



By Robert Moran, Jennifer Myers, Allison Quigley and Sparky Zivin

online communities

# The rules of engagement

## Lessons learned from creating an MROC for Millennials

**A**s Kit Yarrow and Jayne O'Donnell, authors of *Gen BuY*, have written, Millennials are “the largest, most diverse, educated and influential shoppers on the planet.” Substantial research has been done to understand the behaviors, values and opinions of the 71 million teens and twenty-somethings known as Gen Y or the Millennial generation, and for good reason. They are the first generation to have grown up online (so-called “digital natives”) and represent the most ethnically diverse generation ever, with a spending power exceeding \$200 billion.

As a group, they have been defined by the Pew Research Center as confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change, but we believe that we still don't fully understand what makes this complex and increasingly influential group tick. Previous studies, such as the Pew Center's year-long series *Millennials: A Portrait of a Generation Next*, have defined Millennials as a group rather than exploring their diversity.

The recognition that we can't box them in to neat categories sparked our desire to create a proprietary market research online community (MROC) as a way to continue the conversation with Millennials as they evolve and their influence grows. The community, called 8095 Live, was built as a joint

partnership with global communications firm Edelman. It is composed of 500 U.S. Millennials, born between 1980 and 1995, who represent a diverse group of life stages, locations and ethnicities.

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### snapshot

The authors detail the nuances of launching and maintaining an online community of Generation Y consumers and offer tips to marketers interested in community-building.

## Become as central

Based on the increased interest in and steady adoption of MROCs we have seen from brands and marketers across all industries, it is likely that communities will become as central to the corporate insight function as the brand tracker has been historically.

Unlike traditional MROCs built exclusively for a client with the members coming from the client's target customer base, 8095 Live is cohort-centric, targeting a single demographic group. This distinction presents advantages as well as disadvantages that must be overcome by the community manager in order for the community to thrive.

Further, there are significant challenges that a community manager must address when moderating this type of community. Having dealt with the unique challenges of a demographic community, we

have come away with some helpful learnings and tips and will spend the balance of this article exploring them.

## Keep people with a common age range, but not a common passion, engaged.

Building a true community - where content is co-created by moderators and community members and discussions form organically - is more difficult in a community built around a shared demographic characteristic than those tied to shared interests or enthusiasm for a specific brand or product. In the latter, the nexus between members already exists and our job as moderators is to guide the conversation. In 8095, we had the additional step of building "community" itself and the ongoing challenge of maintaining that engagement.

Fortunately, a majority of Millennials believe their generation has a unique and distinctive iden-

tity. As Pew found in its 2010 study, Gen Y has a higher level of cohort consciousness than its Gen X predecessors. When asked, "Do you think of your own age group as unique and distinct from other generations, or not?," 61 percent of Millennials felt their generation was unique and distinct. This compares to 49 percent for Gen X, 58 percent for Boomers and 66 percent for the Silent Generation.

This belief that one's generation has a unique identity serves as a community bond. Communities built around generations with lower cohort consciousness, such as Gen Xers, mean more work for the community manager in building and maintaining community identity.

## Create engagements on a wide range of topics.

With a community of Millennials ranging from 16 to 31, mem-



bers represent a wide range of life stages and milestones: anywhere from getting their learner's permit, to going away to college, to embarking on their careers, to becoming parents. Despite fitting nicely into the Millennial or 8095 generation, as a group they do not have a unifying interest or hobby.

Recognizing that every engagement within the community would not appeal to everyone, it was crucial for us to create more engagements, on a wide range of subjects, than typical in a traditional MROC built exclusively for a client. We found that members will self-select in or out of activities based on their interests, so offering choices was important to help them feel invested and to entice them to keep coming back.

While a segment of community members are active across nearly all subject matters, there are also clear divisions. For example, we have come to expect to hear from different voices when asking about life insurance compared to beer preferences. Stay-at-home moms are happy to tell us about their perceptions on healthy eating but less interested in a reality TV show about a matchmaker. Community members who are eager to tell us about their experiences capturing video are very different than those concerned about protecting their privacy online.

#### **Encourage organic content.**

It is equally important for community managers to encourage organic content, especially at the outset. Managers must actively listen to what members are saying and reward those who co-create meaningful content. In 8095 Live, members don't receive incentive points (which are redeemed for gift cards) automatically when they create their own activities or respond to content posted by others. But when particularly insightful or interesting content emerges, we foster the conversation by rewarding points to the creator and, occasionally, to members.

One of the first discussion boards in 8095 Live created by a member was about a campaign by a major global company in the food

and beverage space to rebuild its image. Members discussed whether the advertisements and news stories they had seen were believable and how they affected their opinion of the brand and their willingness to buy the company's products. We rewarded the creator and the first several members who responded and then turned the activity into one in which anyone who responded would receive points. This encouraged the conversation to continue and it also demonstrated to community members that we were listening to what topics they wanted to discuss and were interested in a dialogue.

#### **Create subcommunities.**

In a large demographic community such as 8095 Live, subcommunities are an essential tool for encouraging more interactive discussions. In a single discussion board posted to the entire community, we can easily exceed 200 unique responses in a matter of hours, but we often find members are only responding to the initial post, not interacting with one another. As an alternative, we sometimes developed multiple discussion topics around a common theme and assigned members to one of those discussions. By dividing the community into a smaller group, we are better able to manage responses, ask thoughtful follow-up questions and encourage back-and-forth discussion by members.

#### **Keep members interested with themes.**

Weekly and monthly themes encourage people to keep coming back and can rekindle interest in members who had stopped participating. For example, February's theme was food, and while community activities continued to cover a broad scope of subjects, we included several food-related activities and offered additional rewards for our most active participants on the featured theme. This resulted in higher response rates not only on engagements related to food but also in other subject matters.

#### **Size matters.**

There has been a lot of debate regarding the optimal size for an MROC. Some have used Dunbar's number as one avenue of approach on this topic. (British anthropologist Robin Dunbar theorized that there is a limit - somewhere between 100 and 230 - to the number of stable social relationships people can have.) When applied to an MROC, Dunbar's number suggests that MROCs in the 150-230 range are optimal and that in larger-population MROCs it may be difficult for participants to develop much of a sense of group identity.

Alternatively, social media consultant Jacob Morgan has argued that applying Dunbar's number to MROCs is inappropriate because we are not trying to build a tribe or fighting unit and are only attempting to get a critical mass for consumer co-creation. Similarly, some clients and prospective clients feel that limiting communities to a range around Dunbar's number (typically estimated to be 150) is too restrictive and that the size of the community should more closely resemble the sample size of traditional national surveys - 800 or 1,000 (or more).

Our perspective is that if it is important to the research that a tight-knit community develops, then Dunbar's number seems to be a guide, and traditional MROCs for brand enthusiasts, employees, etc., are best kept small.

However, when it comes to a demographic community, where a digital tribe is not critically important, the community needs to be larger to allow members to be segmented into subcommunities. Because 8095 Live asks about topics from travel to technology purchases, we need to ensure we will have a critical mass of community members ranging from working professionals to technology early adopters at any given time, and that requires a lot of people.

#### **Community managers are key.**

When designing a survey, researchers aim to keep the questionnaire concise and precise to avoid respondent fatigue. However, unlike surveys, an online commu-

nity is more likely to rust out than wear out. Unless the participants are being engaged regularly, the community dwindles and dies.

Therefore, the skill of a community manager, a position that some current project managers may transition to, is critical. To meet the new demand for community managers, market research and insight firms will need to go through a significant evolution in human capital. In addition to the new skill set that will be required of today's project managers, a mind-set change is needed as well. Focus group training and soft skills, like empathy, may be helpful prerequisites for project managers transitioning to the role of community manager. No longer will researchers treat participants as fungible commodities and nameless and faceless samples in a survey; rather they will be building long-term working relationships with community members who will be partners in learning.

This is especially the case with 8095 Live, as Millennials are the most connected and digitally-engaged generation the world has seen, and there is no shortage of competition for their attention and time online. That means we have had to work doubly hard to keep content fresh, engaging and worth a Millennial's valuable time.

Community management is not an easy job, but it is beginning to get some recognition. January 24, 2011, marked the second annual Community Manager

Appreciation Day. Awareness of this role will evolve, and, in time, best practices and industry training standards will solidify.

#### Four basic conclusions

Our work on 8095 Live has led us to four basic conclusions about the future of MROCs.

First, we believe that "cohort communities" such as 8095 Live can be scaled quickly and have a bright future. For example, we envision the creation of a successful MROC built around Americans born in 1951. These Americans, now 60, have a strong generational bond as Baby Boomers. With disposable income and aging parents, as they contemplate their next act, we can expect much more from this cohort. Their purchase and investment patterns will create ripples throughout the economy.

Second, we also believe that there is room for the development of a new type of MROC through the addition of a new option to the ownership/control dimension - a shared solution. Under this model, a firm creates and fosters an MROC based on a key demographic, life stage or psychographic profile and sells access to this community to multiple buyers for a lower cost than any one buyer would pay to build their own proprietary community. Think of it as the omnibus model applied to MROCs. We believe that under this shared-cost model, "multi-client cohort communities" show much promise as a

market research tool.

Third, we feel that proprietary communities will evolve to become at least as important, if not more so, to corporations as the quarterly brand tracker or customer satisfaction tracker, because of their real-time nature and cost advantages over traditional qualitative research. And we believe that the majority of these communities will remain as "walled gardens" for competitive reasons.

Finally, our analysis of the MROC marketplace leads us to believe that massive, open communities will occupy a hybrid research and public or consumer engagement role. These communities will either rise spontaneously or they will be created or sponsored by a corporation, but their open membership and public access will make them exceedingly large. With strong text analytics tools we believe that the content of these massive communities will be mined successfully for insights. But the existence of these large communities and their dual use as both an insights tool and an engagement engine will present the market research industry with a challenge. After all, the co-creative activities of these future communities will in themselves become a consumer engagement or marketing tool.

Will the blurring line between "marketing" and "research" within this new type of community be embraced by market research or rejected by it? Only time will tell. | 