The Management of Consumers' Community on a Website Bulletin-Board Service

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Abstract: In the Internet space, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of websites. The net group or organization is however an unstable one with many sites closing down or becoming inactive while others emerge. One key element for the success of a website can be the creation of a virtual "community" of users and this, in turn, is often fostered through provision for users to communicate with each other through a bulletin board system (BBS) provided by the website. This paper looks at a popular, frequently accessed website founded by a voluntary site-owner and examines how the administrator approached problems as they arose. As the BBS is not an official fan site it is necessary for the administrator to enforce rules frequently and strictly and to act as an intermediary. Network communities can be divided into two types: weak-tied forums (Type F) or strong-tied dialogs (Type D). Paradoxically, although the policy of the administrator is to strongly guide this site towards an F-type, when D-type discussion did appear, with the administrator and participants' refraining from stifling this, the level of discussion was of a higher quality than that usually in the BBS. Though the inherently anonymous and open nature of the network makes it vulnerable, this touchy dynamism has been making the BBS remain popular and enjoyable for its participants.

Keywords: *Consumers' Interactivity, Website Value Creation, Typology of Networking Communities*

1. INTRODUCTION

The explosive growth of the Internet, driven by the development of the WWW, has stimulated the emergence of new forms of virtual network communities. The growth in the number of websites established by individuals and organizations has been particularly striking and many of these seek to support, or lead to, commercial success and the development of new business models. One of the elements of many successful websites is the development of a website-tied "community" of visitors who use the resources and facilities provided by the website owner to engage in interactive communication with each other. Such communally-generated discussion forums, when successful, can create value in addition to, and often greater than, that generated directly by the website owner and thereby support the success of the website as a whole. The success of such a communally-generated discussion forum is manifest in an increase in the volume, complexity, and diversity of its communicative content. This presents, in turn, an increasingly difficulty set of managerial tasks to the website owner. If these are poorly managed, the very success of the community can lead to its demise. However, because of the openness and relative anonymity of participants, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation, such virtual interactive web communities have an essentially weak organizational basis. They call, therefore, for the development of forms of organizational management distinctly different from those traditionally found in the real world network organizations. This present paper reports on a study of one of the most popular interactive web communities in Japan, and draws some implications from it regarding the dynamic nature of the management of such communities.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND OBJECT

2.1. Research Field

The website studied (Funky Mappies Club [FMC]: http://www.ne.jp/asahi/katsumi/fmc/) is for fans of SMAP, one of the most famous Japanese pop groups. It was founded by an individual fan in 1996 and she still manages the website by herself, though it has grown enormously and is now accessed by an average of 8,000-10,000 persons per day. Because SMAP does not maintain an official website, their fans recognize this as one of the most popular and reliable SMAP-related net community. This website contains various contents, among which is a BBS (Bulletin Board System) which began in 1997 (one year after the website was established) and which now has an average of over 20 messages posted per day. It is the only web-based forum for interactive communication among fans

of and has become the core content of this website.

There is no restriction on participation and visitors do not have to register on that website in order to post their messages. Participants are required only to provide their own e-mail address when posting to the BBS, in case the webmaster wants to make contact with them regarding the ground rules for participation. BBS participants exchange information and opinion regarding SMAP and its activities. They enjoy participation as a way to express their "fandemonium", and that participation also stimulates SMAP-related purchases. It is an active community where participants voluntary increase the value and enjoyment they get from being fans of SMAP, despite the fact that members of the SMAP, themselves, do not participate in the BBS.

2.2. Research Methods

Analysis was performed using the following three resources: (1) daily logs taken of the website BBS over a 2 1/2 year period since start-up (2) site owner's writings on web contents such as the welcome message for the website opening, website administration policy, ground rules for BBS posting, notions and instructions for participants in the BBS, and so on (3) a semi-structured multiple interviews with the site administrator and each of 11 site visitors.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Subjects for the Site Administrator

We can see following five tasks required of the BBS administrator in order to maintain viable and active BBS. (1) Monitoring conformity to BBS posting rules, (2) Detailed fine tuning of BBS posting rules, (3) Technical maintenance of the BBS system itself, (4) Hands-on (direct) guidance and control of BBS discussion. The administrator says that, especially in the first one year since the founding of the BBS, she had to carry out these tasks very frequently and courteously so that sitevisitors would recognize her site management policy and BBS posting rules.

3.2. Site-owner's Unvarying Policies and Evolving Roles

The essence of the site owner's management policy and the ground rules of the BBS have hardly changed since inception. She wants to have her site become one the value of which the members of the pop group SMAP would, themselves, rather than purely focus on the enjoyment of fans. With that goal in mind, she has constructed site contents and managed interactive BBS with a strict management policy, which has served to firmly establish its credibility with site visitors and created its highly favorable reputation.

On the other hand, the role of the Site-owner's direct participation in the BBS has changed significantly in three stages. Initially, while acting as a webmaster, she also was an active participant as a fan in BBS postings and sometimes wrote about topics which interested her which were, however, irrelevant to the website theme. As the website grew in popularity, however, her postings came to be focused on the site theme and her BBS postings as a fan decreased in frequency. Finally, she stopped expressing her own feelings and thoughts as an individual fan entirely and concentrated purely on her role as site-manager. SMAP does not maintain an official fan website. Therefore, despite the fact that the website is managed by an individual fan on a voluntary basis and has no official connection with SMAP or their promotion agency, as the number of site visitors' has increased, many have come to view it as if it were the official SMAP website and it has even gained growing recognition within entertainment industry. As the website grew in prominence, some participants, and the website owner herself, became increasingly concerned that regarding the influence of her personal opinions on the BBS. Gradually she quit participating as a fan as a matter of principle and devoted solely to her responsibilities as the manager of the website.

3.3. Patterns of Postings on the BBS

On this website BBS, participants engage in freewheeling conversations relevant to SMAP and its group members. This present study took the content of these conversations as analytic material to examine what stimulates active participation and creates value for participants. We focused on postings from BBS log which included some positive comments, not regarding the pop group, but regarding the website, the site-owner, or other participants. BBS discussions can be categorized into the following six types; (1) Questions-answers, (2) Casual opinion surveys, (3) Casual chat, (4) Seeking for friends or collaboration, (5) Appeals for, and clarification of, appropriate and moral behavior as fans and, (6) Voluntary attentive information supplement.

3.4. Values throughout Serious Dialogue

Of these six conversation types, the most frequent was casual chat. Typically, two or three main topics are being discussed simultaneously. Usually these arise from some hot topics mentioned by multiple contributors and the content switches to another topic after a few days.

Discussions are not always uncritical of SMAP. Although any gossip about their privacy, rumors, unconfirmed information, slander, and abusive language regarding the members of SMAP and those related to the group are forbidden, when participants have a bad impression of SMAP's performances on TV programs, recordings, and live performances, etcetera, they are allowed to express their thoughts frankly. Whether it is positive or negative, often over 50 messages concentrate on one topic and BBS gets big enthusiasm. However, such discussion is not always conducted in a calm atmosphere. Occasionally it generates heated confrontations among participants.

Some participants think that there should only be positive postings on the BBS and that those with critical comments should address them directly to the relevant TV station or artists agency. In a virtual community on the Internet, where participants/discussants do not see each other face to face, there is always the risk of excessive confrontation and therefore one plausible approach would be to rule out all critical or negative comments.

However, for some participants, the BBS should be a place where constructive critical comments are accepted, and they even question whether uncritical admiration is really the benefit of SMAP. It is noteworthy that we can see such messages as follows when discussions which include critical comments arise.

"I am glad to see many of you here are as passionate as ever. I can understand and accept both opposing opinions - because I realize both of you basically love SMAP."

"At first I always felt sad reading any negative comments. Recently I have been growing tough enough to accept them objectively. The more different from my own thoughts posted messages are, the more I can learn from them."

"I am nearly moved in tears reading many messages. The fact that he (the pop group member) makes fans think so thoughtfully and seriously here tells me that he has big attracting force and also is very fortunate as an entertainer."

Through their "peer discussions" (Kanai, 1988), participants exchange their various perceptions and often arrive at shared understanding and feel deeply impressed by the sincerity of other participants' contributions. Of course they just 'do' conversation for themselves independently from that pop group. It may contribute nothing to those pop group members, but may have much effect on sitevisitors. The BBS approves exchange of opinions, it is impossible to prevent

critical comments totally. Furthermore, acceptance of differing opinions expands the range of viewpoints and makes discussions more thoughtful and profound than would mere "me-too" chat. Site-participants, including ROM (Read Only Members), recognize that they learn a lot from such discussions. Indeed, this appears to be the source of much of the value the BBS holds for its participants.

4. CONDITIONS WHICH MAKE DISCUSSIONS ON BBS SUCCESSFUL

4.1. Rules and Roles

Kaneko(1988) has proposed the term "Voluntary Commons" for networks where people accumulate and share collaborative knowledge assets through voluntary information exchanges. He suggests that such "Voluntary Commons" are comprised of rules, roles, and tools. On the BBS studied here, the tools employed are quite standard in nature, but their implementation in, BBS system has been fine-tuned so as to make it more user-friendly. However, the posting rules for this BBS are more distinctive. They have been defined and refined in detail and are quite strict in comparison to those of other unofficial or official fan sites in Japan because it the prima facie credibility of an official SMAP website, the siteowner felt she needed to implement strict and detailed in order to acquire credibility and win the confidence of sitevisitors.

What seems most distinctive, however, is how the collaborative knowledge assets which the website and BBS have developed are due to the behavioral roles played by the site administrator and BBS participants themselves. These behavioral roles are obviously linked to the BBS posting rules. But it is most striking how the behavioral roles of the administrator and the participants which have supported the success of the BBS, extend far beyond the formally specified system of rules. For that reason, we will focus, here, particularly on administrator and participants' more substantive, less "chatty", discussions revealed on the BBS.

4.2. Site-owner's Behavior

We can summarize the BBS administrator's behaviors as follows;

O-1 A focus on her role as a site manager, not as a fan

O-2 Monitoring of BBS postings several times a day

O-3 When she identifies a message which breaks the BBS posting rules, she deletes it and

announces the reason on the BBS and by mail to the offending poster.

O-4 When a poster appears to have submitted a message for the sole purpose of stirring up controversy, she deletes it without comment.

O-5 When even sincerely motivated discussions become to heated or too long and repetitive, she calls for more moderate discussion or suggests that the discussion be wound down.

O-6 Administrative interventions are explained clearly and carefully in terms of the overall objectives of the website BBS.

O-7 When, occasionally, she does present her own subjective contribution to a discussion, she makes it clear that she is speaking as an individual fan. Even in these cases, however, she intends to introduce to the discussion other points of view – more positive, more constructive, more moderate, and more well-considered.

One of the most severe challenges to the administrator is the timing of interventions in controversial discussions which do not break BBS posting guidelines. If interventions are too early they can inhibit free, frank, and stimulating discussion. On the other hand, intervening too late can lead to discussions which become so long, or contentious, as to reduce the attractiveness of the BBS. It seems evident that judicious and skilled administrator interventions contribute greatly to the confidence participants have in the BBS and to the value it has for them.

4.3. Site-participants' Behavior

Site-participants also show some characteristic behaviors which support the overall success of the BBS. In general, site-participants can be categorized into three types; (1) Steady contributors who post frequently (2) Contributors who post less often (3) ROM or "lurkers". Most of the participants are ROM. The frequency of each steady contributor's posting is variable and the membership of this category is also fluid over time.

The supportive behaviors of participants' are varied in nature, as follows;

P-1 When they find a rule-breaking posting, they often post a message which refers the poster to the BBS posting rules.

P-2 When they intentionally express some critical or negative view, they try to clearly explain why they do so.

P-3 When conflicting views arise, steady contributors sometimes adopt a policy of "benign neglect" and simply refrain from participating in the discussion in hopes that it will quickly wind down.

P-4 Participants do not ignore critical or negative comments if they recognize the sincerity with which they are made.

P-5 When they do post negative or opposing commentary regarding the views of another participant, they try to show respect and consideration for that other view, rather than denying it absolutely. Moreover, they moderate their comments by using smiley marks or by adopting a joking or an empathetic tone.

P-6 When participants receive cautionary or negative comments on their postings, they first apologize for any upset their comments may have caused even if they then go on to explain more carefully the intention of their original posting.

P-7 When discussions become overheated participants call for moderation, or suggest other, less controversial, topics as a way to improve the atmosphere of the BBS.

Thus, a striking feature of this successful BBS is that the participants, themselves, contribute to the enforcement of community norms. Participants want the community to be supportive of substantive discussions, while simultaneously avoiding an acrimonious atmosphere. This parallels the intention of the siteowner, and greatly reduces the administrative burden on her. These participants' behavioral attitudes mainly have been grown up while they had watched site-owner's actions. Fostering the internalization of norms within the virtual community, particularly among high-level participants, is apparently one of an administrator's most important tasks.

5. COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ON WEBSITE

In organizational sciences, there have been many studies on networking over the past 30 years. Kanai(1994) studied entrepreneurs' networking communities founded in the area near to Boston, MA and proposed two ideal generic types of networking communities, Dialogue Type and Forum Type. Table 1 shows the comparison of these taxonomies and we applied characteristics of the BBS studied on this paper to those taxonomies. It is useful to apply this taxonomy to the virtual network community represented by the BBS studied here. Many of the BBS technical and rules systems, as well as the site-owner's intended management style, are basically consistent with those of the Forum Type (Type F). However, we observed that there are a certain amount of discussion, and psychological benefit to

participants in discussions belonging of the Dialogue Type (Type D). Participants evaluate such communication as being significant and as increasing their confidence and commitment to this site.

Nevertheless, the site-owner maintains her position as follows;

"I think, on this BBS, there can be expressions of your frank good or bad impressions of SMAP

Table 1. Comparison of the Taxonomy of Networking Organizations and Actual Conditions of BBS in FMC

Attributes dimension	Ideal Types		Actual Conditions of BBS in FMC
	Forum Type	Dialogue Type	
Basis of ties and connections	- Weak ties - Variant value - Preference over diversity and discontinuity	- Strong ties - Value homophyly - Preference over common grounds and continuity	- Weak ties - A mixture of homogeneity and heterogeneity - Preference over diversity with common interest - Discontinuous connection
	- Loose coupling - A desire to expand horizons	- Tight coupling - A desire for be more deeply rooted in a particular milieu	- Loose coupling - Both types of desire are evident, but a desire for exposure to a wide range of opinions is dominant.
Benefits	- Instrumental tool	- Expressive-consummatory value	- Expressive-consummatory values predominate (When members seek instrumental benefits, they can refer or contribute to a separate "notice board" BBS attached to the same website.)
	- Access to broader information and resources	- A deeper dialogue that may attribute a new meaning even to information already in hand	- Both benefits are important for members, but they evaluate especially highly the deepening of understanding that sometimes results from controversial discussions.
	- Exchange at lower context	- Confirmation at high context	- Exchange and confirmation at relatively high context considering its openness
Entry and membership	- Open membership or the lack of membership qualification	- Close or limited membership qualifications are stipulated	- Open membership - Acceptance of BBS ground rules and site policy is the sole requirement for membership.
Basis of operation and procedures	- Low threshold - High turnover - Low time commitment - Non-regular, sporadic attendance - Indirect interaction utilized, and chain effects as part of anticipated result	- High threshold - Low turnover - Longer time commitment - Regular, continued attendance - Direct face-to-face interactions valued, and chain effects if happens, are a byproduct	- Low threshold - High turnover - Low time commitment - Non-regular, sporadic attendance - Indirect interaction utilized and chain effects as a byproduct (If members interact directly outside of the BBS, they normally conceal that relationship on BBS.)
	- Lower internal cohesion and permeable to outside which may be conductive to macro integration	- Higher internal cohesion; but may entail macro fragmentation	- Lower internal cohesion with confidence and mutual trust among members
	- Grow as a whole group and potentially larger in maximum size	- Grow and divide to reduce the size of each group	- The number of visitors to the BBS greatly increased from 2,000 to 8,000 daily.

Source: Made by the author, based on Kanai(1994) pp.321-322

performances and you can request what you want to the pop group members. However, I never intend to this BBS as a forum for critical commentary or protests regarding how SMAP should perform. We must remember the existing distance between that pop group, as professionals, and ourselves, as fans. We are not professionals working with them in the entertainment business and know only a part of their performance activities. Please bear in mind that this is just a community of fans and will never be a place where we discuss our criticisms, reviews, analysis, or views of the professional strategies of SMAP and its members. This is site policy. I know that some visitors may feel dissatisfied with it, I prefer this place should be more easygoing." (02/06/1999)

Kanai(1994) notes the importance of an interplay between the two ideal networking types in actual existing networking organizations. He says that "mixing only a few drops of opposite type elements into the organization all the more increases active subsistence power of it" (p341, emphasis in the original). However, on the BBS studied, the site-owner is always trying to steer participants' vector to Forum type community, presenting her site policy and ground rules clearly, regularly looking at the BBS in order to check any conflicts, and taking caution to minimize excessively long or provocative discussions.

Under such determined site-owner's site management policy oriented to Forum type community, paradoxically, serious dialogue and thoughtful substantive discussion arises. Considering the open and anonymous media characteristics of the internet, this is a touchy balancing mechanism which enables this organization to maintain its existence and to support high-quality discussions and the interactively created benefits they generate for participants.

6.   CONCLUSION

In this paper, we described an open virtual community built around a BBS and managed by an implicit collaboration between the site-owner and the participants, themselves. It is managed with much more strict rules rather than is the case for the official sites of other artists or entertainers, because unofficial site is so handicapped as to exist itself. Based on these rules, both siteowner and participants take their own roles to make this community active and stable. The siteowner has established a clear policy oriented towards an F-type community and participants basically support it. However, occasionally more serious dialogue or discussion emerges out of the casual chatter. When this happens, participants both enthusiastically engage in it while at the same time, trying to keep discussion within bounds, because they recognize and fundamentally support the site-owner's policy -and the fact that it is almost impossible to reach an objective conclusion for most of the discussion themes. These simultaneous and contrasting behaviors are exhibited not only by different participants, but also by individual participants. This supports the development of serious dialogue while preventing an excessively acrimonious atmosphere on the BBS. Many visitors feel these discussions form a significant part of the appeal of the BBS and of the website as a whole –and are a major source of their fascination with, and commitment to this virtual community, other participants, the website owner, and to the pop group SMAP.

Of course we do not argue that this is the best example of a successful internet-based virtual community. Many consumers' interactive communities on net have been developed but, as yet, few of them have been able to develop into a self-supporting, profit-oriented business model. It would seem, however, that it is possible to use virtual net communities, based on autonomous interaction among participants, to link consumers' enthusiasms to specialized goods and services in ways which we have not previously seen. Thus, further study of net communities holds out the prospect of learning new, innovative ways for organizations to create value for their customers.

7.   REFERENCES

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