Use Niche Communities to Nurture Online Networking

By Nancy Pekala

Fans. Followers. Friends. In today's world of social media, it's all about your network. Making valuable professional connections is nothing new, however. Like many associations, the American Marketing Association has built its reputation for nearly 75 years on creating and fostering strong connections among its 77 national professional and 340 collegiate chapters.

What is new for the AMA is extending its traditional networking model to build connections through social networks and online communities.

In 2009, the AMA began to seriously consider how it could use emerging technologies to connect members. An internal planning team spent more than a year devising its social media strategy, culminating in the decision to build an online community exclusively for marketers. While the trend of using social networks was evident, the AMA recognized that professionals — especially marketers — were organizing and joining themed niche communities.

As the "big 3" networks — Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter — have grown exponentially, professionals are increasingly joining targeted, niche online communities for relevant, valuable connections. With LinkedIn boasting more than 120 million members, 2 million company pages and more than 1 million groups, social media peer groups and business-focused online communities are fast becoming the new strategic mandate.

A recent Society for New Communications Research study, "The New Symbiosis of Professional Networks," revealed that professional networks are an increasingly essential decision-support tool with professionals belonging to multiple niche networks to find peers and content specifically related to their work — by role, industry, geography, etc. Professionals are finding the right mix of large, open networks and private communities to support learning, networking and decision-making activities.

AMAConnect™ Surfaces

In early 2010, the AMA decided to build AMAConnect™ (www.marketing-

power.com/Community), where members and site registrants can connect, collaborate and share content. The association believed this community could enhance member value, membership acquisition and retention.

Following an in-depth evaluation, the AMA partnered with Telligent, which provides social community software. The AMAConnect™ project team led by the AMA's website and IT departments also included Manifest Digital, the AMA's website development agency, and TMA Resources, which provides AMA's member database management software.

AMAConnect™ launched in November 2010, available to AMA members and registrants of MarketingPower.com who may take advantage of most of the community's features during a trial membership. If registrants do not convert to full AMA membership, their access levels remain limited. They can continue to view the homepage and one general group of the community but cannot participate in others. They also can search for content and people but cannot connect with other community members or access full versions of content.

AMAConnect™ offers AMA members 37 groups in which to participate. Each group is customizable and contains multiple blogs, discussion forums, ask-and-answer forums, media galleries, wikis, polls, group membership lists, quick updates and other features. The platform also provides members personalized views of their activity so they can easily update their community friends; view their friends, groups, blog and forum activity; and store files and other content accessible only to their friends. They also can easily set privacy controls.

Key Business Decisions

The AMA did not take the decision to build its own online community lightly. There were many business strategy and technology issues to consider, including:

- **Access.** The AMAConnect™ Business Planning Group discussed at length who should be granted access to the online community and how guarding should work. Ultimately, AMAConnect™ is intended primarily as a benefit of AMA membership; therefore, all of the groups, features and

Training Program

When getting ready to launch AMAConnect™, the American Marketing Association developed a formal training program that included the following elements:

- **Chapter Task Force.** A Community Chapter Task Force, comprised of 12 chapter leaders, developed a plan for communicating, promoting and training the AMA's chapter network.
- **Leadership Training.** During the AMA's annual Leadership Training Summit, specific sessions were conducted with chapter leaders to promote engagement and tutorials on how to use the new community's features.
- **Online Training.** The AMA conducted a walk-through training of the community with members of its four key councils. The council members provided valuable feedback in helping address issues or offer suggestions on messaging for target AMA audiences. The

training was recorded and made available to all leaders via the MarketingPower.com website. Specific online training also was produced for the AMAConnect™ Group Ambassadors and chapter leaders.

- **Collateral Training Materials.** A comprehensive AMAConnect™ User's Manual was created including detailed instructions and screenshots; interactive online tutorials, available in the community, guided first-time users on profile options, group membership, blogs and forums; an "AMAConnect™" benefits guide was created for chapters to assist them in promotion and engagement in the community at a local level; and FAQs were developed to explain unique features, such as the Group Ambassador program and Community Member Point System.

functionality, including members-only content, are available to AMA members, including collegiate student members. A trial membership program was developed to attract new members.

- **Integration.** As a result of the AMA's security decision, members and trial members are required to log into MarketingPower.com to access the community. This single sign-on process also reinforced the branding and awareness goals set by the AMA, requiring technical integration between the AMA's membership database and the Telligent platform.
- **Customization.** While the Telligent product offered the AMA substantial features and functionality for its community, it was essential that the AMA brand was present. Therefore, the AMA invested in numerous customizations.
- **Build or buy.** During initial planning, the AMA business team debated building a community from scratch versus purchasing a third-party software platform. It opted for the latter option because of the intensive tech-

nology and support requirements of a proprietary community.

- **Administration/moderation.** A full-time AMAConnect™ community administrator was hired to manage the community and the business team developed guidelines and terms of use, approved by its legal representatives. The AMA ensures community members are able to communicate with few restrictions and that they also conduct themselves in a respectful, professional manner by including a "Report Abuse" feature, a "Contact Us" form directed to the administrator and community feedback forums where members can voice complaints, suggestions and questions.
- **Community engagement.** The AMA enlisted marketer members with expertise in specific niche topics to serve as ambassadors of relevant community groups. These members of the Group Ambassador program engage community group members by formally welcoming them, publishing thought leadership content, sharing resources and information,

responding to group members' questions and posts, and serving as subject matter experts. Group ambassadors have an avatar and are recognized on the homepage of their community group as well as in an Ambassador Center located in the community. Members are encouraged to learn about and connect with ambassadors, who serve as a conduit to the AMA by providing suggestions, feedback and recommendations for improvements to the community and new programs.

- **Content development.** AMA developed a formal content plan to ensure that fresh, relevant content would be integrated within the community and its groups. The plan includes scheduled online chat events, relevant blog and forum posts, and other content, such as articles, whitepapers, best practices and podcasts that are posted in the community's Media Galleries. Additionally, the community administrator develops bi-weekly talking points for Group Ambassadors with links and references to

Customized Connections

AMA customized AMAConnect™ in key areas for branding purposes:

- A customized profile allows members to include information about their chapter, volunteer positions, local chapter awards and national AMA awards.
- Private, leadership-only groups allow the AMA's volunteer leaders to share, collaborate and connect in a secure setting.
- The AMA's chapters can easily use the platform as a primary channel of member communications through the creation of chapter-branded public or private groups.
- A specifically-designed Community Points System allows AMAConnect™ members to earn points for community participation.
- AMAConnect™ members can search for marketers using a variety of filters, including the AMA

chapter to which they belong, as well as company name, screen name, member name, industry, job title, expertise, geographic location and tags.

- Within the community, members are identified based on their AMA member join date as well as the number of posts they've created and points earned.
- The AMA's national events calendar is integrated into the community for easy access to registration.
- AMA members can make changes to their profile in AMAConnect, which are automatically updated in the AMA's membership database.
- AMAConnect™ members can easily search for and access content from both the online community and the AMA's main site, MarketingPower.com.

content that may serve as conversation starters in topical groups.

A Big Payoff

Although only a year old, AMAConnect™ has proven to be a successful, valuable initiative. With nearly 6,000 community members, 2,500 group memberships, 4,500 posts and 750 media files, AMAConnect™ is off to a great start. Sixteen of the AMA's chapters maintain their own group on the platform with more on the way.

Proprietary professional communities represent a significant investment for associations. Successfully launching one requires planning, organization, business strategy and a long-term commitment. But the payoff can be big. For the AMA, there is no more important initiative than investing in ways to provide its members with better and easier ways to make connections, collaborate, find solutions to key challenges and build their professional network.

Ultimately, online communities offer associations huge opportunities to expand their membership base, increase revenue and create long-lasting connec-

tions with members and with the association brand. A well-designed community can set your association apart from the competition and create a value proposition that will keep members coming back year after year. ⓩ

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