

An examination of the Amazon.com community

Leonard Sheehy

Advanced Methods for Building Online Communities

In their book *Digital habitats: Stewarding technology for communities*, Wenger, White, and Smith describe the interchange between community and the world wide web using the dimensions of domain, practice, and community, (Wenger, White,& Smith, 2009). They define domain as the topic, theme, or reason for existence. Practice includes the activities, deeds or techniques individuals engage in while visiting the site. Community is described as the attitude and outlook of the group (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). This paper will examine Amazon.com and discuss how these three domains are expressed at this website.

Domain

Amazon.com has emerged as the leading online destination for shoppers on the World Wide Web (Greenfield, R. 2013). The purpose of Amazon is to bring buyers and sellers together on their website. Here users might purchase goods, content or services in order for Amazon to make a profit. Research on their website has uncovered their mission statement as “We seek to be Earth’s most customer-centric company for four primary customer sets: consumers, sellers, enterprises, and content creators” (Amazon.com, 2016). Users are linked together by their shared motivation to seek information about goods and to make purchases. All users have a common link in that they have a need for goods, services or content. They are exploring a domain of inquiry in that they are attempting to find information about the goods, services or content to make educated decisions (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). This includes research on basic features of a specific product or comparing attributes and prices of similar products.

When users visit the Amazon website all wish to obtain quality products, content and services at the best possible price. Some members of this community chose to work together to educate each other and the public about the items listed on Amazon that are for sale.

Practice

The common and repeated actions are that users log in to search for goods, content or services for which they are shopping. Search options allow users to enter a description of the product or enter the specific product name to obtain a list of goods, content or services the search engine determines satisfies the consumer’s request. From this list the user can assess features, characteristics and price of the products. If the user determines that one of the products fulfills their need, they can purchase the item and select delivery method and time frame.

An important feature of Amazon is that it allows user to read reviews authored by other members. This type of feedback is viewed as more trustworthy from the point of view of the purchaser. A study by Park, Lee, and Han determined that the quality of on-line reviews has a positive effect on consumers' purchasing intention, and purchasing intention increases as the number of reviews increases (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007).

Amazon has instituted guidelines before a person you can post a review (Amazon.com, 2016). First they would have had to have an Amazon.com account that had been used for the purchase of a physical or digital item. It is not necessary to purchase the item being reviewed. A 48-hour waiting period after the order has been shipped before a review is submitted exists. People can submit written or video reviews (Amazon.com, 2016).

Amazon.com also offers customer communities that have millions of customers who are interested in a variety of hobbies and goods. Here they share understandings and interest in topics with compatible people. There are thousands of themes so Amazon.com gives users the ability to scroll down to find communities that are pertinent to the merchandise.

Badges and tags and are other features of the Amazon.com community. Badges are symbols informing other Amazon.com customers about each other. Members obtain badges by creating content on Amazon.com. When a review is written, badges appear under the member's name.

A program that permits a select group of Amazon customers to post thoughts about new and pre-release products to assist other customers in making informed buying choices is called Amazon Vine™. Members of the Amazon.com community are asked to become Amazon Vine™ writers because they have gained the confidence of other members by creating high

quality reviews. Amazon Vine™ members receive free products that were submitted by vendors. Amazon doesn't impact the feelings of Amazon Vine™ members, or edit these reviews.

Another free service offered by Amazon.com are discussion boards. This gives individuals the opportunity to write remarks about products and services available at the site. Only individuals thirteen years or older that have obtained items from Amazon.com and are in good standing in the Amazon.com community can participate. There are guidelines on appropriate posts available at the website.

Amazon offers various levels of membership to users. The basic membership is free and allows access to all its goods and services. The prime membership offers free shipping and free access to a number of videos, music, and downloads for an annual fee.

Amazon also offers an Amazon credit card which rewards purchasers for using the card as well as offering free shipping for certain products. Points accumulate at the rate of three points per dollar spent on the Amazon website, two points per dollar for restaurant or gasoline purchases and 1 point per dollar for all other purchases.

Community

The Amazon community seems driven by the value added by interactions and reviews with other members. There is a trust among members that product reviews are accurate and unbiased.

Amazon also offers a marketplace to users to sell products using the Amazon website to access a larger number of potential customers. Amazon charges a fee to the seller and provides the service of interfacing with customers, creating packing slips and shipping labels. Offering customer service for returns etc.

According to Armstrong, companies now need to expand the traditional role of ecommerce from using the internet for advertising purposes only (Armstrong, 2000). He goes on to say that companies should develop an electronic persona using social media to stimulate brand loyalty among its customers. This is important because companies must now monitor social media and become a part of it. Amazon is able to quickly provide a link from consumers to goods they are seeking by becoming part of the social community. Amazon reflects a concern to react to its community members by practicing technology stewardship. Wenger, White and Smith define technology stewards as

‘people with enough experience of the workings of a community to understand its technology needs, and enough experience with or interest in technology to take leadership in addressing those needs. Stewarding typically includes selecting and configuring technology, as well as supporting its use in the practice of the community’ (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

Amazon stewards constantly reviews customer feedback to improve the user experience. According to Wenger, White and Smith, these stewards must understand the communities’ needs that are not always expressed directly and be able to respond with ‘respect to technology’ (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Web developers should look for new technologies to enable users to communicate (Preece, 2000). The stewards must also possess technology awareness to have a sense of what is achievable and accessible (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Technology stewards should combine the understanding of their community and technology awareness to make, select and implement changes in technology based on informed decisions. This according to Wenger, White and Smith is not enough. Technology stewards should prepare users so that any transitions that takes place as smoothly as possible. Finally, technology stewards should

insure that technology is integrated into the everyday use of the community it serves (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

A few examples of new innovations stewards have implemented are: Amazon One Hour Delivery, “locker” pickup and one-click purchasing (Dougherty, 2015).

Amazon.com stewards can employ tools such as “netnography” to develop the best online community for its users. This term is described in an article by Kozinets as a sales examination tool for obtaining customer information. Netnography is an examination of the customs of individuals modified to the research of online communities (Kozinets, 2002). It provides information on the imagery, connotations, and consumption forms of online consumers. Kozinets incorporates the work of Wenger, White, & Smith in that he supplies strategies to facilitate the online community, support the elasticity of study of customs, and deliver high quality marketing research. As an illustrative example, the author provides a netnography of an online coffee newsgroup and discusses its marketing implications (Kozinets, 2002).

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