Mirage Community: It looks like community from a distance. It's not.

by Carrie Melissa Jones and Charles Vogl

Hundreds of brands, from Glossier to Starbucks and Walmart to LinkedIn, built transformative and supportive communities in cities around the world from soup to nuts in 2018. Not.

In our work and the work of those before us (Muniz, Albert, and O'Guinn, 2001), a "brand community" is, first, a community that is then also inspired, created, or influenced by a brand. In this context, a brand means any identifiable organization. This can include a for-profit, non-profit, political or otherwise driven organization.

An authentic brand community includes *all* of these elements:

- Members who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare.

- Members who share an identity founded in values (at least one value).

- Members who participate in shared experiences reflecting the shared values.

Successful brand communities serve both members and organizational goals. Consider Salesforce's "Trailblazer's Community" for users, Harley Davidson's "Harley Owners Group" for riders, and Lady Gaga's "Little Monsters" community of fans. Each organization has invested in tying stakeholders (customers and staff) together, which grows all three of the above elements. It is no surprise then that both members and the organization get value, even if it always takes years to see that value.

Typically, specific infrastructure must be in place to both build and support authentic brand community elements. How to create that infrastructure is a deeper conversation for another time.

Hard to build what you can't identify

Marketing departments and C-suites continue to use the term, "*community,*" to label wide-ranging organizational investments, including neighborhood events, charity partnerships, online forums, and even simple email lists. But a closer look reveals that most (and sometimes all) of the community-building measures are superficial (even irrelevant) for real community. Too many companies use the term haphazardly and sometimes carelessly. To avoid shaming, we're not listing them here.

Brands often use "community" as a catch-all label to describe an audience or group of returning customers. *There is nothing wrong with audiences or customer groups.* They just don't constitute a community without additional and appropriate investments. In fact, the term community has been used by brands to refer to so many ideas over the past 20 years that the word has lost whatever meaning it once had -- a loss for the organizations as well as the individuals within these so-called communities. In 2018, the unhelpful misuses have become more widespread than ever.

When we ask individuals inside organizations how they define community and how they themselves understand its importance for their roles, most are hard-pressed to define the term for their work. Often the best they can conjure is: "Community is good for people." That's hollow at best and meaningless at worst.

When we look closely at so-called communities, all too often we find what we call Mirage Community. A mirage community may look like a community to outsiders and the untrained. But those who are close to it can easily see that it is not the real thing. Mirage communities miss fundamental infrastructure and deliver none of a community's powerful outcomes for members or organizations.

Mirage Community

A Mirage Community is defined as a group that aspires to form community, and may even call itself a community, but lacks fundamental elements that constitute a community. Mirage communities fail to deliver positive community and organizational results.

Groups

Note that there is nothing wrong with groups that fall outside the definition of community. Most of us are involved with lots of groups. An advocacy campaign (say advocating for clean Oakland streets) may never build a community, but as a group, it can serve a rich and powerful role for Oakland. The danger comes when we can no longer distinguish between groups and communities, and we expect more from a group than it can ever deliver. Or we fail to invest in a group to grow a community (say an Oakland streets cleanup community) and then despair at the failure.

A social media campaign like the Ice Bucket Challenge to raise awareness for ALS serves a deep need to grow a conversation about a disease and raise research money. It does not knit its participants into a community where members care for one another. Growing a conversation and fundraising nevertheless can prove a satisfying outcome with tangible impact.

We must recognize Mirage Communities to create clarity for what to build for organizations, where to invest effectively, and how to remain honest in our intentions. Real communities take more and often different investments than mirage communities.

Identifying mirage communities and building authentic communities that serve organizations and members is the topic of our forthcoming book to be released by Berrett-Koehler Publishers in 2020.

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Muniz, Jr., A., & O'Guinn, T. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 27*(4), 412-432. doi:10.1086/319618

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