

SAP Community: Source for Business Interaction, Education, and Discussion

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Abstract: Collaboration between e-business partners happens online and without boundaries. The SAP Community is a platform for business people around the globe to connect, interact and share best practices for running their e-business. The focus is on real-life experiences and must-have strategies needed to gain competitive advantage. Members benefit from exclusive online offerings for knowledge interaction. The paper outlines the successful ingredients of SAP Community as a valuable source for business (peer) interaction, education, and discussion. Plus, it shows how SAP has added value by incorporating affiliated community networks and other online programs such as webcasts, chats, and expert (discussion) forums.

Keywords: SAP Community, online offerings, knowledge interaction, webcast, chat, expert forums

1 A Networked World

The Internet has expanded the ability to connect with each other and entirely transformed our notions of time, space, relationships. Today it gives people the ability to connect and be more closely related to others who share their purpose online in a business community. SAP is helping companies and their employees, customers, and partners collaborate and succeed in the Internet economy. Also, SAP is using the Web as a tool to communicate in one voice around the globe, achieve superior understanding of customers' needs, and cultivate championship outside SAP.

1.1 A Meeting Of The Minds

In a business environment continuously transformed by new technologies, the SAP Community fills a powerful need. It enables customers to leverage their collective experience, share best practices, and gain insight into their most pressing business challenges. It also provides direct access to SAP's expertise through the participation of the company's executives and most knowledgeable experts.

Meanwhile, the community has grown well beyond expectations. A few statistics tell the story. Almost a million business executives and managers rely on

regular e-mail updates from SAP. More than a quarter of a million subscribe to the SAP Business Flash newsletter. More than 100,000 are active participants in SAP online community programs, which range from live events to discussions about business issues and SAP solutions and products. Online events are among the most popular feature, bringing community members together with business and technology leaders. Today, SAP Community is the largest online community hosted by an e-business solution provider.

Over the past two years, the community has gained critical mass and momentum, it has also matured to provide a continuous source of customer insight. In short, the community has assumed a new importance by becoming integrated with the work of both SAP and its customers. In this paper, we look behind the scenes to examine this change and what it means.

1.2 Membership Benefits

SAP's Web site contains thousands of pages of information, including the latest news on SAP's products and useful analyses on business issues that matter most to customers. But SAP customers also

need something else. They want to learn how the best-run companies are succeeding. They are looking for real-life experiences in companies just like theirs, so they can learn from successes and avoid common pitfalls. They are also looking for the must-have business strategies that are emerging every day in the laboratory of the real world. To meet this need, SAP runs SAP Community at www.sap.com/community as a platform for knowledge interaction. SAP's online community is an intrinsic part of SAP.com. The topics highlighted on the community home page convey a focus on both current concerns and future trends. Unlike telephone calls, conferences, or meetings, the community is available whenever and wherever someone needs it - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Here members can:

- Get straight talk and first-hand experiences from business innovators in live webcasts, and then interact with experts in real-time chats - all free and without even leaving their desk.

- Build a valuable base of contacts by networking with peers in various discussion forums - and get a direct line to SAP experts in special "Ask-the-Experts" online discussions that focus on the latest SAP solutions.

- Hear from e-business thought leaders in a weekly, personalized global newsletter (SAP Business Flash).

The SAP Business Flash is a newsletter that offers community members the convenience of having community content "pushed" to their desktop or device. Because the newsletter is optional, subscription growth provides SAP with an important feedback loop.

1.3 SAP Benefits

An online community of the size, quality, and diversity of SAP Community represents a significant investment in both money and time. While the value to customers is clear, how does SAP benefit?

Basically, there are two reasons a business creates an online community: relationships and insight. For a company like SAP, establishing strong relationships with customers is critical. This means both attracting and retaining those customers.

Of course, attracting customers is primarily a question of making sure customers get the products and services they need. A knowledgeable sales representative can take a customer a long way toward this goal. However, many new customers are influenced by peers or other leaders in the business community. The SAP Community helps here, by bringing new customers into contact with others who have selected and implemented SAP software products and are willing to share their experiences.

Just as retail customers who have done a lot of research about their purchase are much more likely to buy, business people who have vetted a purchase in a community are essentially "prequalified" for the sales process. Other customers have completed the educational effort that used to fall to the sales reps, who can now focus their efforts on later phases of the sales process. Retention means making sure the customer's experience with the product is a good experience. With complex products many factors can influence customer satisfaction. An online community provides a place where customers present questions before they become complaints. The SAP Community gives SAP the opportunity to address issues while they are still local and limited, rather than front-page news.

But there's another less obvious aspect to the community's role in customer relationships. The interactions that take place within the community forge strong peer-to-peer relationships among members, which in turn reinforce the bonds between SAP and its entire global ecosystem. These peer relationships are a positive influence on purchase decisions and have a positive effect on customer retention.

The other part of the equation is insights. As a community grows and matures, it offers a wealth of insight into customers and the marketplace. For the first time, SAP has real-time access to customers' priorities and gains first-hand knowledge of their business issues. The company learns in real time about the products that customers are comparing with SAP, and the results of those comparisons. When customers ask for information on the future direction of SAP products, they reveal their own thoughts about future application needs and infrastructure changes. Questions about features and functions provide a steady stream of insights to product plans and roadmaps.

SAP also learns what information customers require to make purchase decisions and sell those decisions internally. Questions like "Who else has implemented this solution in my industry?" or "Who has converted from System X to the SAP product?" reveal the basic factors that influence the purchase process. In this way, SAP Community functions as a critical "two-way street" where the outbound direction provides value to customers and the inbound direction is used to better understand what customers want, where markets are going, and what competitors are doing.

2 Programs

Creating communities is actually about creating community programs: opportunities for members to interact around the topics important to their business. Community programs can be planned, managed and measured. They come in many forms, but they share a common foundation in many-to-many interaction. That is, they allow large groups of people to interact without regard to the boundaries of time and distance. If they are well designed, they serve as a catalyst for real relationships to form and grow.

Programs are not the same as technologies. Programs encompass everything the member experiences, from design, to content, to interaction with experts, hosts, or moderators. However, the right technologies are the foundation for a successful user experience, and new technologies for community interaction are appearing every day.

What kinds of community programs are possible? There are dozens of ways to enable community interaction, but most programs fall into one of three categories:

2.1. Interaction Programs

These include programs that enable users to contribute a question, comment, or answer for other community members to see and respond to. The most common format for interaction programs is the message board or discussion forum, which has served as the basis for community interaction for more than two decades. The SAP community features "expert forums" on more than a dozen of the topics most important to SAP's customers, where members submit their query in a natural language format, and receive all the community discussion and content relevant to their question.

2.2 Content Programs

These programs give users the opportunity to create something more robust than a comment or a question. The most familiar example is personal home pages or profiles, in which members can share their background and experience. In some business settings, members can avail themselves of opportunities to interact on a smaller scale, though self-created team rooms or discussion lists. In the SAP community, every member has the opportunity to create an electronic business card for other members to see. This card can display simply the member's name and e-mail address, or a complete profile identifying areas of interest. If they wish, members can also add their "personal motto" - the kind of information that establishes one's identity and helps relationships form.

2.3 Event Programs

Event programs come in all shapes and sizes. The simplest way to think of event programs is to imagine interaction and content programs that are bounded by time. They feature experts or other guests, giving members the opportunity to listen and learn, ask questions, and engage the guest in discussion. Companies are increasingly using such events to give customers an opportunity to interact with the deep expertise that exists within their organizations - whether it's the developer of a popular new product, or the head of a business unit.

The SAP community offers a rich set of online events, including interactive Web events, live discussions with SAP experts focused on both SAP products and general business issues, and webcasts/chats on topics of compelling current interest, pairing SAP's own experts with other industry thought leaders and forward-looking customers.

3 Target Audience

Online communities require a targeted audience of loyal and interactive members. Communities can be as small as a few hundred people, and as large as several million. The latter, of course, are really collections of smaller communities that have some overarching connection. Who is the typical online community member? In many ways, this is like asking who is the typical telephone user. ("They are curious, goal-oriented . . .") Community members are like anyone else, with this difference: they know what an online community is, they know how to use it, and they have a reason for doing so. The

challenge for companies is to understand their target audience well enough to meet their needs. This is because community building requires a relentless focus on members: who they are, what they need, how they want to get it. And the answer can be different for every member, and different tomorrow than it is today.

For SAP, the community is clear - it's the members of more than 13,000 companies worldwide that have implemented its solutions, along with a large number of partners and other interested parties. Users alone represent more than a million people, from executives making decisions on strategy, to line managers implementing SAP business solutions, to integrators interested in staying current with SAP technology solutions. Through actively managed community, SAP is not only earning a positive return on its investment, it is providing its members with a return on their interest in SAP solutions.

4 Measurement and Reporting

An important element of process management at SAP Community is measurement and reporting. The Internet is often referred to as the most measurable of business mediums. Process managers gather data from a variety of sources, ranging from site analysis tools to online surveys, to create an ongoing view of what's happening in the community and what it means to the business. The reports they produce not only help a company keep score in terms of ROI, but provide the data needed to make strategic decisions about what's working today and what's needed tomorrow.

5 Membership Reward Program

The Membership Reward Program recognizes members for their activity in the SAP Community. Interacting with others and providing content helpful to other community members is rewarded by a point system. Points earned can be redeemed for merchandise in the SAP Shop. There is no special registration required to participate. Members who have already registered on this site as an SAP Community member, are automatically enrolled in the Membership Reward Program. Points will be awarded according to the following earn table:

User Action	Points
Registration	100
Log In 10 (granted only once a day)	
Create new posting in Expert Forum	20

Answer a posting in Expert Forum	20
Participate in an Online Event/Replay	30
Participate in a Survey	50
Subscribe to SAP Business Flash	50

A maximum of 250 Points can be earned per day. When a total of 1,000 points has been reached, the community member gets a voucher by email at the end of the month, with a personalized link that enables him/her to shop in the SAP Shop. This voucher has a fixed amount and gives the community member the privilege to choose from various products eligible for purchase.

6 Conclusion

What makes the SAP Community successful? Certainly SAP's brand strength and intimate knowledge of its customers helped pave the way. But SAP has done much more. First, it created a community that provides clear benefits to members.

No community succeeds without a relentless focus on the customer, and that focus shapes everything that happens in the community. Second, SAP has devoted the right resources to make the community successful, whether it's the skilled SAP community staff, the SAP technical experts who answer customer questions, or the software and services to successful business communities. Third, SAP provides a carefully blended mix of renowned business people - strategists, recognized thought leaders, industry experts. All are active participants in SAP Community.

With SAP Community, SAP has succeeded in creating avenues for customer participation all around the globe to connect, interact, share best practices, and deliver market-driven insights in a most time- and cost-efficient fashion.

References

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