

The Community Age

How to connect with consumers through meaningful and active communities

Community, a concept that is especially meaningful to Gen Z, has gained unique importance for marketers in recent years. We are now reaching a point in which community will be increasingly used by brands as a way to connect with their audiences, a 'Community Age'. This concept has quickly built momentum, and especially since the pandemic and its impact on social life, community has been cemented as something that will connect people and brands more and more.

Why is Community Especially Important for Gen Z?

Brands that prioritise community-building will be much better equipped to win over a younger demographic that places more emphasis on connection through shared values.

The evidence for this is clear when you consider:

- 62% of Gen Z and millennials believe brands have the power to create communities based on common interests and passions.
- 45% see 'contributing to my community' as important.
- 15% of Gen Z believe brands should run customer communities
- 15% buy products specifically to access the community around them.

Whilst the last two points here are relatively small numbers, they become important when you consider these numbers were virtually zero for previous generations.

The Community Age may have started with millennials, but it is now being owned by Gen Z. This is because, quite simply, community is important for Gen Z to feel connected. In many ways, Gen Z is the most digitally connected generation on the planet, but it could be argued that in terms of relationships, they are the least connected when compared to other generations. In the USA, loneliness among Gen Z was measured at 48% before COVID-19, and for Gen Z in the UK, feeling lonely was the second most pressing concern during the pandemic, well above actually catching the virus.

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A defining feature of Gen Z is the prevalence and awareness of mental health difficulties. This generation is acutely aware of the time they spend on smartphones, and there is evidence that they are consciously reducing their phone time. This increased screen time could signify a lack of true connection, which is something that Gen Z realises and seems to be taking active steps to tackle. In fact, sharing these feelings and burdens builds comradery by 50% among Gen Z.

With increased use of smartphones and an awareness of the challenges of loneliness and mental health struggles, Gen Z craves community. Interestingly, the growth of technology and technological platforms that has facilitated this need.



There have been some key technological and social media developments over the past two decades. Twenty years ago, communications were aimed at a broad range of people on a mass scale – specialist press was about as targeted as it got in terms of connecting with people’s passions. Since then, from the introduction of Facebook and Facebook groups, to Instagram pages and now Tik Tok, the structure of community has been massively encouraged. Technological advancement and platform development have undoubtedly put more value on community, and Gen Z have mostly grown up in this environment. On top of that,

smartphones and increasing data speeds mean that these community structures are available and with us at all times. Now, we have all experienced the effects of the pandemic and lockdowns in which digital community has grown to become even more important to everyone. However, it is Gen Z who have connected with these communities while they would otherwise be out enjoying their rich social lives. It is also worth noting that the massive rise in popularity of more personal forms of media, such as podcasts, vlogs, blogs and more recently influencers, has also facilitated communities banding together both digitally and in person.



Opportunities and Examples for Marketers

Effective use of community can increase customer loyalty, it can build brand trust, and provide a deeper connection with customers, as well as ultimately delivering sales growth. For these reasons it's important to look at case studies from brands who have been effectively using community as a core part of their marketing activities.

Gymshark: *Placing Community as a core of the brand*

This sports apparel brand started in 2012, and in less than ten years has reached a \$1.3bn valuation. A driving factor in this massive success has been their application of community marketing. Gymshark's clear target is 18 to 25-year-olds, and their broad focus is on fitness, fashion and music. The key to their success, however, is the detailed and specific ways in which they engage communities to create audiences that genuinely care about the brand and its values.

Take fitness, for example. Gymshark targeted communities in the fitness space that the larger sports fashion brands were neglecting. This included boxercise, weightlifting and long-distance swimming. Gymshark made these sports aspirational to a young audience, partly by creating brand communities around key areas like their Gymshark Lifting Club.

Of course, influencers were important. However, Gymshark didn't focus on just any fashion or fitness influencers. Instead, they used a clear vision of the type of influencer that would best represent the brand, and hand selected whether each one had the right look and feel. This single-mindedness gave them the confidence to turn influencers into ambassadors, and to go beyond a pay-per-post relationship, to a long-term, meaningful partnership.

Another method of stimulating community was through their use of experiences that brought their online world into reality. Gymshark meet-ups and 'expos' – where fans can meet their favourite fitness influencers – were all documented heavily on social channels. This reinforced the community-oriented nature of their approach, bringing together their audience and influencers to create a community based on shared appreciation of the brand.

Once somebody had become a fan of the brand through passion, Gymshark gave them broader reasons to love the brand and stay loyal to the community. One key method for achieving this was with complete openness and transparency to their audience about the business. For example, the founder of Gymshark has his own YouTube channel, where he participates in in-depth Q&As about his role and the company. In one case, he hand-wrote 2,500 apology letters to customers who were unable to purchase from the website due to a Black Friday technical outage. One return of this personal engagement with the community was that consumers were willing to generate brand content themselves on social media channels.

Gymshark successfully threaded community into a core identity of the brand, creating a community of like-minded people that their customers craved. This approach generated loyalty and facilitated a close connection between the brand and the consumer, directly contributing to the phenomenal success and growth of Gymshark.

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Timberland: *Using One Community to Inspire Many*

If community works for an up-and-coming brand like Gymshark, it is also important to demonstrate how it can work for a more established brand. Community has been a focus in the work KINC has been doing with Timberland, and for the Timberland Nature Needs Heroes programme we took an approach that valued geographical communities.

The goal of our programme was to convert a rough, concrete grey-space into a thriving green oasis for the local community. Engaging both the council and residents of Croydon in Southeast London, together we transformed the concrete wasteland into a usable green space. Championed by rap artist Loyle Carner, who grew up in the area, the programme built a legacy for Croydon residents. On top of that, by customising the campaign at a local level, we could spread the message of our achievement and inspire communities across the UK to rethink the importance of planting in urban areas, benefitting social integration, mental health and creativity.



This programme had truly powerful direct results for the community. We took the values of the brand directly to a local community, working with them to create something unique and personal to their environment. As a result, people felt part of a community brought together by Timberland, creating a lasting impact on their area and influencing their view of the brand.

An unexpected result was that 76% of people said that the project changed their opinion of Timberland and made them more likely to consider the brand. The success of this community-oriented marketing initiative built confidence in this approach at Timberland, and has led to further community campaigns being developed to roll out across Europe.

Community marketing is about more than using digital advertising to reach various target groups on social media. It is about finding deeper ways to connect with customers. It is about building relationships between consumer and brand, generating loyalty and trust, and creating something out of a brand's identity that people can truly be a part of. After the vast social changes of the pandemic, and with the rise of community-driven social media and increased online connectedness, **there has never been a more important time to consider community.**

