Building a Brand Community

From Our Partner Agencies

Study after study shows that customers want to connect with a brand on a deeper emotional level than just the products they sell.

Whether by a greater purpose or mission, or a strong community, customers gravitate toward connection. Our industry experts discuss the key elements of gaining traction by building a brand community of shoppers.

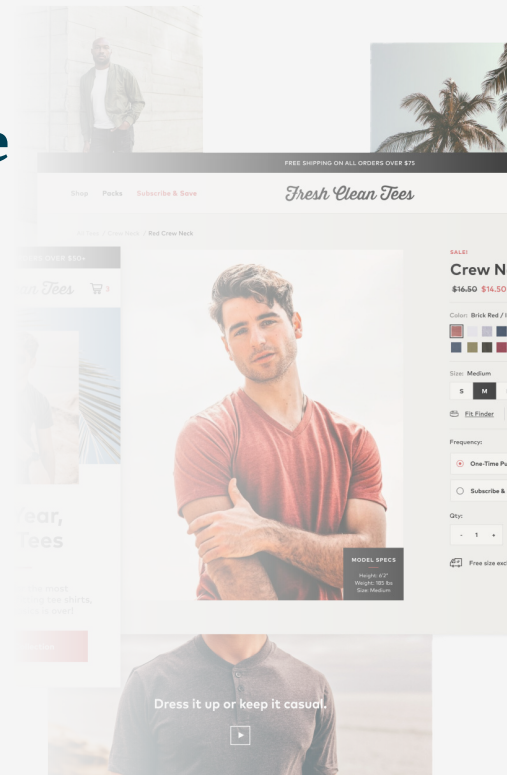LEARN MORE FROM 12 EXPERTS IN COMMERCE

Brand building doesn't start with the product. Building a brand needs to start from an inherent need, idea, culture, or discussion that product then becomes part of. For example, GymShark has built a brand around a lifestyle and philosophy that's executed so well in their marketing. Their products have become just part of the lifestyle that the brand is focused on and this makes the purchase of their products easy for new and existing customers.

We've seen community building work first hand with our clients at Blend. A couple of years ago, a client of ours in the hobby crafting space launched their Shopify store. This was alongside a Facebook group dedicated to helping crafters come together, discuss, and debate. Not only was this move great for market research, but also drove around 50% of traffic. Today, the community is 1000's strong and acts as a key marketing and sales tool for the brand.

Adam Pearce
CEO at Blend Commerce

The most important piece to building a brand is having a voice - a point of view. Make sure visitors feel - not just read - this voice and point of view. Think of your brand like a language. You want your customers speaking this language through all touch points of the brand through mechanisms such as identity, color, and type hierarchy.

Branding and identity packages are still geared towards a print and publish medium. While this is extremely important in brand building, so is the digital medium. Be sure to give equal thought and strategy to the digital presence of the brand. Either create the brand identity or have a web focused agency extend the brand identity for a digital platform with brand voice as the most important pillar.

Don't use a theme - it's a one way ticket to losing your brand voice. Themes were made for everyone, not you. **Remove the guard rails to your digital strategy and find truly unique customer experiences.** This costs more in the short term, but far less in the long run as you continue to enhance the digital experience in reaction to customer behavior.

Thomas McCutchen
Founder & CEO at Scoutside

Dieter Rams, the famous Braun designer, is well-known for his quote "Good design is honest." **Creating a community around your culture should be predicated on honesty.** If sustainability or social responsibility is core to your brand's mission, show, don't tell your customers how your brand is sustainable. Prominently dedicate content to explain the measures your company has taken to offset its carbon emissions or remove plastic waste from the ocean. These pages are just as important as your Home, Product, and Collection pages.

If your brand is just starting, it's okay to show the modest steps you're taking to hit those sustainability goals and be sure to detail that journey, perhaps through a series of blog articles and social posts. Building a brand around social and environmental responsibility should be a genuine exercise in describing your core values, not solely a marketing strategy.

Jonathan Osborn
Partner & Co-Founder at Presidio Creative

Ecommerce businesses need to think of themselves as brands, not products. It can be a challenging shift to make because many businesses get started based on a great idea for a product. Moving beyond a product focus and owning the customer experience from end to end requires thinking about the value and experiences the company brings its customers before, during and after purchase. Telling the brand story and creating community requires meaningful lifestyle content.

For example, a natural supplement health brand does not sell zinc and vitamin C supplements, they sell a healthy immune system! They achieve this through great content.

First, they educate consumers about why a healthy immune system is so important. Next, they connect how their products are the best for promoting immune health. Then, they clearly explain how to most effectively use their products, how much customers will need, and why it's important to take them daily. They may offer value-add services like convenient bundles and subscriptions.

After customers purchase, they continue to build the customer relationship by helping customers discover more ways to boost their immune system, as well as their overall wellness. Enabling customers to share their health and wellness stories – and not just how much they like the products – also builds the brand story and community.

Aaron Quinn
Founder & CEO at eHouse Studio

The difference between building a brand and selling products is simple, people buy products once, but buy from brands over and over again. Take MVMT watches for example, people keep buying from them because of the cool, hip, millennial brand they have built.

In general, when it comes to building a brand, customers like to feel like they belong. In the case of MVMT, customers were able to literally be a part of the brand by submitting their content and getting reposted. Could customers buy the same cheap watches from any other drop shipper? Sure. But they don't, they keep coming back to MVMT and it paid off for them with an acquisition.

Adena Merabi
Strategic Partnerships at MuteSix

In retail, you'll find that most companies fall into one of two camps. There are those that are building a brand, and there are those that are selling products. Both camps are built on relationships – albeit with very different expectations.

When you're building a brand, you're creating a living, breathing entity that's fueled by love. You're seeking connection with people with similar lifestyles and shared values. At point of purchase, the exchange between brand and customer is about more than just the product. It's about them being able to covet something that embodies certain values and beliefs.

When you're selling products, you're nothing more than a speed dating exercise. Customers are drawn to you for as long as you have a certain item in stock, at a certain price point, in a certain color. If you can't give the customer what they want, they'll swipe right.

When it comes to being successful, it's less about which route you take and more about being honest with your customer about what they can expect from you.

Matt Abbott
Head of Growth at Swanky

Suzannah Cranwell
New Build Service Team Lead at Swanky

Brands offer value and meaning to people's lives outside their products. Brands exist beyond a price point, and COVID-19 has amplified the importance of community and culture.

Products exist to serve a brands' "why." Selling products is a one-time conversion, and companies that only market products don't provide the consumer a reason to invest and keep coming back. Brands, on the other hand, have a relationship with their consumers and their community. Through their storytelling, brands cultivate the sense that consumers are a part of the brand.

Likewise, the stories a brand tells can communicate what it means to join that brand and offer a story about its users' beliefs and values. Brands encourage you to opt-in. When you subscribe to a given brand's offerings, become more than a consumer. You become an advocate.

Aaron Quinn
Founder & CEO at eHouse Studio

Short answer: Selling is transactional. Branding is personal.

Longer answer: Thoughtful branding is critical in transforming transactional customers into long-term raving fans. It gives a company personality; imbues it with human characteristics that consumers can identify with (or want to identify with, as with aspirational branding/marketing).

It is, essentially, the basis for a much deeper relationship--and customers are much more likely to buy from a brand they know, like, and trust. The community that grows around a brand also fosters brand loyalty (giving you a leg up on competitors), referrals (free marketing!), and repeated purchases (boosted LTV).

The personal care company Billie is a great example of well-done branding. Their brand:

• is clearly defined and consistent

• resonates well with their target audience (Millennial and Gen Z women), and (as is becoming a more and more important consideration for businesses)

• takes a stand on social issues that their target audience is likely to care about: inclusivity, racism, and female empowerment

What We Stand For

In an industry that seemed to care only about men, Billie was created to champion womankind. Since launch, we have always donated 1% of our revenue to support women and important causes around the world. We recently donated $100K across Black Lives Matter and the NAACP. Going forward, we'll be focusing our 1% contribution to specifically support BIPOC women. At Billie, we have zero-tolerance for racism and systemic oppression. We ask that our employees, partners and yes, even our customers, uphold these values as well. <3

Having a stance on issues relevant to your product or industry is becoming more pertinent for brands to think about. SproutSocial reports that 66% of consumers say it's important for brands to take public stands on social and political issues.

If your customers aren't forming an emotional connection with your brand, it might be time to revisit your strategy.

Z
Founder at Tako Agency

Just selling products is a transaction. It is a short-term relationship. This model is harmful to a merchant in the long and short-run. Merchants spend a ton of resources to acquire customers. In the short-run, the life-time value (LTV) of the customer is typically limited. In the long-run, just having a transaction, means that a business always needs new customers to survive. It is the 'short-run' results stuck in a hamster wheel. It is not scalable.

A store becoming a Brand breaks that hamster wheel. When a store has character, it creates a culture. When there is a culture it attracts individuals who identify with that culture. Once customers begin to identify and relate with that culture, the Brand must capitalize to bring those customers together to build a community.

The power of building a community, evoking emotion, and making a connection with a customer will lead to repeat purchases, brand loyalty, and advocacy. A community will create user-generated content to suggest how to wear merchandise or show how that record player accents a living room.

Taking care of customers and providing a great customer experience will be amplified by those that have an emotional attachment. Customers that are part of the community will want to echo that and share it with their social circles. The attachment to the Brand will lead to high engagement on blogs, live videos, likes, and comments. And, eventually driving sales.

Building a brand and building a community starts with the faces behind the brand. A brand without the faces is just a logo. Merchants must be vulnerable and transparent. Allowing themselves to be exposed and tell everyone who they are, why they are doing what they are doing, etc.

This is the same reason multi-billion dollar brands invest in endorsements into celebrities, athletes, etc. Smaller brands must start with the core team. For some, it can be an intimidating journey. But, it is the one that must be taken.

Touchpoints with merchants must be implemented throughout the buying journey. This starts with the look and feel of the website. It is mirrored throughout the blog and social channels. It is reinforced through welcome flows and other touchpoints. It solidified with every customer experience interaction.

This is done through supporting the community. Share the expertise, provide advice, and show support. This will allow for a dialogue between the merchant and the customers, and a discussion within the community.

Brands that do a really good job about creating a community, a brand, typically see a Returning Customer Rate (RCR) between 40% to 55%. Those that do not, typically are between 10%-25%. This is the portion that touches earlier points - it increases LTV, conversion rate, and decreases the blended rate of acquiring a customer.

Amer Grozdanic
Co-founder & CEO at Praella

Building a brand is different because you're building deeper long-term relationships with customers instead of the simple transactional experience of selling a product. A brand generates ideas, conversations, and communities that transcend individual products. Building a connection with customers ultimately translates into more positive word-of-mouth and higher LTV.

Creating a community around your brand is key to reinforcing social proof that the brand and products are something a consumer wants to buy. Brands inspire trust in any product or service produced out of or endorsed by a collective community, shortening a customer's purchase journey. For example, when parents are purchasing products for their children, it's not only comforting, but critical for them to know that the products are trusted and loved by other parents. No one wants their child to be the guinea pig.

Brands also represent ideas that can play into a consumer's emotions. Rather than purchasing a product, you're buying into or contributing to a larger idea that aligns with what you're passionate about. This type of emotional purchasing behavior can also shorten a customer's purchase journey. The characteristics of the brand and its respective community help a consumer justify their purchase. A simple example are brands that give a percentage of revenue or profits back to a cause they're passionate about. We've seen these campaigns work time and time again as they push someone from consideration to purchase.

A well run community keeps past purchasers engaged and increases your LTV. This is driven by engaging content, targeted outreach, rewards programs, etc. When these activities come together to truly engage your community, you organically boost LTV and keep your customers from straying to competing products.

The trick is finding the right balance. Building a brand is ultimately the long-term goal for many founders and marketing teams, but sometimes our clients get stuck on the concept of their marketing efforts being "on-brand." Looking at your sales driving initiatives through the lens of the brand can occasionally lead to paralysis by analysis. Digitally native brands need to be agile with their marketing efforts if they want to efficiently sell products, so you can't always let brand building activities get in the way of that.

For example, when UGC content really started to take off as a key performance asset within paid social, some of our clients were too slow to adopt it due to concerns about the UGC assets not being "on brand." The reality is they needed to find the balance and adapt their brand standards to accommodate best practices in both paid advertising and ecommerce.

Pierson Krass
Founder & Managing Partner at Lunar Solar

How often have you as a customer made a purchase decision based on a recommendation from a friend? About 92% of customers are more likely to make a purchase based on a recommendation or referral from someone they know. Simply put, products don't sell products, people sell products—and people want to be understood, they want to connect, and they want to be inspired.

Brands with traction prioritize listening and engaging with customers on a regular basis. Connection isn't just about social media or setting up an email campaign. It takes time and energy to understand your customer and their needs. Connection builds trust, and trust builds loyalty.

Often, eager startups have a product to sell and they believe that if they can get a designer to make a nice looking logo and a killer website—boom, we're in business! Design is an important part, but much like social media and marketing, it is a tool used to deliver a message. If you don't first define a relevant and meaningful message that connects with your customers, they will very quickly lose interest.

If you want to sell products, it is important to think beyond sales. What story are you telling and what world are you creating for your products to live in? Who is your audience? What do they want? What problem are you going to solve for them, and why should they trust you? These are all important questions to consider if you want to win loyal customers and generate a community around your business.

A great brand looks, acts, thinks, and communicates with consistency. It lives and breathes with personality, quirks, and a story that is inspired by some human insight.

Take Billie razor subscription service for example. Women have been shaving and removing body hair since the 1940s or perhaps longer, so shipping razors to customer's doorsteps, while convenient, is hardly a revolutionary idea.

However, with the launch of the "Pink Tax" Rebate Program and a promise to remove the stigma around women's body hair, suddenly a razor is seen in a whole new light. Billie's "Project Body Hair" campaign—featuring ads with hairy women of all colors, shapes, and sizes—quickly gained momentum gaining 22 million video views and press coverage across 23 countries.

The founders of Billie uncovered human insights that resonated with all womankind, insights that transformed the mundane act of buying a razor into an act of identity and empowerment—the razor brand now represents the agreement that women should be empowered to take care of their bodies in a way that suits them, not because of what society tells them (and all the women say AMEN!).

When your brand does the work of telling a story that your audience can relate to, people want to share it and join the conversation. If you first seek to understand, connect, and inspire, your time will not be wasted. Your customers will feel good about their purchasing decisions, you will gain loyal enthusiasts, and as a result, you will sell more products.

Tate Lucas
CEO at DotDash.io

We're out to build a better shelf

It started with a razor that changed everything: We noticed that women were overpaying for razors and shamed for having body hair. Kind of a double whammy, when you think about it. So, we did away with the Pink Tax and put body hair on the **big screen**.

Now, meet our sparkling clean collection of better beauty basics for your medicine cabinet (and handbag and gym bag and desk drawer). Powered by ingredients that do no harm, work super hard, and take the guesswork out of clean.

FILL YOUR SHELF

Here's the gist

__Analyze your own business.__ What is it about you that draws your customer to you? Are they connecting with you on a human level? If not, leverage the advice from the experts and discover your why. As more Millennials and Gen Z enter the economy, their gravitation toward brands with a purpose grows even stronger. How are you connecting?

As you continue to build a strong community, ensure you're also providing customers with the opportunity to __explore more of your offerings__ and __connect with you from checkout and beyond.__

Explore the rest of the __Powerful & Profitable Subscriptions series__ to gain insights from 12 different agencies on a variety of topics: from building a community, to scalability, and everything in between.

Thank you to our partners

We're thrilled to collaborate with the most successful and fastest-growing agencies in commerce to create this playbook. If you're interested in contacting one of our partner agencies, please use the links below.

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