

CHAPTER 5

What Is Community Focus?

What exactly is community focus, and how does it facilitate experiences in the digital space? To answer these questions, let's consider what community focus means in the context of physical spaces, such as in a town hall meeting. In such meetings, people are focusing on one another: listening, sharing opinions, and discussing community needs. This type of interaction allows community members to voice opinions and concerns, providing a voice for the community. In this context, we can say community focus is an emphasis on participants' ideas, concerns, and interactions.

The town hall meeting is just one example; people obviously hold many different types of meetings, from religious gatherings to departmental business meetings to family reunions. We tend to think meetings are important. Why is that? Because we

find conversation important, and meeting together facilitates conversation.

Conversation inherently facilitates something else, too. It allows us to interact with members of our community with whom we wouldn't normally interact or even know. This type of interaction allows us to feel as if we are participating in the "grand scheme of things." The challenge, then, is to usher community into our digital space.

Example from a Public Library

I work at Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL; www.tscpl.org), a large urban public library in the Midwest. In our physical space, the library is all about conversation, participation, sharing, and community. We hold thousands of meetings and events each year. Our parking lot is almost always packed, with some people visiting the library for books or web access and others visiting to attend a meeting.

The library has turned itself into a physical gathering place. People come to meet together or to learn something new from a famous author such as Ray Bradbury, and they come informally to hang out together at the cafe, the teen space, or around computers.

What's going on during these different meetings? Conversations are taking place: traditional conversations, formal "listen to the speaker" conversations, and question-and-answer types of conversations. There are discussions during breaks and jokes over a cup of coffee. And, of course, there are reference questions and requests for help finding information. In all these different types of interactions, conversation is front and center.

All this conversation and interaction can simply be called participation. This includes participation in conversations and participation in a meeting or another type of event (e.g., the square dancing class my kids and wife attended). It even includes participation by simply being there—it's all about participation.

TSCPL is a great example of community focus because it invites the community in to hold conversations, to interact with staff and with each other, and to participate. We want to include all these wonderful community elements in our digital space, too. By the time you read this sentence, we will have already created Phase 1 of our fledgling “digital branch.” Or if we haven’t, I’m in big trouble :-)

Digital Interaction

In a physical setting, conversation happens when two or more people interact. Digital conversation is similar. In a digital conversation, some form of digital interaction takes place. There are at least two basic types of digital interaction: interacting with an online tool and interacting with a person.

Tool Interaction

When visiting a website, you have to interact with it. You have to click on the links, examine the site to figure out how the navigation works, find the Play button to watch a video, and so on. Visiting a website isn’t a passive activity—it’s active, requiring you to actually do something.

That’s the website as a whole. What about the site’s smaller parts and pieces, such as filling out an online form? You are interacting with that form. Let’s say you are signing up to join an online discussion group. Before you get to the actual group, you have to interact with the tool (the form). For example, you might need to:

- Type (interact with the computer to fill out the web form)
- Sign up for an account
- Understand what the menus and form boxes are for
- Know what to put in each text box of the form

Person Interaction via Commenting

The goal, of course, isn't simply to successfully interact with the web form but to interact with the community that's behind the form. In many cases, the digital tools we interact with are enabling community in the digital space. To understand what I mean, let's look at a few simple tools in general terms and then look at Amazon.com and eBay to see how we use these tools and sites to enable community, and, therefore, a community-focused experience.

Comment boxes abound in today's web world. They're everywhere, from digital versions of the complaint department to blog comment boxes to feedback mechanisms on social networking sites such as Flickr and YouTube. Even newspaper stories on global news sites such as the BBC and CNN now invite reader comment.

Is the goal here to interact with the comment form? Well, yes, in a basic sense. But the real goal of using these comment boxes is to enable a new form of community via conversation. In the same way that people used to be able to talk about a newspaper article in the barbershop while getting their hair cut, comment boxes now allow individuals to share thoughts and opinions with anyone interested in the article or the topic or the video.

There are two huge differences between those barbershop conversations and the conversations taking place in digital spaces. One difference is that in the old days, my comments in the barbershop were shared with two or three people—only those within hearing distance (and who were interested in the conversation). Now, my conversation starter has the potential to “go global.” The whole world (well, the world that can connect to the web) can take part in my conversation.

The second difference is one of longevity. The barbershop conversations began and ended in the barbershop. If the topic was extremely interesting, the conversation might spread to others outside the shop, but for the most part, the conversation would

have died when everyone taking part in the discussion left the building. This has changed in the digital age. The conversation I take part in when I comment on a news story, for example, theoretically never disappears (unless the site disappears or the webmaster deletes the database where my conversation is stored). Instead, my conversation is saved with the news story, and it can be accessed by anyone. It can be read today; it can be read (and commented on) 10 years from now. Theoretically, conversations I start today in the digital space can outlive me!

The conversation I started in the digital space can also be connected back to me. Comment forms usually include the option to point back to myself—by linking back to my email, my blog, or even my Flickr account (the norm in Flickr comments). That allows people interested in my thoughts to contact me personally to continue the conversation privately, even if the bulk of the conversation has stopped growing.

Tagging Starts Conversation

Tagging, or the process of creating a folksonomy, allows a unique type of community focus. What is tagging? Emerging web tools and services allow users to “tag” stuff—to assign a personally relevant keyword to something, such as blog posts, emails, web links, videos, or images. This is a way for someone to remember what an item was and to help them find it later or classify it. These tags also allow a new form of community-focused experience by way of community memory.

For example, when the New York subway workers went on strike (December 20–22, 2005), you could visit Flickr to see a part of the story you didn’t get to see through traditional media. Traditional media told you what the strike was about, why it was happening, and what that meant for the daily commute to work. But Flickr told the story visually through images of closed subway stations, people

walking across bridges to work, and signs in shop windows commiserating with fellow New Yorkers.

These visual stories of people's travel to work were told through the actual photos and were found and collected via the tags people assigned to those photos. That week, Flickr's hot tags and most popular tags included *nyctransitstrike*, *transitstrike2005*, and *transitstrike*. These tags created a viewable digital memory that was both findable and sharable. This is an important aspect of digital community: the ability to share experiences with others who are going through the same thing or who may be interested in the situation.

Mashing Up Digital Conversations

Mashups provide the same type of “extra awarded” experience and participation that tagging and commenting provide. Here's an example to get us started. Google Maps is an intuitive, useful online map application. Another site can create a database of area gas stations with current gas prices and put that database on the web—another helpful tool. But when those two tools, the gas station database and the map application, are combined, something special can happen. In this case, we suddenly have a visual map of the least expensive local gas stations that gets updated by members of the local community. That's a mashup.

Our gas prices mashup has created a special digital form of community experience: Through sharing, individuals are working together to cope with high gas prices. Mashups, in other words, can help organize the community in the physical space by allowing interaction in the digital space.

These examples (commenting, tagging, and creating mashups) facilitate participation in the digital space via conversation. This conversation—this participation and interaction—is the ticket to a community focus in digital experience. Participation and interaction

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LosAngelesGasPrices.com

Add gas prices to your web site.
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Home Message Forum Price Charts Map Gas Prices Gas Price Temperature Map Fuel Logbook Wireless More

Master Station List Contact Us Link To Us In The News What's New Related Links Helpful Tips FAQ Classified Ads

Los Angeles Classified ads

Report a Price Here

☒ Reg ☐ Mid ☐ Prem ☐ Diesel

Station (Other) Area (Other)

Station Address

Comments

Time Spotted
Now ☒ Add to my Favorite Stations

Submit Prices removed after 36 hours

Save 5%-10% on gas with the Discover card *

Looking for more prices in California? Try: Bakersfield California Fresno Modesto Oakland Orange County Riverside Sacramento San Bernardino San Diego San Francisco San Jose Stockton Ventura

We have recently launched dedicated websites for: [Sacramento](#)

Quick Search for Gas Prices

Find the lowest gas prices in these areas: Burbank Claremont Compton Downey El Monte Glendale Inglewood Long Beach Los Angeles Norwalk Pasadena Pomona Santa Clarita South Gate Torrance West Covina [More Cities]

Saves 70¢ Per Gallon

Proven, Tested,
Guaranteed Way to
Save 19% or More on Gas

Get your test drive supply
Click Here!

theGasSecret.com

Become A Member
Join Now to become a GasBuddy member, and help everyone save on fuel purchases. As always, membership is entirely free.

Local Price Snapshot

Today	3.104
Yesterday	3.069
One Week Ago	3.041
One Month Ago	3.230
One Year Ago	2.620

Trend
Prices
Rising
[Points Leaders]

Regular Gas	Midgrade	Premium	Diesel Fuel
Lowest Regular Gas Prices in the Last 36 Hours			
Price	Station	Area	Time
2.82	Sam's Club 7480 Carson St & Nectar Ave	Long Beach	Fri 7:56 AM
2.85	Valero 10602 Imperial Hwy & Curtis & King Rd	Norwalk	Thu 11:50 PM
2.85	ARCO Washington & Paramount	Pico Rivera	Thu 1:46 PM
2.87	Valero Whittier Blvd. & Strub	Whittier	Thu 9:25 AM
2.89	ARCO 15306 Whittier Blvd & Scott Ave	Whittier	Fri 8:25 AM
2.89	ARCO 10159 Alondra Blvd & Woodruff Ave	Bellflower	Fri 5:28 AM

CLARAKWON
r1cer1985
5150
Cisco dude
Dodgers67
Jeepney4106

LosAngelesGasPrices.com

connect you to others, thus changing the experience from one of simply interacting with a tool to using the tool to interact with and connect with people.

Amazon.com's Community-Focused Experience

Let's look at another example of community-focused digital experience. Amazon.com has a cool tool that allows anyone to provide a product review and also allows users to rate those reviews, which started with the bookstore (every book can be reviewed by

any customer). This ability provides customers with a powerful voice that may affect the purchases of other customers.

While reading one review can be interesting (depending on the source), the ability to read 100 reviews of a single book is what really turns these reviews into a community-focused experience. Reading numerous book reviews provides a glimpse into what the majority of readers think of the book. When an unfamiliar author writes a book that sounds interesting, you can find that book on Amazon.com and read what other people thought of it, a feature I find more useful than the book's marketing copy and one that allows me to form a more knowledgeable opinion. Having quick access to these customer-created book reviews allows you to tap into the collective wisdom of Amazon.com's reading community to see whether you might like the book. That's a powerful ability that didn't exist before the web.

But you don't have to stop there. You can also rate each review. This gives you the opportunity to point out the extreme reviews—either positive or negative. This customer review process ultimately allows for better information gathering because you can

Customer Reviews

15 Reviews

5 star	(10)
4 star	(4)
3 star	(4)
2 star	(0)
1 star	(0)

Average Customer Review
★★★★★ (15 customer reviews)

Share your thoughts with other customers:
[Create your own review](#)

Most Helpful Customer Reviews

9 of 10 people found the following review helpful:

★★★★★ **How to manage consumers' perceptions of real or fake offerings**, October 26, 2007
By **Robert Morris** (Dallas, Texas) - [See all my reviews](#)
[Top 50 reviewer](#) [Helps users](#) [Watch video](#)

This is the latest in a series of several books (notably *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* and *Markets of One: Creating Customer-Unique Value through Mass Customization*) in which James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine focus on what Peter Drucker once identified as one of the greatest challenges any business faces: How to get and then keep profitable customers? Their thesis in this latest volume is that marketers need to address the problem of managing "the perceptions of real or fake held by the consumer's of [an] enterprise's output - because people increasingly make purchase decisions based on how real or fake they perceive offerings. These perceptions flow directly from how well any particular offering conforms to a customer's self-image."

In this volume, Gilmore and Pine examine "the authenticity of economic offerings, not the authenticity of individuals in personal relationships, something people also greatly desire but the subject of many other tomes." They cite two exemplars in particular - Disney and Starbucks - because no company "has more affected our collective view of what is real and what is not" than has Disney. As for Starbucks, no other company "more explicitly manages its perception of authenticity, making direct appeals to authenticity in every way" Gilmore and Pine define this new discipline.

Here are some of the specific issues they address with rigor and eloquence:

Most Recent Customer Reviews

★★★★★ **Pieces of a thesis**
I love the thoughts put forth in this book -- very academic. When the authors apply the thinking, it is pretty strong. [Read more](#)
Published 18 days ago by R. Kenney

★★★★★ **Repeating Information, but worth reading!**
The book contains a lot of information that is repeated over and over, just by different descriptions. Other than that, the information given was pretty helpful. [Read more](#)
Published 1 month ago by Razzle

★★★★★ **Consumers of the world, demand Real/Real!**
What do consumers want? According to James Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II, we want products that are genuine: that are what they appear to be and do what they say they will... [Read more](#)
Published 1 month ago by Kay M. Gilbert

Amazon.com's customer review

find good reviews and good reviewers. It also lets you gather more levels of information: information about the book, information in the reviews, other reviewers' opinions of the review, and information on the reviewers themselves.

This deeper level of digging through reviews and reviewers provides an amazing digital experience—one of interaction and participation. It provides multiple doors of entry into the digital community:

- You can be passive and simply read the reviews. Here, you are passively participating in digital community simply by showing up, much like the crowd at a baseball game.
- You can go one further and rate a review. From here, all participation is active.
- You can read the book and then write your own review.

Participation

While Chapter 6 is devoted to participation, it also needs to be mentioned here because participation is extremely important in providing experience in a community-focused digital space.

Participation is about getting beyond the tool to the thing you want to do. When filling out a comment box, the user's goal isn't to successfully type words in the box and find and press the Send key. (Of course, that's certainly one small goal in the whole process, so you do want your form to be usable.) The big goal when filling out a comment form is to actually participate in a discussion. The reason people enter text in that comment box is because the thing they just read or watched made them think. Maybe it got their dander up, or they thought it was the most amazing thing they ever read. They want to add their thoughts to the mix: to participate. By having a comment box, you are inviting people to participate, in

essence telling them, “I want you to add your thoughts. I want you to continue the conversation.”

Ann Arbor (MI) District Library’s website (www.aadl.org) uses the Drupal open source content management system, which allows visitors to comment on most pages of the site. In fact, it effectively turns most of the website into blogs, one of which is the library director’s blog.

One day, the library director posted on what I would consider a ho-hum topic: a request for proposal (RFP) for a library building, a “we’re going out for a bid” post. She received, when I last checked, 29 comments on that blog post—a post talking about a building plan on a library director’s blog. That’s just amazing. The system allowed community members to add their thoughts to the original post, in effect allowing the community to hold a conversation about the building project. It gave the commenters a voice.

Placing the post on the website, allowing people to subscribe to it via RSS, and allowing community members to add their thoughts via commenting helps make the library much more open and transparent to the general public than before.

Commenting opens up a new model for communication. Think about it: In the old, pre-web world, how did this RFP information reach the library’s community? The library director would probably have written a couple paragraphs about the RFP, and then she would have sent that document to her marketing department. Marketing would have turned that document into a press release and sent it to the local media. Then, if it was a slow news day, maybe the local newspaper would have printed the press release in the community section of the newspaper.

That’s how you, a library customer, might have discovered the information. How would you have responded and participated if you wanted to share your thoughts? You might have written or called the library—but honestly, not many people would. You might have sent in an editorial to the newspaper, which would then be edited for length and included in the editorial section (but

The screenshot shows the Ann Arbor District Library's website. The header includes the 'aadl.org' logo and navigation links: ABOUT US, CATALOG, EVENTS, SERVICES, RESEARCH, CONTACT US, MY ACCOUNT. Below the header, there's a breadcrumb trail: Home » Library Issues RFP for Downtown Library Space Needs/Facility Study. The main content area features a comment titled 'Library Issues RFP for Downtown Library Space Needs/Facility Study' by 'Director's Blog'. The comment text discusses the library's strategic plan, the solicitation of proposals for a space needs and facility feasibility study, and the timeline for the project. A sidebar on the right contains a 'HARC' logo and information about HIV/AIDS resources, including a 'Featured Events' section for an HIV in Washtenaw County event. The bottom of the page shows a 'picture Ann Arbor' section with a photo of the library building.

Ann Arbor District Library's comments page

only if there were enough room and only if the editor thought your comment was worthy of being included).

The new model trumps the old. You can now instantly add your thoughts to the conversation without much work or crossing of fingers. Simply visit a particular page, type in the comment box, and press the Send button: Your thoughts are added to the discussion.

Furthermore, your thoughts can receive immediate feedback, instead of the weeks required in the old model (and that's only if your letter to the editor was published). Participating digitally provides a wonderful way to connect to your community. It provides the sense of purpose and closeness of a town hall meeting, if you will—one that you can attend anytime, even at 2 AM.

Twitter and Community

One of the newer participatory Web 2.0 tools is the microblogging site Twitter (www.twitter.com). Twitter users can post comments or thoughts (up to 140 characters), sort of like sending an SMS (Short Message Service, which allows mobile device users to send and receive short text-based messages). The difference is that others can subscribe to your Twitter “Tweets.” So Twitter’s model is more of a bloglike, one-to-many, sharing model of communication rather than the one-to-one mode used in SMS messaging.

twitter Home Find & Follow Public Timeline Settings Help Sign out

Scobleizer
 Following Notifications ON

Linda Stone asks "are you breathing while Twittering?" <http://tinyurl.com/yqlsjs>
 about 9 hours ago from im

Can anyone stop Amazon's Jeff Barr? <http://tinyurl.com/39luq2> about 12 hours ago from im

Watching @ponzarelli playing with Milan Scoble, our son. about 12 hours ago from im

@focoma: the problem is that this service is a small thing. Done by two guys. And it's not Office or something that we'll use every day ... about 12 hours ago from im in reply to focoma

@brendanb: I think this product stands up to the scrutiny. I understand if you think it won't, though. It's not Office or a new OS. about 12 hours ago from im in reply to brendanb

@brendanb: there's a lot of Microsoft products that have wow factor. Photosynch was the coolest thing I saw in 2006. Xbox? Halo? about 12 hours ago from im in reply to brendanb

Amazon's VP of Global Talent Acquisition, Brian Krueger, told me today that Amazon is definitely hiring. about 12 hours ago from im

@MartysMind yes, I'll be at the metaverse shindig tomorrow. Looking forward to it! about 12 hours ago from im in reply to MartysMind

@ryanaraine and what the hell is wrong about getting excited about technology once in a while? about 12 hours ago from web in reply to ryanaraine

@ryanaraine if you think I'm overhyping things, let's talk again on March 3rd. Buzz overhyped me and he was wrong. It was even better. about 12 hours ago from web in reply to ryanaraine

About
 Name Scobleizer
 Location Half Moon Bay, California, USA
 Web <http://scobleizer.com>
 Bio Tech geek blogger @ <http://scobleizer.com>

Actions
 message Scobleizer
 nudge Scobleizer

Stats
 Following 6,978
 Followers 6,862
 Favorites 7
 Updates 6,764

Following

Scoble's Twitter page

Robert Scoble, a popular technology blogger, writer, and videographer, has a Twitter account. He announced on his blog that he was playing with Twitter and quickly amassed more than 4,000 Twitter followers. He was able to use his large Twitter following in some interesting ways. He has, of course, done the usual Twitter thing, telling everyone what he was doing (e.g., “I’m eating lunch with my kid.”). But he has also used Twitter as a community brain, which has been fascinating to watch. He has asked his 4,000 Twitter readers questions and received instant feedback. He has been able to get a snapshot of the thinking of techie colleagues simply by posting a quick question and having potentially 4,000 immediate responses. Using Twitter in this way provided a great level of participation in the digital community created around Scoble’s Twitter account and provided Scoble with an amazing digital experience—one of connecting and interacting with many.

Digital Experience

What are the types of digital experience to be had when one focuses on community? There are many, including the following:

- Real conversations
- Telling your personal stories
- Continuing the story

Real conversations take place in digital spaces. This can happen in a variety of ways, including commenting on blogs and other areas of a website, or through services such as instant messaging (IM) or microblogging sites such as Twitter. An online forum accessible to both site developers and customers is another way to hold conversations.

The goal, and sometimes the challenge, of conversation in digital spaces is to allow your customers to connect with you and with others. Connecting with the developer or the organization is important. Your customers want to interact with you. They want to know more about a product or a service. They want to have input on new website features, and they want to feel as if they know you and your product. They want to connect with you!

They also want to connect with each other. Company-produced product information is good, but what your customers *really* want to know is how 100 other customers have been using your product or service. They want to hear from “real people” what works, what doesn’t, and how to get around that really odd usability issue that the developers simply didn’t notice (and are now working furiously to correct). Amazon.com customer reviews are a great example of this and are a popular service for all of Amazon.com’s many products.

Another digital experience provided is one of telling your personal stories. Michael Stephens, a library and information science professor at Dominican University, in River Forest, Illinois, really understands the power of story: “One way for libraries to promote their value and relevance is to tell the library’s story every chance you get. Beyond daunting columns of statistics, users—and staff—might benefit from a story about how the library helped its users today. Ponder a staff exchange where internal stories can be told via a wiki or Weblog. You may find a lot of answers to the question: Why are we doing this?”¹

What’s so important about telling stories? Well, people want to know the history of your service and your company. They want to know why you developed it. They want to know who *you* are: what your credentials are, what else you’ve developed, whether you like using the product, and what shortcuts you take when using it. And they want to know all these things about others in the community, too. This helps connect people to one other—that community thing

again. Statistics and numbers can show the same information, but stories are more memorable and will connect with a majority of your users much faster than mere sales figures do. That's why businesses use testimonials.

But people also want to participate in the story. They want to feel as if they are part of the story, as if they are the next chapter. This happens currently in Second Life (www.secondlife.com), a virtual world that allows people to participate in the story by building their mansion, changing their character's appearance, or joining a digital community and helping create that community. And your organization's presence in Second Life allows you to be part of your potential customer's story.

Flickr also allows you to participate visually in the story. Remember the New York subway strike I mentioned earlier? Everyone who took pictures and tagged them participated in the story of the strike and told a snippet of the story of their life—they told their personal story of dealing with the strike by documenting their walk to work. Combined, those contributions told a unique group story made up of unique individual stories.

People want to continue the story. The people affected by Hurricane Katrina had one story to tell: the actual hurricane and the immediate aftermath. But then that story continued: when they revisited their houses, when they received a FEMA trailer to live in, when they were able to rebuild their houses—even now, some have yet to reach that chapter of their story. And others can add to the story, too. I did, in fact, when I traveled with my kids and others from our church to the Mississippi coast a year after the hurricane to help with cleanup. So, even though I wasn't directly affected by the hurricane, I was able to tell my story in photos on Flickr showing the people I met, how the devastated coast looked, and how many houses remained unlivable a year later. I was able to add to the continuing Hurricane Katrina story.

Endnotes

1. Michael Stephens, "Telling the Library's Story: A TTW Fave," Tame the Web, tametheweb.com/2007/09/telling_the_librarys_story_a_t.html (accessed January 29, 2008).

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