

The End of Attraction: Why People Stop Visiting Company Online Communities?

Tuula Mittilä¹; Maria Mäntymäki²

¹Professor (Marketing), Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, Pori Unit, tuula.mittila@pori.tukkk.fi

²Ph.D. Student (Marketing), University of Tampere, maria.mantymaki@uta.fi

Abstract

To execute relationship marketing with online communities is a challenging process for companies. Therefore, it is important to understand the reasons why customers¹ establish, maintain and dissolve their relations with online communities. In marketing research, the beginning and development of a relationship are widely studied while the research focusing on business relationship ending has increased only during the last years. Most of the research is conducted in a b-to-b setting. Therefore, there is a research gap concerning the ending of consumer relations, especially online community relations and relationships². Online communities have characteristics that differ from traditional business relationships. Therefore, studying relationship dissolution through the attraction lenses is expected to enhance our understanding of relationship ending in this context. To be able to totally understand attraction, studying the opposite of attraction, non-attraction explaining why customers end relationships and stop visiting online communities, is needed. The aim of this paper is to report an empirical study exploring non-attraction in the company online community context. Attraction factors identified by Mäntymäki (forthcoming) are more concrete and many-sided than non-attraction factors. Four different categories of non-attraction factors were identified in the study. They are content-related, membership-related, culture-related and usability-related.

Keywords

non-attraction, attraction, company online communities, relationship marketing

Introduction

Background of the study

The Internet has tremendously increased communication possibilities by enabling people to stay in touch via networks with other people in many different ways. In the beginning, the Internet offered primarily information, but it has now become an arena for experiences, social contact as well as a market where consumers may buy and sell (Gummesson 2002).

¹ The terms member, customer and visitor are used as synonyms in the paper.

² According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (1995: 985-6), relations are the official connections or friendships between countries, organisations etc. Relationship is a friendship and strong emotional connection between two people. It can also refer to the way people or things are connected and affect each other.

Online communities have become central arenas for customers seeking and exchanging information and experiences of products. Along with internet and online communities, product comparisons as well as the availability of different products have become easier for customers who have also become more active information seekers. Furthermore, the possibilities of sharing peer experiences increases rapidly in consumers' purchase decisions. With the popularity of online communities, word-of-mouth has got a new scope.

From a company's perspective, online communities are challenging but also interesting tools that cannot be ignored. They enable conversations among customers and dialogue between customers and company representatives. Besides companies learning from customers' experiences and needs also customers may learn by having conversations with other customers and maintainers. (e.g. Hagel and Armstrong 1997; DeSanctis? (check spelling), Fayard, Roach and Jiang 2003; Kozinets 2002).

One of the common objectives for building company online communities is to enhance companies' relationship marketing. Relationship marketing with online communities enables, in addition to maintaining existing customer relationships, the opportunity to create relations to and with potential customers. However, relations between customers and company online communities have some features that have to be considered. First, a relation between a member and an online community is totally based on customers own choice and will to visit the site. Second, members act anonymously in most online communities. Third, members only need to be passive and stop visiting an online community to dissolve the relation. For these reasons, a relation or a relationship is extremely easy to end. Hence, Mäntymäki and Mittilä (2005) have suggested that attraction is a more important concept in studying online community relations and relationships than for example commitment and trust.

In their earlier study, Mäntymäki and Mittilä (2005) have explored factors that attract members to company online communities. However, we think that to be able to get a holistic view of online communities' attractiveness the opposite phenomenon of attraction, non-attraction, has to be explored.

Purpose of the paper

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyse *non-attraction of company online communities*. The research question can be formulated as: "*Why members stop visiting online communities?*"

The research problem is approached from the members' perspective. Researchers take the viewpoint of an outsider or a spectator to the focal phenomenon. In this study, the term 'member' refers to consumers. Members may have either relations or relationships with the communities. Although we do not empirically explore whether the respondents themselves feel being a member or a customer, we label every visitor a member.

The theoretical background of the empirical study is based on earlier studies concerning company online communities (e.g. Preece 2000, 2001; Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003) and their attraction (Mäntymäki and Mittilä 2005), attraction in relationship marketing (e.g. Halinen 1994a; Halinen 1994b; Harris, O'Malley and Patterson 2003; Perry 1998) as well as

predisposing factors of supplier-customer relations (Mittilä 2002), and relation dissolution (e.g. Tähtinen 1999, 2001; Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila 1997).

Methodology

Since there are only few studies considering the phenomenon in focus, the study is exploratory and qualitative by its nature. A pilot study was conducted in two company online communities' discussion forums where the members were posed open questions considering both attraction and non-attraction. Since the pilot study seemed to be successful with 29 answers including rich data, this justified the use of the same method in this study.

In the actual study the questions were identical with the pilot study. Two forums were chosen for the empirical study, but because one of them was not successful in producing data, it had to be discarded and a new one was chosen. The first of the forums (www.hairstore.com) is aimed for people interested in hair caring. The other forum (www.nakokulma.net) is aimed for people interested in discussing philosophy, culture, religion, science and society.

The open questions asked from the members were the following:

1. What in this forum draws you?
2. Do you visit other online communities? If yes, why?
3. Have you stopped visiting some online community? If yes, why?

The respondents were asked to answer in the discussion forum or alternatively by email. In addition to answering the above questions the respondents were asked to tell their age and gender as background information. With 89 answers from the study we considered that a saturation point was reached.

The answers were analysed in the N'Vivo software. The classification of the factors is derived from reading and rereading the answers of the respondents until the themes started emerging from the data. Thereafter, the data was coded according to these themes.

Structure of the paper

After the introduction we take a look at earlier knowledge and briefly discuss the concept of a company online community proceeding to discuss about relationship marketing and relations, as well as attraction. After that, the findings of the empirical study are presented and related to earlier studies discussed in the paper. Finally, the conclusions are drawn and future research paths presented.

Company online communities

Many terms are used when speaking about company online communities. The terms "b-web" (Tapscott, Ticoll and Lowy 2000), business community (e.g. Schubert and Ginsburg 2000), and business-oriented online community (Cothrel 1999; 2000), and commercially based online community (Andrews 2001) are widely used. The term `company online community` refers to all communities that are owned and maintained by companies. These communities seek profit in either the short or longer term. A company online community is here defined as

“a company maintained collective sharing a common interest and interacting via information and communications technologies”. In the company online community context ‘a common interest’ refers to all kinds of members’ interests which may originate from, for example, the same kind of demographic profile or interest in the same hobby. Even though a company is a part of an online community, maintainers may have different interests from members’ shared interests (Mittilä and Mäntymäki 2003).

There is some inconstancy with the use of terms, because with above terms some writers refer to the communities that generate direct revenues. However, the terms are also used to refer to online communities that are company maintained, but have other kinds of objectives than generating direct revenues, namely acquiring new customers, increasing efficiency, making new innovations, building stronger relationships (Cothrel 2000). In fact, Mittilä and Mäntymäki (2003) studied 30 company online communities and their study showed that in many cases the aim of the communities is not to generate direct incomes, but to enhance customer relationships and attract potential customers.

Relationship marketing with online communities

Basically, relationship marketing with online communities differs in two ways from the traditional relationship marketing. Both the medium, i.e. an online community, and the relations vary from the traditional ones. Since online communities enable dialogue between the customer and the supplier as well as among customers the development of online communities has brought a new tool for implementing relationship marketing. Because of the development of the Internet and especially online communities, *c-to-c interaction* has enhanced dramatically. People with similar interests and lifestyles may interact around the clock and the globe. Word-of-mouth has a new scale while customers’ exchange views on goods, services and suppliers. As a consequence of that a customer power grows as well. (Gummesson 2002, Dye 2001, 30; Searls & Weinberger 2000)

One of the characteristics of online communities is the lack of communication control. In their own online communities, firms can control the communication only by removing inappropriate messages. Therefore, sometimes a company online community may even cause more harm than benefit. Because members have the power, building and maintaining a company online community is a challenge that can not be totally controlled by the firm. The Internet also offers plenty of choices between different online communities, so the competition is really fierce. Thus, members have to feel that they get some value with every visit.

Since online communities enable members to interact with one another not only on one-on-one basis but also on many-to-many basis, they add a new element to the dialogue framework in relationship marketing, namely, *many-to-many communication*. This means that by posting to a newsgroup, or sending a message to a discussion forum, every member can speak to all other members. Because both the customer and the supplier may learn in this process, these conversations can be seen as a part of the dialogue process even if the supplier doesn't involve in discussions. Therefore, companies may aim for creating many-to-many as well as one-to-many interaction with some customers instead of one-to-one dialogue that requires much more resources.

It is necessary to consider differences between *relations* and *relationships* in an online community. According to Mittilä (2000), in relations, actors pursue self-interest and have only individual goals while in relationships, parties have a mutual interest and they want to develop the relationship by setting common goals. Relations and relationships in an online community context vary from traditional relationships. Gummesson (2002) spoke about the *e-relationship* to embrace relationships, networks and interaction based on IT. However, surprisingly, it seems that e-relationships have not decreased the need for meeting in a real life, but on the contrary increased this need (Gummesson 2002). For this reason, Gummesson (2002) suggested that in e-relationships high-tech should be used to add human dimensions, not decrease them.

In addition to the e-relationships Gummesson (2002) used the term *parasocial relationships* to depict relationships to brands, objects, symbols and other less tangible phenomena. These kinds of relationships are manifested in the connotations of company names, brands, trade marks and well-known business leaders or other people who symbolize a business. In parasocial relationships just like a person, a product or a company has a soul, a personality and a body language. In a way an online community may be parallel to a parasocial relation in that a visitor may not have any real interaction with the community, for example, when only visiting the sites without participating in the communication or using the services offered by the maintainer. These *lurkers* use a community to get benefit without giving anything in exchange.

For above reasons, it is suggested that some elements in a relationship, for example loyalty, trust and commitment, have a smaller role in relationships with online communities than in traditional relationships between suppliers and customers. Instead, the role of attraction is emphasized. However, this does not mean that the customer loyalty cannot be developed, but rather suggests that instead of exploring bonding (Szmigin et al. 2005), for example, it is important to start by exploring attraction and non-attraction to understand the factors that attract or unattract members. By being acquainted with the attraction and non-attraction factors, it is easier to start considering whether commitment or loyalty are possible and how they can be built.

One of the characteristics of the relation between a member and an online community is voluntariness (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Since relationships may exist only in the virtual world, members are often anonymous and behind their nick names. Therefore, ending a relationship is even easier than in “the real world”. Technically, visiting online communities needs just one click of the mouse. On the other hand, if a member is not satisfied with an online community, ending the relationship is extremely easy by being passive, in other words stop visiting an online community.

Relationship dissolution has recently been studied by many authors (e.g. Hocutt 1998; Tähtinen 1999, 2001, Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen 2000, Giller and Matear 2001, Halinen and Tähtinen 2002, Freeman and Brown 2004, Hallén and Johanson 2004, Perrin-Martinenq 2004). Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997) have divided the reasons for business relationship dissolution into two groups: *predisposing factors* and *precipitating events*. The former can be further divided into *task-related*, *actor-related*, *relationship-related* and *network-related* factors. Precipitating events, in turn, refer to critical incidents (e.g.

Edvardsson 1988; Roos and Strandvik 1996) in relationship evolution. They may originate from the parties involved, from the relation, from the network or from the economic situation (Mittilä 2000). The causes of dissolution are affected by attenuating factors, which may be actor, relationship or network related factors. (Tähtinen 1999, 2001).

Lehtinen and Mittilä (1995) have suggested that attraction influences the willingness to terminate a relationship. Attraction has a central role in explaining why customers visit online communities as well as why they end a relationship. The phenomenon explaining why customers end their relationships can be referred to as 'non-attraction' of online communities. Non-attraction can be logically seen as an opposite phenomenon to attraction and is regarded as *factors that drive away members from an online community*. Therefore, we next focus on attraction before scrutinizing non-attraction.

Attraction

Traditionally, attraction is seen as an interpersonal phenomenon, which has been studied in social psychology and in marketing. It has received the greatest attention within social exchange theory where Homans (1961) and Thibaut and Kelley (1959) depict the interaction between people as an exchange, in which feelings like devotion or love are exchangeable. Because of that, attraction's determinants have been viewed as primarily social in nature. In social psychology attraction is defined to mean attraction, devotion or love towards another person or group. Attraction is seen as an important element in group formation, because attraction power increases cohesion in groups and also defines their limits. Furthermore, attraction has been studied as a tool of sociometry research. (Eskola 1984, 129)

Attraction has also been researched in the context of personal selling and negotiations, when the main focus is in the attraction between two persons. Then, attraction can be seen as an inter-firm phenomenon as well. (Mittilä 2000, 55-56). According to Halinen (1994, 76), attraction may be viewed as a company's interest in exchange with another based on the economic and social reward-cost outcomes expected from a relationship over time. Referring to Mittilä (2000, 56), when considering relations, attraction is always based on expectations and references and presumed satisfaction. In older relationships, the experiences and the involvement as well as other factors outside the relationship also affect it. Consequently, attraction can be considered a very strongly future-oriented concept.

In business relations it is recommendable to consider both collective and individual attraction. At the collective level attraction can be seen as *a company's interest in co-operation with another actor*. At the individual level attraction is an *individual's interest in personal intercommunication*. When considering businesses, attraction can also be directed towards the product (goods/service) itself. In this situation, attraction can be seen as an actor's interest in creating value through acquisition or utilisation of the product. Attraction to the producer or to the customer of the product plays minor role in relations in that case. (Mittilä 2000, 56)

As Mittilä (2000, 56) pointed out, attraction can be directed towards the product (goods/service) itself. In this study, company online community is considered to be a service product. Because of studying attraction from a product's point of view, attraction is defined

here as *an online community's ability to draw members*. An online community consists of many elements: actors (members and maintainers), purpose, culture and information systems. Because of the wide variety of different online communities, members compare different communities and choose the one that is most attractive. For this reason attraction factors can be considered as relational factors explaining why one online community is more attractive than the others.

Based on a case study of four online communities Mäntymäki (forthcoming) has built an Attraction model depicted in Table 1. To produce a holistic picture she studied both the members and the maintainers of the communities. The model includes three elements: different community relations, i.e. attraction dyads; the type of attraction, i.e. whether attraction is related to a member as an individual or as a social entity; and the attraction factors. The four dyads are member-to-member, member-to-maintainer, member-to-service and member-to-brand. The attraction factors are classified according to members' self-related and social related type of attraction. Self-related attraction refers to the type of attraction that does necessarily not require another people. On the contrary, socially related attraction forms in interaction between at least two members (see Mc Kenna and Bargh 1999).

Non-attraction of an online community

As a result of our empirical study we present our findings of the reasons to stop visiting online communities and the non-attraction factors abstracted from them, and relate our classification with the factors identified by Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997). We also compare non-attraction factors identified in this study with attraction factors identified by Mäntymäki (forthcoming).

Reasons for leaving the community

One of the major reasons to stop visiting an online community was related to the change in interest or life situation. This refers to a situation where a member's life situation or interest changes, and therefore, the online community is not interesting anymore, which leads to end the relationship. We labelled the reason *uninteresting information*.

In some online communities the purpose of the visit is strongly related to some life situation, for example, in a discussion forum dedicated for weddings. As one of the respondents stated, although an online community was excellent, after the wedding she doesn't have a need to visit the sites anymore. Another respondent said that sometimes the current topics are not interesting, and therefore, she ends the relationship. However, this factor is more related to the members' own motivations, not derived from the community itself.

The quality or amount of discussion was mentioned as a reason for ending visits. The reasons under this theme varied from too incoherent discussions outside the actual topic to the claims of inappropriate discussions and provocative discussers. Also the reason that same questions and topics started to repeat caused some respondent to end the relationship. Thus, an online community's inability to change and generate new topics was also mentioned as a reason for relationship dissolution. As the respondents indicated, moderators have the power to affect

the quality of discussions. In some cases too slack moderating affected that the quality was considered bad.

Furthermore, one of the reasons for ending the relationship was *other members*. If a member does not feel being at the same mental level with other members he or she may end the relationship. On the other hand, if other members do not produce interesting opinions or contribution to discussions the situation is the same. All in all, the feeling of giving something and getting something in return for own activity, is essential to motivate the members to create and maintain the relationship with an online community.

Some of the respondents indicated that they had “got fed up with other members”. Along with the time, some members end their relationships as new ones come which, for example, may remarkably change the members’ age structure.

In some cases there had actually been conflicts between members which had lead to the relationship dissolution. This reason type differed from *other members* type because it included a conflict in some relationships. Hence, this reason was named as *relationships between members*.

Also the general *atmosphere* of the forum was a reason to end a relationship. For example, if other members constitute a clannish group, the atmosphere was considered bad. Other mentioned reasons were, for example, racism towards some group of people.

Inaccuracy of rules may as well be a reason to end member visits. Either members stop visiting themselves or they are forced to end the visits by a moderator. For example, one of the respondents said that rules are unclear and they are applied arbitrarily in some forums. In such a situation, members may be uncertain of what they are allowed to write and what is considered inappropriate. Furthermore, it was indicated that some forum had asked members to register again which led the respondent to end the relationship.

Finally, the *functioning* of the online community sites seems to be a reason to stop visiting the community. The respondents said that if the software used is slow or otherwise unsuitable for the visitor’s equipment, the reading is too complicated.

Non-attraction factors

In the further classification of the reasons into non-attraction factor categories we could identify four classes. First, there is the *content* category which refers to the attractiveness of the topics of the community as well as the quality of discussion. The second category is labelled *memberships*. It includes both member actors and relationships among members. The third non-attraction factor can be labelled *culture*. At the operative level this materialized in the atmosphere and in the rules as well as in moderators’ behaviour. The last category can be labelled *usability*. It includes both technical and member specific competence reasons for relationship dissolution.

For further analysis, we use Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila’s (1997) model of the predisposing factors of relationship ending. The authors further divided the factors into *task*-related, *actor*-related, *relationship*-related and *network*- related factors. We leave out the precipitating

events because they refer to the critical incidents which could not be evidenced by the empirical data. We next relate Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's (1997) factor classification to ours.

In the studied context, task-related factors refer to the reason a visitor enters a community in the first place. It may be information seeking, looking for social contacts, entertainment etc. When the task is fulfilled, the interest in the community disappears, i.e., the content of the community sites becomes unattractive. Therefore, we include the task-related factors in the content factor.

Actor-related factors in an online community may refer to a maintainer, to a specific visitor as well as other members of the community and to a web site itself. In this context, there are also multiple relations and relationships; those between a member and a maintainer, among members and between visitors and their equipment with which they come in contact with the virtual world. To emphasize the human side of the community we use the term membership factor, which includes both members and their relationships. Technical actors are included in our usability factor.

Network-related factors in Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's (1997) model refer to a wider network of other actors affecting the ending of a relationship. In our study's context, this kind of effect did not occur. However, an online community is a networked collective relationship where intra network factors could be detected as in the case when members build a clannish group. We include these network-related factors in our membership factor.

The culture factor identified in our study could be included in the relationship factor in Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's (1997) model. However, the context of the two studies differs to a great extent. In a consumer setting and especially in an online setting it is easy to act on feelings. Therefore, we stress the cultural aspects of a collective relationship. Furthermore, in an online community there are so many relations and relationships each of which may have a culture of their own.

In the online context the role of technology is decisive. Therefore, it is an important factor affecting the attractiveness or unattractiveness of an online community. Naturally, if we wanted to use Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's model, usability could be discussed under actor-related or network-related factors in which case we were talking about virtual networks from the technical point of view.

Attraction versus non-attraction factors

To depict the differences between attraction and non-attraction of online communities we utilised Mäntymäki's (forthcoming) Attraction model. Reasons for non-attraction identified in the study are marked with the bolded font and darker colour.

Table 1. Differences between attraction and non-attraction

ATTRACTION DYADS	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self- / social related</i>	Information from members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
	<i>Social related</i>	Similarity
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self- / social related</i>	Information from the maintainer
	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Availability
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
	<i>Self-related</i>	
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Image

In classifying the non-attraction factors following the Attraction factor model some problems raised because non-attraction factors can be positioned in several categories due to the fine-grained structure of the Attraction model. For example, in the *content* factor of the non-attraction, uninteresting information may refer to information from members or information from the maintainer or as well the maintainer's either members' content. Furthermore, quality or amount of discussion may refer either to valuable discussions or information obtained through discussions from members or maintainers, which are two different factors in the Attraction model. In the *membership* factor, other members may refer to friendships or similarity. Inaccuracy of rules which affects the atmosphere is pointed to the maintainer's content in the attraction model. The *usability* factor is the same in the attraction model.

The *Atmosphere* factor is a sum of many reasons and therefore problematic to position in the model. Atmosphere is not mentioned as an attraction factor in Mäntymäki's (forthcoming) model.

Conclusions and future research paths

Basically, relationship marketing with online communities differs in two ways from the traditional relationship marketing. The medium and the relations vary from the traditional ones. Because of the development of the Internet and especially online communities, *c-to-c interaction* has enhanced dramatically which has led to the increased power of word-of-mouth or 'word-of-mouse'. A relation between a member and an online community is totally based on customers own choice and will to visit the site. Furthermore, a relation or a

relationship is extremely easy to end. To dissolve the relation members only need to be passive and stop visiting an online community.

Factors affecting relationship dissolution have been studied in the b-to-b context. Factors affecting the abundance of a company online community seem to be somewhat different. Comparing our results to the Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's (1997) model, the role of technical usability of the community sites and community culture were new categories of predisposing factors of relation dissolution. The precipitating events that Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila's (1997) model also included were left out because they refer to the critical incidents, which we were not able to evidence by the empirical data. However, the empirical data implies that relationship ending also in the online community context seems to happen little by little rather than as a result of some specific incident.

It seems that people have many different reasons to join the community while the reasons leaving it are fewer and more holistic in their nature. Managers should, in addition to understanding why people visit their community also know why people leave it to be able to ensure member satisfaction and customer retention.

Studying relationship ending from the non-attraction perspective is an innovative way of looking at the phenomenon which especially in the online context seems to be appropriate. Further research could utilise not only non-attraction factors and reasons but also Attraction model to gain deeper understanding of the reasons leading to online community abandon.

We have only opened a door to a research field. Further studies and deeper analysis is needed to increase our understanding about attraction and non-attraction of online communities. Both qualitative and quantitative studies should be welcomed to develop the theory.

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