

## ABSTRACT

Marketing literature is exploring the strategic importance of building communities centered around strong brands – brand communities. Our research adds to the current understanding of brand communities by extending the notion of brand community being non-geographically bound. While prior research acknowledges this characteristic of brand community it fails to, firstly, illustrate the strategic importance of such freedom. And, secondly, provide directions for an operational, tactical, or strategic tool to truly build and sustain non-geographically bound brand communities. We refer to such communities as geographically free brand communities (GeoFree BrandComms). This research presents the conceptual underpinnings and characteristics of GeoFree BrandComms. Further, the use of Weblogs (Blogs) and related technologies such as Video Blogs, Podcasts and RSS as strategic tools in building GeoFreeBrand-Comms is explored. We then proceed to posit the applications of GeoFree BrandComms in Web-based marketing strategies that find their basis in strong brands and loyal customers.

**Keywords:** Brand Community, Customer Relationship Management, Customer Voice, E-marketing

Building  
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Geofree  
Brandcomms

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## INTRODUCTION

A community is made up of its member entities and the relationships among them. Communities tend to be identified on the basis of commonality or identification among their members, whether a neighborhood, an occupation, a leisure pursuit, or devotion to a brand. Through communities, people share essential resources that may be cognitive, emotional, or material in nature. Recently researchers have drawn our attention to communities built around (and often sustained by) strong brands – brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002).

Brand communities are communities whose primary bases of identification are either brands or consumption activities, that is, whose meaningfulness is negotiated through the symbolism of the marketplace. In an ongoing effort to retain customer loyalty and build a strategy based on lifelong partnerships, brand communities offer a way to enmesh the customer in a network of relationships with the brand and fellow customers as opposed to the traditional one-to-one relation between brand and customer. It is presumed that such an approach would strengthen the bonds with the customer in a much superior fashion, thus building and strengthening strategic brand loyalty.

Juniz and O'Guinn (2001, p.412) posit: "A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand."

Brand Community is conceptualized as being "specialized" because at its center is a branded good or service. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) further envisioned a brand community from a customer point of view as a fabric of relationships in which they are situated in relationship to the brand, to the firm and to other customers of the brand.

Our research adds to the current understanding of brand communities by exploring the notion of brand community being "non-geographically bound." While prior research acknowledges this characteristic of brand community it fails to, firstly, illustrate the strategic importance of such freedom. And, secondly, provide directions for an operational, tactical, or strategic tool to truly build and sustain non-geographically bound brand communities. We refer to such communities as geographically free brand communities -- GeoFree BrandComms.

We propose that GeoFree BrandComms present relatively inexpensive strategic tools to build brand loyalty and brand equity. We examine the characteristics of such GeoFree BrandComms, and compare and contrast them to the more traditional brand communities (Jeep Jamborees, e.g.). We then proceed to illustrate the use of one such on-line tool -- Web Based Logs (Blogs) -- as a possible strategic tool to build GeoFree BrandComms in the virtual world.





## BRAND COMMUNITIES VERSUS GEOFREE BRANDCOMMS

Brand communities have been seen as being fundamental contributors to a brand's larger social construction. Customers value their relationships with their favorite brands and with firms that build and foster those brands. Being a member of a brand community leads to shared experiences with the brand, the firm, and fellow customers. As time progresses the brand community begins to draw its lifeblood from relationships with fellow community members rather than the brand itself.

Companies like Chrysler, Harley Davidson, and the Green Bay Packers have shown a remarkable sensitivity to the existence of brand communities and have actively sought their development leading to an amazing level of brand loyalty from their customers. Events like Jeep Jamborees, Camp Jeep, HOG (Harley Davidson Owners' Group), Packer's Stock Holders Meetings, and the Packer Experience, bring together people who often share no connection other than an interest in a brand and its consumption. Eventually, the fellow members of the community become as important (if not more important) to the product experience as the brand itself.

All such "geographically bound" brand communities offer opportunities for context-rich interaction and communication within a limited geographical location. Offsite communication is either initiated or fostered by the firm that owns the brand (membership newsletters, email notifications, and e-updates, for instance) or is rendered nonexistent. While gathered in a central geographic location, participants build community and are able to interact in a fashion that strengthens relationships. However, upon returning from such momentous events, a sense of loneliness follows. Communication is often faceless and moderated by the owner of the brand. All company-initiated communication is usually limited to mass media. Participants share extraordinary consumption experiences with each other through the company media. Relational ties often die down or at least ease up until the next big community gathering is planned.

All of this holds true for a physical event that fosters community. We suggest that the virtual world of the Internet might be able to sustain, supplement, and perhaps even strengthen the relationships developed in a geographically bound brand community. Consider the use of the Internet in virtual community gatherings and events for members that await the next geographically bound sponsored event. Further, consider the strategic value of continued communication to keep members informed about each other and their product experiences. The Internet could provide opportunities for members to communicate one-on-one with each other, affording them the freedom to do so directly – without the intervention of the brand owner. Studies have shown that relationship between customers that form communities around a brand are indeed the foundations of strong relationships between the brand and the customer (see

McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002, for an extensive reference list). We reiterate -- brand communities find their identity through shared experiences and consumption of the brand, therefore, increased opportunities to share consumption experiences will lead to a stronger brand community. The Internet presents the marketer and customers with a multitude of such opportunities.

Sufficient evidence exists to suggest that brand building through brand communities are evident and thriving on the Internet (DM News, July 7, 2003). Brand communities on the Web (e.g., [village.com](http://www.village.com) and [webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)) offer strategic advantages compared to geographically bound brand communities. Geographical gathering is no longer an issue to establish relationships. The process of socialization is based on more contemporaneous and non-personal communication. Preexisting tools of community building in the cyberspace offer low cost alternatives to building brand communities. Such efforts have largely remained unnoticed by marketers. Opportunities to build communities via the Internet have largely been viewed as the responsibility of the consumers. The brand has not been made a participant in forging a triad of commitment in a relationship.

This paper suggests one possible tool – Web Based Communities (Weblogs, or Blogs) as a possible strategic device for establishing GeoFree BrandComms. The phenomenon has implications for both building new brand communities and sustaining pre-existing brand communities. For those companies with little or no (geographically bound) brand community Blogs may be used to build an inexpensive virtual brand community. While companies that already enjoy traditional geographically bound brand communities Blogs could aid in sustaining a secondary, supportive, and more going GeoFree BrandComm. Such communities would not be solely driven by short term and expensive community events.



## ROWING IMPORTANCE OF BLOGS

The Wall Street Journal (Sept. 30, 2003; p. 1) describes the phenomenon of Weblogs: "...one of the fastest growing activities on the Web." Weblogs are online diaries or journals typically written in a personal nature, then available to anyone in the world via the Internet. In the word "Blog" has gained credence as a legitimate word in a virtual lexicon (Webopedia, 2003).

Bloggng refers to publishing a regularly updated Weblog with links and entries. More specifically, blogs are identified as having frequently modified pages in which all entries are dated and listed in reverse chronological order. Bloggng has been taken on several additional formats, including mobile blogging, video blogs, photo blogs and audio blogs, also known as podcasts. Mobile blogs, commonly referred to as a Mobile Blog are blogs where an author with a smart wireless phone can take pictures and record sounds to their Blog while they are nowhere near a computer. The popularity of camera phones and the freedom afforded to update a blog while on road further spurred consumer interest in bloggng (Sacramento Bee, 9/2/03). Video blogs, or vlogs as they



commonly known, allow their authors to upload video clips not only to their personal or corporate blogs, but also to sites like YouTube.com and Google Video. The potentially viral nature of video content, coupled with the power of social media can turn brands or even individuals into celebrities almost overnight, as evidenced in the summer of 2006 by the rapid circulation of a series of videos featuring Diet Coke and Mentos which were originally created by Fritz Grobe and Stephen Voltz of Eepybird.com. Podcasting, or a method of distributing multimedia files, such as audio programs, over the Internet using RSS or other syndication formats, for playback, is another variation on the theme of blogging.

The importance of Blogs in the overall business strategies of corporations and the critical mass they may have attained in formulation of marketing strategies might best be illustrated by a series of converging factors:

1. The growth of the blogosphere (aggregate of all of the publicly available weblogs) over the past several years. According to research by the firm Technorati, the size of the blogosphere has been doubling every 5 months consistently over the last 36 months, as of February, 2006.
2. The volume of articles, news stories and popular media mentions of blogging over the past few years. A search for the term "blogging" in Google turns up over 234 Million results.
3. The growing number of Fortune 500 companies that have implemented blogs as part of their communication structure. As of April of 2006, 29, or 5.8% of the Fortune 500 were blogging, according to research conducted for the Fortune 500 Business Blogging Wiki. (<http://www.socialtext.net/bizblogs/index.cgi>)
4. A series of books on blogging by noted blogging authorities extolling the benefits of corporate blogging for a variety of purposes.

In an August 2003 survey, Forester Research indicates that only 2% of their respondents visited a blog once a week or more. In fact, 79% of the respondents reported not having *heard* of a blog (Forrester, 2003). While Blogging was gaining popularity, there seemed to be sufficient room to grow and expand markets despite the competitive frenzy. A similar study by comScore Media Metrix in May of 2006 shows just how far blogs have come as tools for mainstream marketing and media. Visitation to blogs grew by 56-percent from May of 2005 to May of 2006, to 58.7 million visitors. This represents 34% of the total Internet audience that is now reading blogs.

Over the summer long-time blogging holdout, Dell Computer, launched a blog called "Direct2Dell" to give customers an "accessible alternative to more formal, one-way channels of communication," according to the Dell site. According to many industry observers, Dell's foray into blogging was largely founded on their desire to revive their brand community and improve their overall declining brand image.

Blogs, different from other online community tools such as message boards, threaded discussion and chat, are vehicles of inclusion and accepted meaning rather than being underground or highly differential. Blogs exhibit inherent social characteristics through blog comments, blogrolls or citations, links to other bloggers' content. These

characteristics make them ideal candidates to accommodate an open and non-threatening community. While it is true that some bloggers seek to espouse contrarian emotion and action, one finds that the majority of bloggers are seeking a voice in greater community and positing an agreeable slant on an ideology that their circle of readers readily identifies with. Moreover, after examining the existing corporate blogs, currently on the Internet, they, as with most corporate communication vehicles, tend to error on the conservative side when it comes to viewpoints on their industry, products and solutions and largely avoid social issues and other such matters, which could espouse dissent, distrust or ridicule. Blogs could support a GeoFree BrandComm, either as a stand-alone entity and the sole gather place for the community or as a support mechanism for existing brand communities, as they are tools of personal publishing and person-to-person dialogue. Through the author's posts and readers' comments, brand communities can unite virtually any time, and from any place. Marketing managers could easily enjoy the benefits of such brand themes and subject streams being associated with shared experiences of their brand -- a very non-intrusive mode of eavesdropping on the "voice of the customer," if you will.

#### Characteristics of Geofree Brandcomm

Like any other community, we expect a GeoFree BrandComm to be marked by shared experiences, rituals, mores, traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. In the case of a GeoFree BrandComms, each of these qualities will, however, find expression within a commercial context on the Internet.

#### Consciousness of Belonging

The most important element of any community is consciousness of belonging- members sharing a "we-ness." Members in a GeoFree BrandComm could feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, feel a stronger connection toward one another. The consciousness of belonging found in GeoFree BrandComms transcends geographic boundaries. It may also be characterized by a belief in the legitimacy of cause and oppositional brand loyalty. The members would almost be compelled with a deep moral obligation to rally around their favorite brand due to a felt sense of legitimacy of the focus of their community. In the same manner, competing brands would be seen as threats to community and therefore there would be a unity of opposition to competing brands. In arenas such as sports, one often witnesses legitimacy in membership through shared opposition to a competing team.

Blogs are uniquely effective in fostering a "we-ness" among brand followers, as they allow for expressions of both, legitimacy of cause and oppositional brand loyalty. For instance, in the case of a sports team fan base, Blogs could serve as a medium for venting frustrations on a team's performance or for voicing opposition to rivals. Moreover, Blogs are emerging as integral support mechanisms for geographically bound (local/parochial) efforts such as "Smart Mob" gatherings (Rheingold, 2002) through such technologies as Geourl.org or Blogmapper.com, which provide tools that create "geoblogs" in the virtual world that are organized by geography, rather than date. (The Economist, 2003). Geographical proximity might allow for physical events to bind the GeoFree BrandComm further in its sense of belonging.



Existing corporate blogs, such as the blogs hosted by Dell Computers, Google and 37Signals, a web-based Internet tools company, all exhibit characteristics which expose the deep sense of "we-ness" that the brand followers feel. In the context of the GeoFree BrandComm blog, this "we-ness" is manifested in the following forms:

1. Comments left on the blog by readers, pundits, brand aficionados, brand opponents and other bloggers. Comments may be positive, and supportive of the brand, or negative.
2. Links from other bloggers who fall into the aforementioned categories of blog readers and comment contributors. These links are manifested on the blog in the form of a Trackback, which is the recognition by the blog software that an outside source has referenced it, and in turn offers a reciprocal link back to the inbound content, fostering and "automatic connection" from the corporate blog to another blogger.

#### Legitimacy of Membership

Legitimacy is a process whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space. In the context of brands this is demonstrated by "really knowing" the brand as opposed to using the brand for the "wrong reasons." The wrong reasons are typically revealed by failing to fully appreciate the culture, history, rituals, traditions, and symbols established by the brand community.

GeoFree BrandComms are generally open social organizations in that they do not deny membership, but like most communities, they would have status hierarchies. Ostensibly, anyone who is devoted to the brand can be a member of the community, regardless of ownership. However, the devotion to the brand must be sincere and for the right reasons. Legitimacy is however not a necessary condition in all brand communities.

The worldwide reach and open nature of the Blogs prevents it from discriminating between legitimate and illegitimate members of the brand community. However, just as consumers may self-select into or out of geographical brand communities, they might choose to regularly read, or never revisit a particular blog. The legitimate brand consumer can be easily discerned from a colleague of lesser status based on comments left about a post in the brand's or ones personal Blog. One could always gain legitimacy of membership in GeoFree BrandComm over time, by expressing their belief in the legitimacy of cause or expressing oppositional brand loyalty toward competing brands.

#### Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are easy ways for a community to propagate and perpetuate its membership. Rituals and traditions also aid in transmitting the mores of the community within and beyond the community. In case of GeoFree BrandComms, such rituals and traditions would be expected to center on experiences associated with brand consumption. In effect, such rituals and traditions would shape the culture of the GeoFree BrandComm.

Some of the rituals and traditions could include celebrating the history of the brand and sharing brand stories. HOGS and

Cheeseheads take pride in the history of their brands. The mention of Lambeau Field or Vince Lombardi makes a Packer fan repeat stories of the "Snow Bowl."

The preservation of what the brand is and stands for is important to the GeoFree BrandComm. Members often feel that they have a better understanding of the brand than the brand owner does. They can be, and frequently are, critical aspects of the brand and/or its management to the extent that the brand's very ownership may be contested.

We find that Blogs provide a feasible venue to manifest such rituals and traditions in GeoFree BrandComms. The ritualistic nature of authors posting and readers commenting gives Blogs that give and take feel that espouses ownership and sentiment toward the brand or shared consumption experience being discussed. Bloggers provide ways to amplify the voice of the brand message and such communication is much more likely to reach the target consumer than a standard market message from a corporate marketing department. On a Blog the copy is written by customers that have experienced the product and offers a very noise-free communication medium between an unsolicited testimonial and its reader. In addition, Blogs allow for a chronologically ordered discussion on the merits of the brand's attributes by its most ardent supporters. The Blog serves to extend the experience of the physical ritual of attending a game or participating in an event by allowing brand aficionados to share discussions for weeks after the event, laying a firm foundation for the GeoFree BrandComm.

#### Obligation to the Community

A community bears an implied responsibility for its members to share responsibilities as an obligation to the collective members-at-large and to individual members as well. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion. The goal now becomes to add to the ranks by strengthening existing community and making new member of the GeoFree BrandComm feel welcome.

There is a sense of common purpose, obligation, interest and social responsibility within the Blogosphere that centers on the idea of the Internet as the great equalizer, and group mobilizer. Blogs serve the GeoFree BrandComms by allowing everyone to have a voice in the community. In addition, Blog authors typically seek to fulfill the obligation of providing an insightful and rewarding reader experience on their web. Bloggers are intent on being part of the broader conversation, which is manifested through the obligation to write quality entries that are likely to resonate with the greater community. "Being part of that broader conversation is what gives Blogs a unique, fascinating appeal," writes Sullivan (2002). Moreover, the blogger's obligation to the community only strengthens the GeoFree BrandComm grows in membership and tenacity, expecting continued freshness, honesty, and candor.

#### Social Anonymity

Interactions within a GeoFree BrandComm may be rich in social context or nearly devoid of it (Fischer, Bristor, and Gainer 1996). GeoFree BrandComm members may have a great deal of information about one another, including such data as age, gender, attractiveness, and personal history, but they may know nothing of one another (Granitz and Weller 1996). At times, community members might be uncomfortable



about providing too much information to fellow members. The weekend road warriors on Harley Davidsons are often fake tattoo wearing corporate hotshots that enjoy the open road and the psychological stimulus it provides in the garb of pseudoanonymity. Blogs offer an opportunity to participate in the GeoFree BrandComms to the degree of disclosure one would find most comfortable. Bloggers may choose to use pseudonymous "handles" to preserve their privacy. At times, it is this anonymity that enriches the candor of shared consumption experiences generating a renewed sense of community in the GeoFree BrandComm.

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF GEOFREE BRANDCOMMS

### MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Customers who are highly integrated in the GeoFree BrandComms would also be emotionally invested in the success of the brand and the welfare of the brand owner. As community members, marketers also contribute to the process of community building by supporting the context (e.g., Blogs) in which owner interaction occurs. Marketers may also take an active role in establishing the shared rituals, traditions, and meanings that foster consciousness of kind. Promotional materials that depict the product in use may help establish shared aspirations and support viral marketing efforts as they make their way through the Blogs of the brand aficionados.

The benefits to a firm of cultivating GeoFree BrandComms are many and diverse. GeoFree BrandComms could carry out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing customer care and assistance. GeoFree BrandComms provide a social structure and communication conduit to the relationship between marketer and consumer. Further, customers integrated into the greater GeoFree BrandComm constitute a strong market for licensed products and brand extensions.

GeoFree BrandComm integrated customers could serve as brand missionaries, carrying the marketing message into other communities, which may involve blogging extensively on the brand communications from the company. GeoFree BrandComm members are expected to be more forgiving than nonmembers are of product failures or lapses of service quality. In addition, such tolerance could manifest itself in bloggers writing on not only the negative experience, but also the follow through and turn around exhibited by the company.

GeoFree BrandComm members are expected to be less apt to switching brands, even when confronted with superior performance by competing products. After having communicated about the benefits of a particular brand, they are likely held accountable by the greater community. GeoFree BrandComms are intrinsically motivated to provide feedback to corporate ears, which, through the power weblogs and the Internet, is an exceptionally easy thing to receive for today's technology savvy marketing managers.

A brand that evokes a powerful sense of brand community would generally have greater value to a marketer than a brand supported with a weak sense of community. However, a strong

GeoFree BrandComm can be a threat to a marketer, should the community reject marketing efforts or product change, and then use efficient communications channels to disseminate the rejection. Recognizing the power of this community, attempts should normally be made to appease and perpetuate the GeoFree BrandComm by maintaining links with the brand's past.

GeoFree BrandComm members who purchase a product often do so with the support of other users, which leads to the possibility of brand-focused interpersonal bonds. To the extent that the brand owner facilitates such interactions, the customer base is likely to reciprocate with increased appreciation for the company and a sense of being an important part of a larger set of social phenomena. The key here is for the brand owner to become an *integral* part (a full member) of the GeoFree BrandComm, not a guest of the community that visits periodically.

Part of the reason for the establishing a strong GeoFree BrandComm of customer-centered relationships may be their role as exit barriers. Customers value the relationships available to them as a result of the efforts of the brand owner. GeoFree BrandComm ties become exit barriers as owners realize that valued interpersonal relationships would be altered or lost if they were to defect to another brand. Positive relationships with brand owners and bonding with brand itself also contributes to a GeoFree BrandComm based exit barrier. The same elements that lend longevity to successful interpersonal and community relationships in the physical realm, such as reciprocity investment, commitment, interdependence, and integration in social networks exist in the GeoFree BrandComm.

For the more insular marketer, a more connected and empowered GeoFree BrandComm can be a real problem. For instance, brand communities, particularly those operating within computer-mediated environments, could pose enormous rumor control problems. Competitors could easily snoop on one's GeoFree BrandComm and their internal communication. Insurgents with the potential of misappropriating or subverting community values and interest could sabotage GeoFree BrandComms. In short, GeoFree BrandComms that are managed poorly could derail a marketing strategy.

### Branding Implications

The GeoFree BrandComms serve an important signaling function, both positive and negative. The concept of GeoFree BrandComm indicates that brands are shared objects, which are socially constructed, and that consumers are involved in that creation. GeoFree BrandComms have important implications for brand equity. Just as brand quality perceptions can be affected by alliances with other brands, brand quality might be inferred from the character of the GeoFree BrandComm associated with the brand. Marketing researchers conceptualize brand equity as having four components: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations. GeoFree BrandComms affect all four of these components and are consistent with the trend toward broadening definitions of consumer brand loyalty in general. A strong GeoFree BrandComm can lead to a socially embedded loyalty and brand commitment.



**Member Implications**

The implications of GeoFree BrandComms presenting an efficient form of consumer feedback loop are obvious. By virtue of their accessibility through the Internet, GeoFree BrandComms provide members with a louder and clearer means of having their voice heard. GeoFree BrandComms represent an important resource for members seeking information on a brand. The information might be provided by the brand owner or a fellow participant in the shared consumption experience. GeoFree BrandComms based on Blogs are, by their very nature, archival knowledge repositories that can serve as a surrogate to storytelling in the physical context when a new consumer enters the GeoFree BrandComm circle. GeoFree BrandComm members can more easily turn to one another in an established collective for information on the brand.

GeoFree BrandComm interaction may generally provide wider social benefits to its members. For instance, the process of brand socialization between more and less experienced owners is symbiotic in nature. New owners benefit from the expertise and social approval of veterans. At the same time, veterans benefit from the status accorded them in their assumed leadership roles. Moreover, the GeoFree BrandComm as a whole benefits from exchanges of knowledge that cements relationships through exchanges of value, further enhancing customer satisfaction with the brand.



**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The traditional customer-brand community relationship has been forged over time, usually at the behest and strategic initiatives of the

brand marketer. Even as the brand community models have evolved to a more customer-centric view in recent years, two-way communication essential in building lasting relationships has been strangely one-sided in its origin. The volume of a brand marketer's communication has continued at a proverbial near deafening roar, with nary a whimper from the brand consumer.

The tide in brand community marketing has turned as of late, largely due to the advent of the Internet. Brand aficionados now have the ability to connect outside the context of brand owner sponsored communiqué and events in a kind of dynamic ad hoc alliance that simply was not feasible before the Internet. The once feared, online brand 'chatter', consisting of posts, flames, and rants on Internet bulletin boards, is evolving into a conversation where brand owners and brand aficionados are becoming more transparent to each other. In effect, bilateral communication is now available to build a foundation for lasting customer-brand relationships. Most of the marketing world is either unaware or unappreciative of the potential of Internet based community building opportunities that would help serve their customers better.

This research has attempted to draw marketers' attention to the fact that this optimization of the true brand community, via the Internet, can be greatly assisted by one such medium: weblogs – in forming and sustaining GeoFree BrandComm. Further, we explore how GeoFree BrandComms may foster a system of 'feedback' between brand consumer, and brand creator, allowing each to read the emotions of the other while expanding the affinity of the brand and growing the brand community.

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