and enable the social technology, but also to keep it going. Keep it authentic. Remember that communities can spot an interloper and they will backlash. Consider hiring or designating a community manager. This should be someone who has or can earn the respect of the communities on behalf of your organization but is not hampered by an overly worried legal department. They should be able to speak with credibility to people inside and outside

Social Media & E2.0 efforts are not just for IT.

IT provides and supports the technology but it is the LOB that builds, engages and empowers the community.

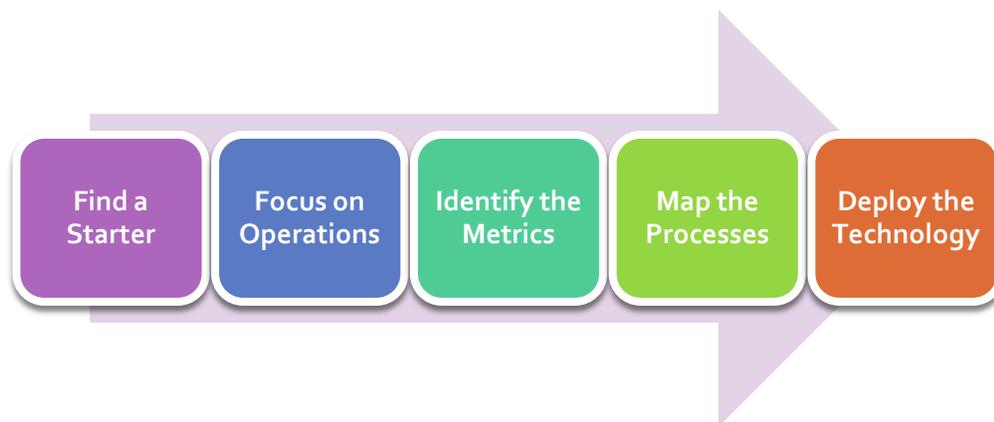*Figure out where you are going before you hit the accelerator and take off.*

Successful social media and E20 efforts include a strategy that includes curated content and coordinated execution.

the organization who are likely to have deeper and longer experience than they do. In other words, it is not a position for a new college graduate. Then report on the engagement metrics. Link ideas up with your customer / partner advisory councils. Get your support staff involved since customers are working around the problems your products have introduced anyway. Reward behaviors in the communities that you want to see emulated and increased.

Businesses on the path to social should realize that while the technology makes engagement easier and faster, it also raises the risk of poor, inauthentic and lame messaging getting out into the community ecosystem. Businesses on the path to social will take the time to develop a strategy that can keep the engagement powerful, profitable and exciting.

Once they understand community and how to engage it businesses on the path to social will take five intentional steps to ensure that their projects are successful.

FIVE STEPS OF DISCOVERY

| Find a Starter | Focus on Operations | Identify the Metrics | Map the Processes | Deploy the Technology |

Many organizations are unprepared for the time and effort that it takes to develop a successful, measured and process-integrated social strategy. The aspects of communities may be understood and the principles for engaging them internalized. But the steps for getting from here to there are often left to hope, chance and experimentation.

At its core, this discovery process operationalizes social media and enterprise 2.0 programs and projects. It answers the *HOW TO* question. There are several variations to this process and many ways to implement it.

Here at BloomThink we prefer to organize the process as an agile spiral; starting at the core and circling upward and outward as we expand scope, features and audience engagement while gathering feedback and course adjustment. Others, have different structures some more aligned with RUP, waterfall, lean or agile methodologies[vii]. All of them pass through these phases in one way or another.

Businesses on the path to social will take an intentional and deliberate approach to their social media program. Before jumping on the E2.0 bandwagon and rolling out their social technology they engage experts and champions inside and outside the business to chart their course. Each step is unique to their business, their market and their organizational structure. This must be the case since each business exists within a unique community, market, geographic, user, partner, prospect, and employee context. This context makes up the community ecosystem in which the social media program or project must function.

Consequently there is no short-cut to these five steps. Bypassing them is an exercise in futility and pegging strategy to hope and a prayer.

Here are the five steps of discovery.

1. **Find a Starter Group.** Look across the enterprise and find one group to start with. This is not the same as a pilot program or a trial balloon. Rather the starting group exists within the ecosystem of the organization. Lessons learned here will be used as accelerators and course-corrections for subsequent projects. Each project conforms to a story-arc or world-map for the entire organization. This way work done with the first group does not negatively impact subsequent projects or "code them into a corner".
   Decision Driver: which group is the biggest budget consumer.
   Rationale: biggest impact potential.

2. **Focus on Operations.** Within the group selected from step 1, focus on one key set of operations. These operations should be intrinsic to the daily operation of the group and have a substantial impact on

how that line of business, team or unit is run. It is not worthwhile to select a little-used or low-impact set of operations. Doing so reduces impact, delays adoption and renders the social project impotent even before it starts.
Decision Driver: LOB budget driven up by operations. Good way to spot success and failure. Clear financial and behavioral success metrics
Rationale: where cost is trending up, it should be going down.

3. **Identify the Metrics.** Identify the core metrics for those operations. The metrics should be established and tied to the current operations. This way you have a built in benchmarking apparatus for your social program.
Decision Driver: know what to measure and what you wish to impact.
Rationale: need to know how you know it is working or not.

4. **Map the Processes.** Drill into the business processes that the metrics measure. Map it out, literally. Draw the workflow, process flow, traffic flow or information flow. Many times these processes are intrinsic though undefined. The reality is that the processes are happening, but before you can change or impact them with social media and an enterprise 2.0 project you need to fully understand what they are and how they work. Interview the people involved whether they are executives in a GRC process or line workers in a manufacturing process or partners in a supply chain process, get their validation of your process. Then you will see where and how the social technology can help.
Decision Driver: understand exactly how you got here and what happens next.
Rationale: figure out what should be improved before you go about trying to improve something.

5. **Deploy the Technology.** Deploy the social and E20 technology to solve the specific problem – it may not be what you expect.
Decision Driver: the discovery process you just completed.
Rationale: with purpose the social tech will solve your problems.

Throughout each step feedback is presumed. Validation is required to ensure that the trajectory of community engagement is where the community is at; and where they are going to be.

There is no shortcut for this process. But avoiding it is a sure way to waste time, budget and the political capital it takes to roll out new technology[viii].

CONCLUSION

Businesses on the path to social have technologies that are more powerful than ever before. They have access to networks of people who use their products and services. Understanding that communities are not networks is important. Understanding that communities are engaged by definition is important. Understanding the differences between real world and virtual communities is important. These three key understandings are important because they guide successful identification, communication and interaction paradigms.

When businesses on the path to social employ the four principles of interaction they are able to more quickly and successfully engage communities and the benefits that they offer. Starting by understanding that they are already doing it, enabling and empowering both virtual and real world communities and doing it all with a strategy that provides the story-arc for your engagement are important pillars for your social business.

When businesses on the path to social follow the five steps of discovery for their social media or enterprise 2.0 program they are well positioned for success. While not following these steps may seem less expensive and easier, it is also unguided. Following these five steps allows the organization to effectively engage communities and know what is working, why it is working and how to replicate it in the next project.

Following the 3 aspects of community, the 4 principles for engaging them and the 5 steps for your projects will position you to see your business bloom into a social business supported by the message amplifying and idea generating power of your communities.

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