Back to the Future
of Online Community:

A brief history of where we have been and where we are going

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www.leadernetworks.com

Why am I telling the community history story?

I have seen the history unfold!

– Community builder since 1991 – an academic researcher and management consultant (CEO of Leader Networks)

– Worked with 260+ online communities. Over 20 million members across 110 organizations, 10,000+ online community managers trained.

– And believe that unless we understand the past, we can't advance in the future.

I believe in sharing what I've learned

✓ 3 books, 4 eBooks and 150+ reports

✓ Been a source of community evolution for many channels… *Harvard Business Review, The New York Times, Forbes, The Wall Street Journal,* and *The Economist*

✓ I teach Knowledge Management at Columbia University (and run a community consultancy).

About Leader Networks

- Leader Networks is a research and consulting firm that helps companies use digital and social technologies to gain competitive advantage. We work alongside our clients to develop digital business strategies, launch new digital products and business models, create and grow online communities, and craft social selling campaigns and operations. Our efforts pay off – by enabling organizations to better engage their customers, drive new product and service innovations, reduce costs, and boost shareholder value.

- Our clients include some of the world's best-known companies – from Cisco Systems, Hitachi, Hewlett-Packard, and Royal Dutch Shell to Fidelity, Thomson Reuters, Company, and the World Bank. They also include forward-thinking associations like The Children's Hospitals Network and National Congress of State Legislators.

Where We Are Going Today

1. The history of online community

2. Remarkable happenings in our industry

3. Trends that shape the future

Online Community: Where it all began...

- **1950's and 1960's marked the Russian Arms Race and the US was behind.**

  - Russians tested an atom bomb (1949), tested the first hydrogen bomb (1953), and launched Sputnik into orbit (1957). Russians beat the Americans into space.

  - US was concerned that there was no centralized network for "Command and Control" if a crisis occurred.

- **US government created an organization called the "Advanced Research Projects Agency" (ARPA) to create the centralized communication network.**

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ARPANET

- The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was a packet switching network and the first use TCP/IP.

- The vision was to connect networks with other networks and create an "Intergalactic Computer Network."

- The National Science Foundation created NSFnet that was only open to government and research organizations until early 1990's.

The Very First User Guidelines

It is considered illegal to use the ARPANet for anything which is not in direct support of Government business ... personal messages to other ARPANet subscribers (for example, to arrange a get-together or check and say a friendly hello) are generally not considered harmful ... Sending electronic mail over the ARPANet for commercial profit or political purposes is both anti-social and illegal. By sending such messages, you can offend many people, and it is possible to get MIT in serious trouble with the Government agencies which manage the ARPANet.

Supercomputers

- The government awarded a contract to Bolt Baranek and Newman to build Interface Message Processors (IMP) in 1968.

- They used Honeywell DDP-516's with 1*2K memory* as the connection and interface device.

- These computers were placed at four colleges. UCLA, Stanford, UCSB and the University of Utah were the first universities to interconnect these "super computers."

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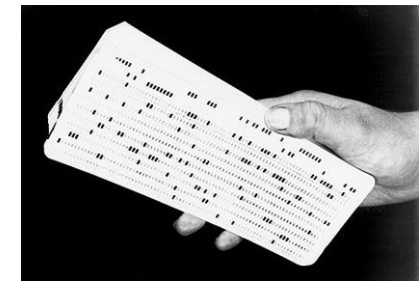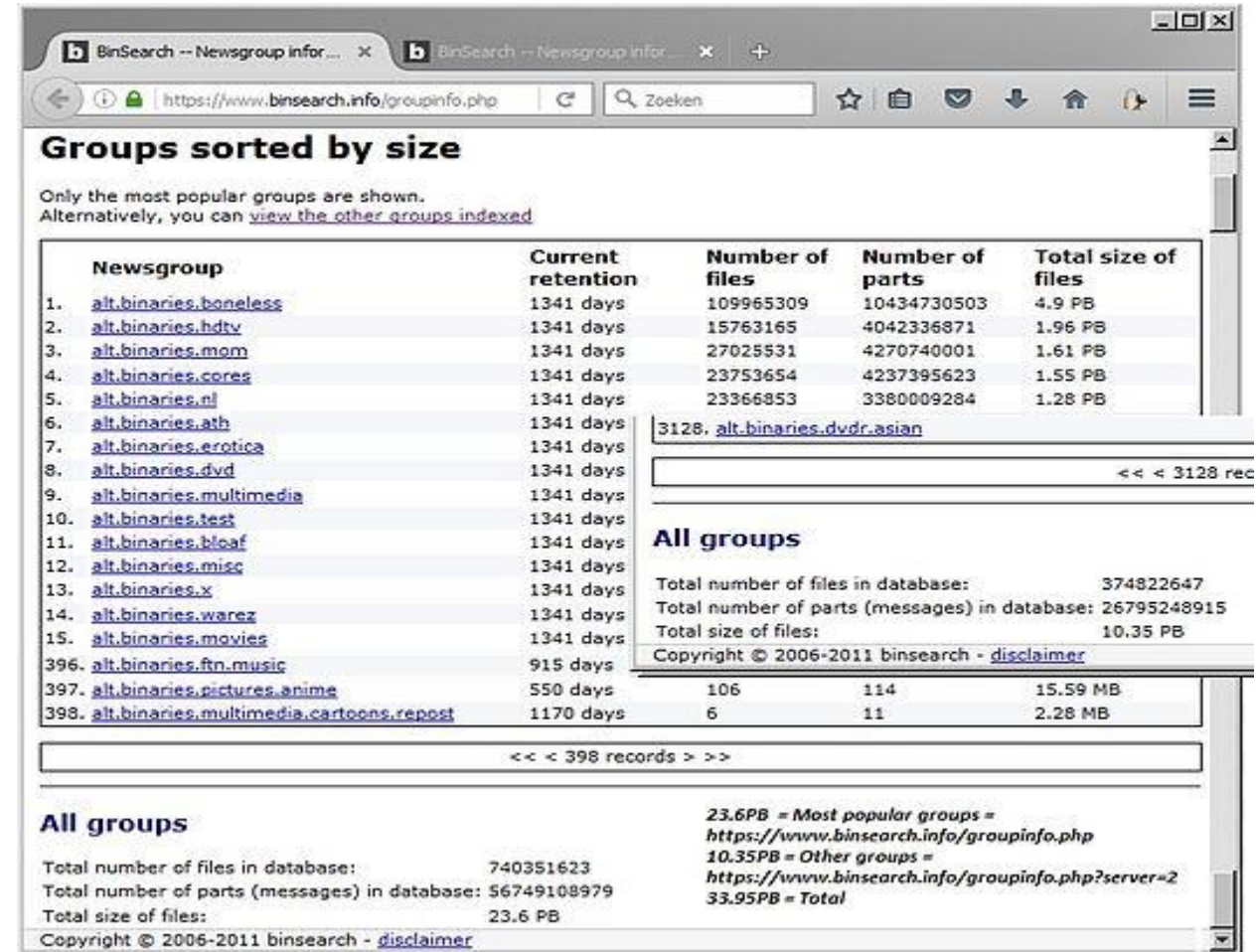
A VT Terminal 100 Personal Computer

BBS, Chat Groups and IRCs

- Usenet News, like a bulletin board, provides open areas for discussion of topics clustered in hierarchies.

- Chat systems, instant messaging and texting systems are synchronous (live)

- *Like Twitter only organized better!*

By FlippyFlink - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18375196

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The Well Was the First Online Community

Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant founded the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link in 1985, starting with a dialog between the writers and readers of the Whole Earth Review.
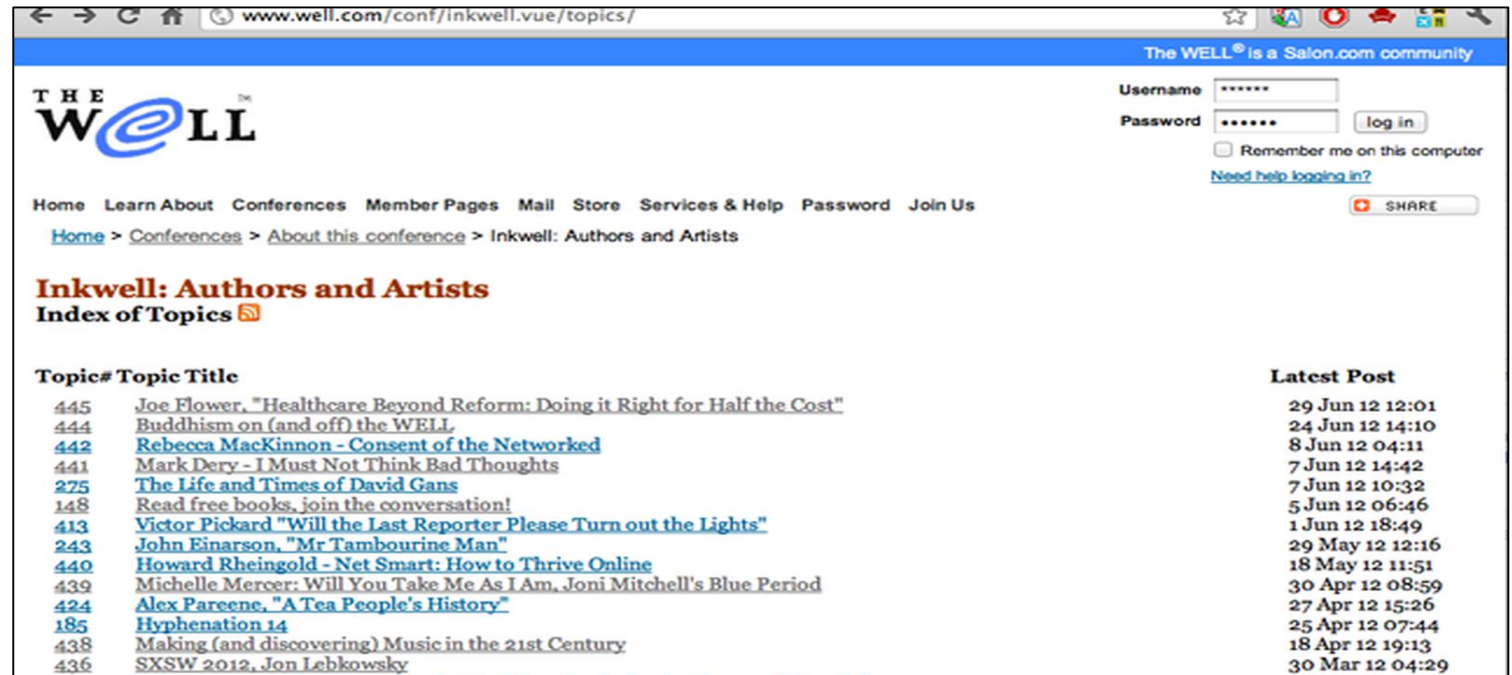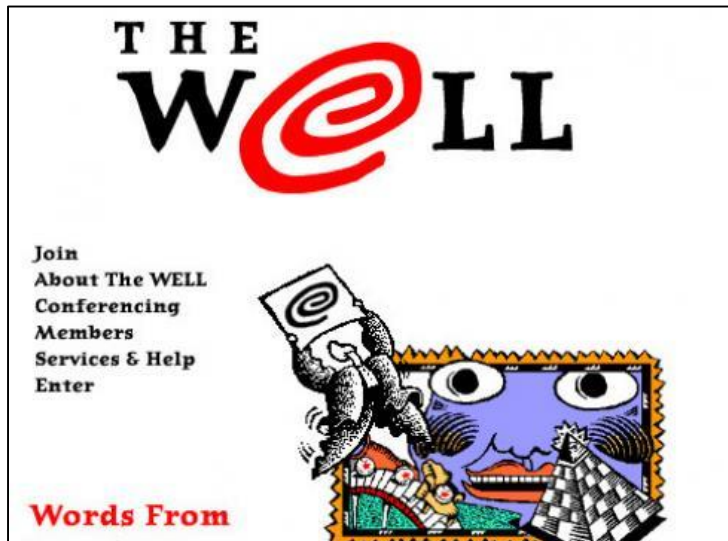
1980's – 1990's: Educators and researchers were the first to embrace community

We wondered…

How does it work?

What can we learn?

Who benefits?

What should we call it?

What does community mean to culture and society?

Online Community Foundations

| Pre-World Wide Web | 1997 | | 1997 | | 1998 |
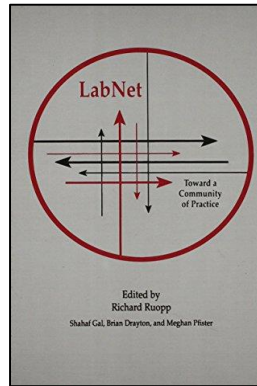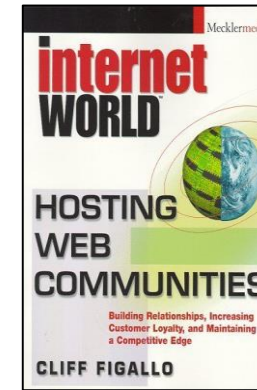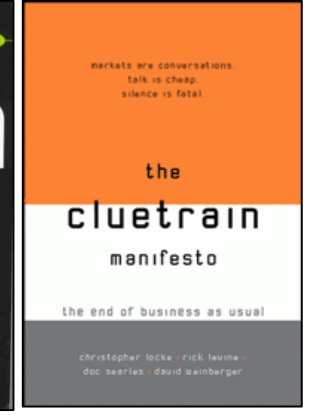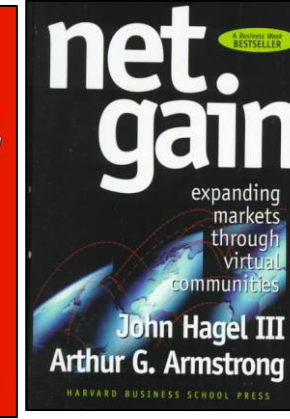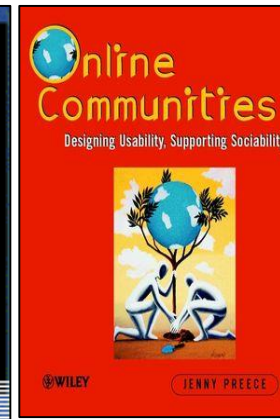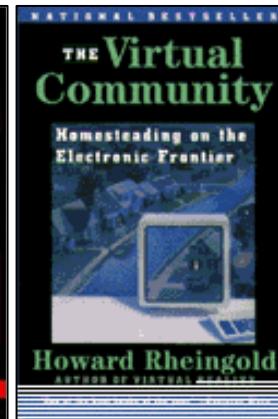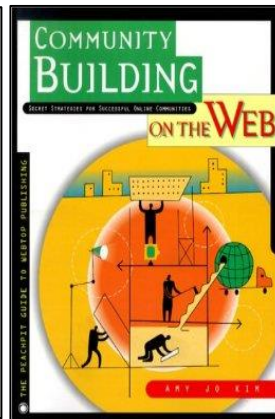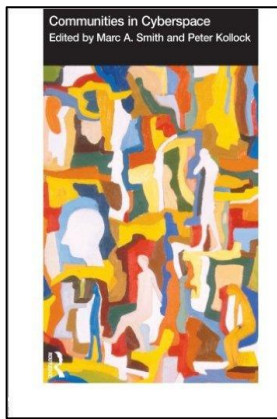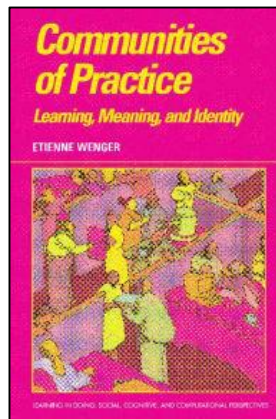
LabNet was a prototype teacher-support project developed by TERC, and funded by the National Science Foundation, is dedicated to understanding the impact of online learning and knowledge transfer. The first three year phase of LabNet began in January 1989 and ended in mid-1992.

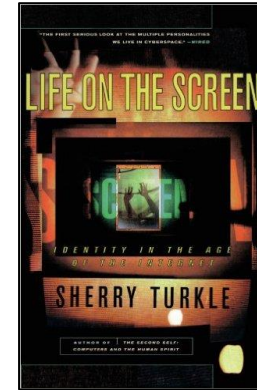*"The most notable use of new technology in the LabNet project is telecommunications—computer-to-computer communication via telephone lines."*
source: https://www.scribd.com/document/72668105/Zhao-Review
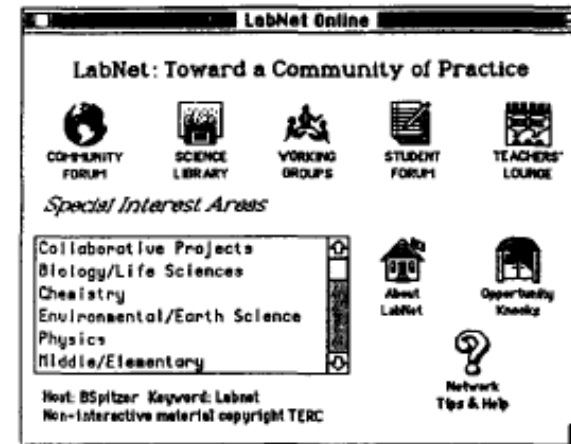
Fig. 1. Map of the LabNet area on AOL.
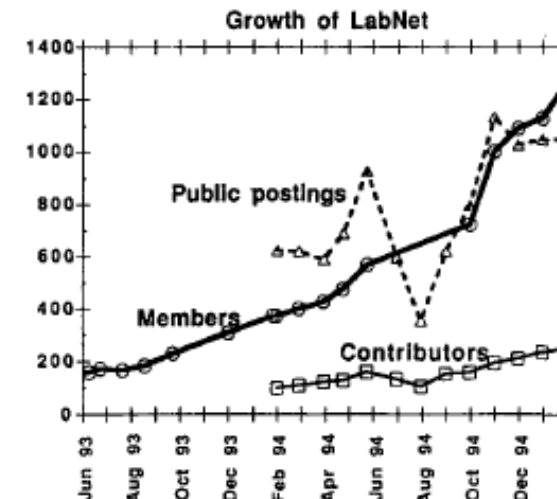
Fig. 2. "Members" represents the number of teachers who have access to the LabNet area on AOL. "Public Postings" represents the total number of postings per month to the public message boards. "Contributors" represents the number of teachers each month who have posted at least once to a public message board during that month.

The First Manual For Online Community Facilitation (1993)

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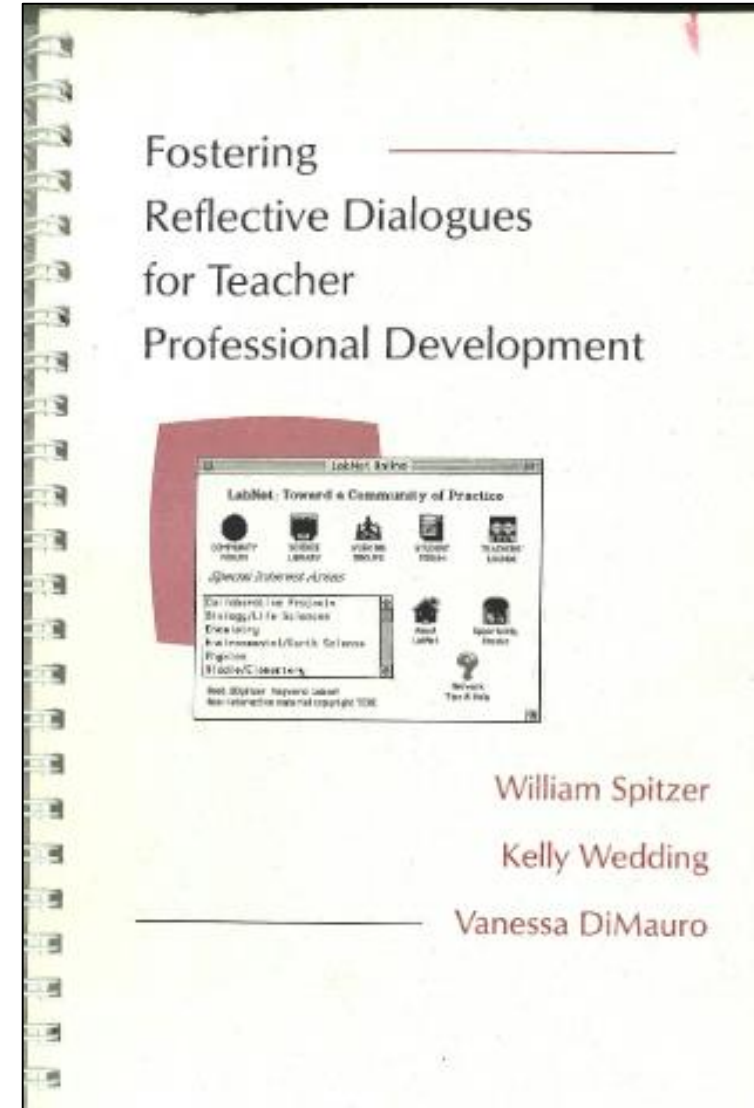
The SEE Method for Community Facilitation

Explicit goals: Helping members to SEE

To create a vibrant, network that takes place largely online

Support Knowledge Exchange

Encourage Being Visible Online

Enable Access to Tools and Resources

Moderator Tactics to Help Members SEE

Main goal	Key action
Discover members	Introduce self and email them short overview of group Give members a go-to resource (you)
Educate members	Offer monthly tour or informal discussion to members to help them get involved
Involve members	Ask individuals for documents, opinions, posts and interviews to share with the community
Connect members	Point people to valuable resources, discussions and resources on a quasi-personalized way to help
Reward members	Reinforce community-enhancing behaviors by thanking members, featuring members, sending "knowledge-gifts" or access to special events.

Howard Rheingold

Howard coined the term "virtual community" in 1993 in his book *The Virtual Community* which documented his experiences on The Well community and the cultural and political implications of a new communications medium.

Enter The World Wide Web

"The World Wide Web (abbreviated WWW or the Web) is an information space where documents and other web resources are identified by Uniform Resource Locators (URLs), interlinked by hypertext links, and can be accessed via the Internet."

Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989. He wrote the first web browser computer program in 1990.

The Web inspired the proliferation of community via AOL, Delphi and other browser-based commercial platforms.

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Cambridge Information Network - 1995

- CIN was the world's largest exclusive online community for CIOs and other senior IT executives

- Over 10,000 members from over 50 countries, 3000 members in Europe

- CIN members represented over $300+ billion purchasing power

Gaming

We went from this….   **To this…**

Community Goes Commercial!
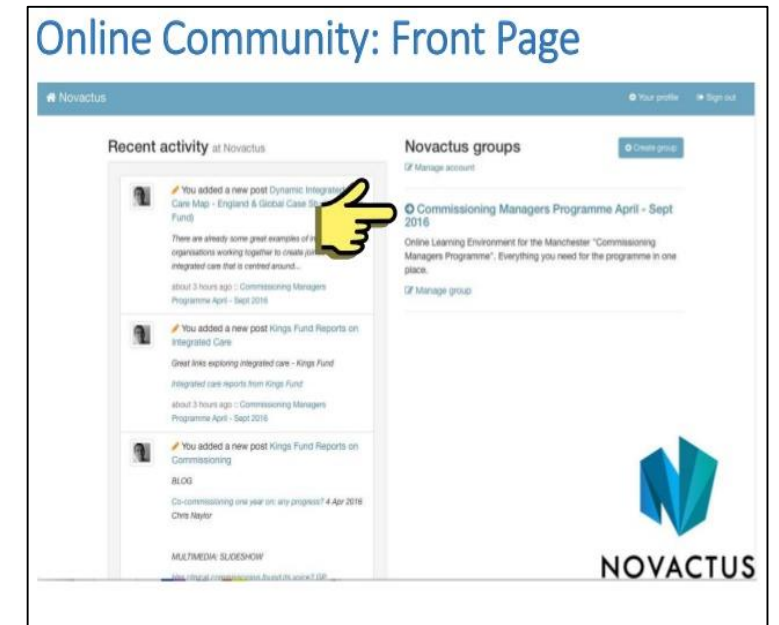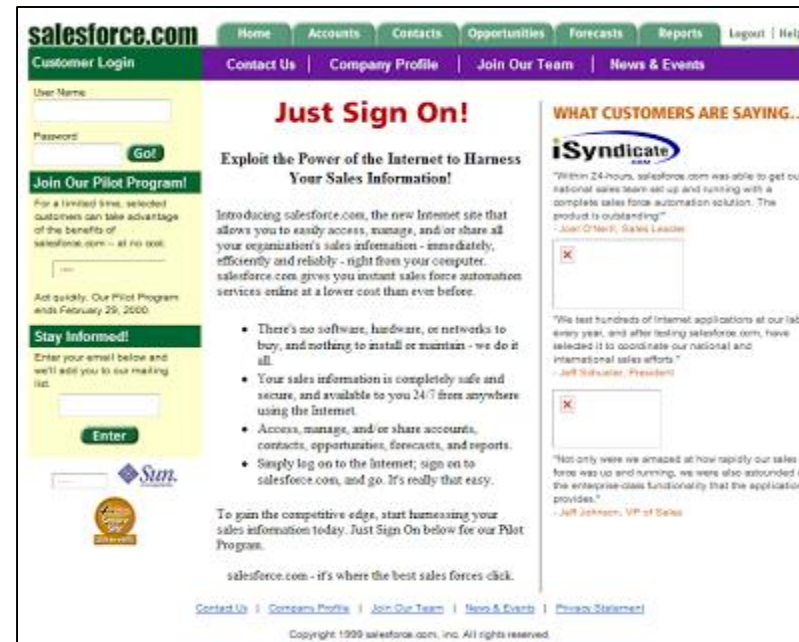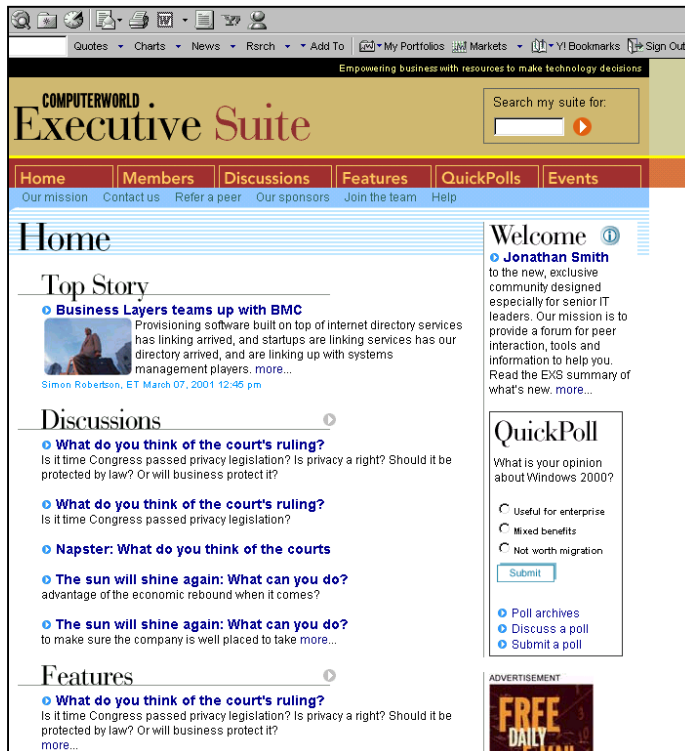
VerticalNet: The First Community Bubble

Founded in 1995, Verticalnet became famous during the Dotcom bubble for its $12 Billion valuation in early 2000, at a time when the company had few tangible assets and a revenue stream of only $112.5 million.

At the peak of its valuation, VerticalNet operated a few B2B portals, plus more than 50 internet business-to-business trading communities as well as professional communities.

Online Customer Communities: 3 Models

Professional Collaboration

• **Goal**: Helping customers solve longer-term issues that involve your products/services

• **Methods**: Participation in studies; providing white papers and other articles; holding webinars; etc.

• **Typical community hosts**: Firms whose customers are professionals who need to share information to stay current in their fields

Shop Talk

• **Goal**: Helping customers troubleshoot transactional problems with your products/services

• **Methods**: Organized discussion forums that allow viewers to share knowledge

• **Typical community hosts**: IT companies whose customers help other customers solve technical problems

Information Dissemination

• **Goal**: Keeping customers informed on your products/services and how to use them

• **Methods**: Company-written blogs with comments; using Twitter and other social media tools to broadcast information

• **Typical community hosts**: Regulated industries, topics where engagement is unlikely to be high

Cluetrain Manifesto

1. Markets are conversations.

6. The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.

33. Learning to speak with a human voice is not a parlor trick. It can't be "picked up" at some tony conference.

34. To speak with a human voice, companies must share the concerns of their communities.

35. But first, they must belong to a community.

36. Companies must ask themselves where their corporate cultures end.

37. If their cultures end before the community begins, they will have no market.

38. Human communities are based on discourse — on human speech about human concerns.

39. The community of discourse *is* the market.

40. Companies that do not belong to a community of discourse will die.
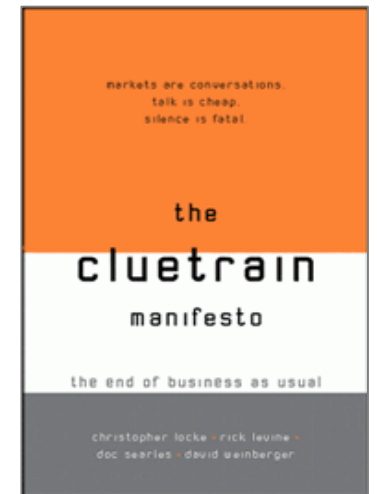
@vdimauro

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT COMMUNITY OVER THE DECADES?

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INTENTIONAL

From Research and Experience, We See Six Reasons Why Firms Launch Online Customer Communities

Customer-Facing Business Functions

Product Groups

Sales

Online Customer Community

Product Development

Marketing

Customer Service

To help customers get more value from their products and services

To improve the way they enhance products and services

To get control of the social media conversations about their firm

To develop better _new_ products and services

To market and sell more effectively

To reduce the cost of post-sale service

Online Community Trajectory

@vdimauro

Growth Phase - Ongoing
- Community growth planning
- Transition planning
- Governance and metrics

Launch Phase - Operational
- Design platform features & functionality
- Engaging, retaining & growing membership
- Content co-planning
- Community best practices roadmap

Grow and Monetize
- Inadequate customer support
- Member fragmentation
- Weak community leadership
- Missing performance metrics

Planning Phase - Strategic
- Business plan
- Member requirements
- Competitive benchmarking
- Positive positioning & validation

Launch
- Technology delivery failure
- Poor membership outreach response
- Content planning delays
- Insufficient member engagement resources

Beta Launch
- Incorrect ROI assumptions
- Misaligned membership requirements
- Competitive overlap
- Brand confusion

Risks

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Where We Are Going

❖**Shift toward universality, diversity and access**

❖**Return to human factors**

❖**Measurement and standards**

❖**Governance and centralization (e.g. federated)**

❖**Integrated**

Useful, Usable and Engaging

Easy to use

Helps solve problems

Community Success

Saves time

Evolving

Select Resources and Research On Online Community From Leader Networks

- **The Business Impact Of Online Communities**

- **Keys To Community Readiness and Growth Study**

- **The Social Consumer Study**

- **Customer Intimacy on Steroids: Why B2B companies need to build customer communities**

- **Your Roadmap to Building Online Community**

- **The Big List of B2B Online Communities Infographic**

- **Digital Transformation Strategy Map**

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