

The Beckström Starfish Report



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Starfish Principles at Work - Neighborhood America

We interviewed Kim Kobza of [Neighborhood America](#) to learn how they apply starfish principles.

Neighborhood America has built a business around social networks that you call high value communities. What are high value communities?

These are communities with a specific purpose, as opposed to traditional social networks that are designed and built for creating relationships amongst people. In high value communities, there is a very clearly defined purpose, and the communities are designed to achieve that result, whether it be better health care, better transportation projects, or in the commerce communities, better product and service delivery, better decisions, better partner support.

How do you create communities that can transform the collective wisdom of consumers into actionable business intelligence for the hosting business organization?

Establish Clear Expectations

For a community network to have value for a business, it must also be beneficial for the members. Participants in a high value community have to feel like they can make a difference. When a business considers building an online community to drive value, it needs to consider the same behaviors that drive participation in physical communities. For example, there needs to be clear expectations. A business can tell a consumer base, "We're establishing a consumer community, and the purpose is to listen to you. We'd like to engage you in a discussion of how we can better serve you, and create better products and services. We'd like you to provide us with feedback, and on the basis of that feedback we're going to do the following..." So the consumer has a very clear expectation of what's in it for them. This principle also works for an employee community, a partner community, or stakeholders in a business.

Build Trust

Also, the business needs to build a trusted relationship with its community. Trust needs to be much more than just the feeling of integrity. Stephen Covey addresses this in his recent book, *The Speed of Trust*. He says creating trust is about getting results. When businesses build communities, they have to do so in a way that produces results for their members, so they satisfy their members' desire to make a difference.

Create Structure

A distinguishing characteristic in high value communities to achieve trust is structure, both from a technology and an organizational standpoint. This involves all forms of data, delivered across all types of devices, properly categorized and reportable. You can use analytics—things that provide meaning to data. Review of content prior to publication would be another element of structure.

All of us have specific products and services we use which could motivate us to participate in a community. For me, the obvious one is the airline industry. I do an extensive amount of travel, and every time I come away feeling that things could work so much better if the airline would just listen to the travelers. Virtually every organization, whether in the area of government, health care, education, media or the corporate environment, can benefit in some way from community.

This relates to one of the theses in *The Starfish*: that listening to and drawing from the collective consciousness of many to help us make decisions is much more powerful than internal decision making in a more isolated environment. And if you do it wrong, it can be just as powerful in a negative way. If you fail, and don't deliver on the promises made to your community, or if you don't meet expectations and don't do what you said you would do, that can be powerfully negative.

How does Neighborhood America help businesses avoid such a negative result?

We provide a platform in a Net-Native Software as Service (SaS) model, which means that we provide, on scale, the application—the tier one infrastructure for engineering and service. This includes all the best practices from the knowledge we've learned by building these communities over a long period of time. We think the model of software service is perfect for community building. Any organization that is building high value communities and wants to be trusted needs to employ security of data and privacy principles. The many promises you make depend on the technology model. That's why the Net-Native SaS model is particularly appropriate for community building. Outside of search, this is the fastest growing segment of the technology industry today.

This concept may be foreign to many businesses. We say we listen, but do we really? We send surveys out, and may utilize a CRM system for intake of customer comments, but in the context of a traditionally engineered process, we don't really listen. The big change that's taking place today is that we're starting to understand that there's value in that listening, and now we can actually do it on scale, and reach customers we never would have reached before.

Again, books like *The Starfish* help lead us towards an understanding that there is business value in developing listening behaviors. It goes toward the trust that is absolutely critical in a high value community. All of these changes are converging in our society and in our technology industry at the same time to create some really exciting opportunities. They promise to re-architect the way we do business and the way we govern.

You have said that leadership is critically important in high value communities to encourage the free exchange of ideas and content. How would you compare the leadership style needed to make this happen with the catalyst type of leadership described in *The Starfish and the Spider*? The importance of catalysts is that they convey the sense of the possible when they connect people with each other. So the connectedness is very critical. It's a leadership style where you try to involve more and more people, in a trusted way, into a community. As opposed to the common autocratic leadership style, the catalyst is becoming a much more acceptable leadership style within these communities, because they inherently understand the value of connecting the members within the community. And they value all the members equally, in the sense that they don't rank them—they're assuming that each member brings a diverse experience to the community, and though different, no one experience is less valuable than another.

Catalysts also promote a very clear sense of vision, and a very clear sense of the possible in terms of what can actually be achieved with the community. The catalyst as a leader is critical to the success of a high value community.

Conclusion

The real opportunity here is to use the understanding of community to create engagement which drives a much more meaningful value. Organizations that are doing this well, and really master community building and engagement, will have a very pronounced competitive advantage over those that do not. The successful organizations will have achieved an emotional engagement with their

consumers. That will be the real economic engine in our future, and the same applies in governance models as well.

A city, county or state that really listens to its citizens will be able to make better decisions, leading to a higher quality life and service delivery on the part of government; and will have a competitive advantage in recruiting new businesses and attracting the most skilled and talented people. This is a big change that will happen in our world. It will transform everything we do, in every business, agency, health care organization, and educational system.

If you look at this on a global basis, those countries that listen to their citizens well will be relatively competitive to those countries that do not. Countries with emerging economies that embrace community building and collective intelligence will grow at faster rates than those that do not.

At Neighborhood America we've built highly scalable systems to enable the building of these types of communities. That's what's going to be required for change. It's not going to be enough to throw a Facebook or MySpace type site at these types of challenges. You're going to need a much more highly engineered technology, platform, and way to deliver it, with the services and understanding for successfully building high value communities that will benefit all who are involved.

Kim Patrick Kobza is President and CEO of Neighborhood America. Learn more about how this innovative company uses starfish principles to enable business, media and government to build social networks at an enterprise level at NeighborhoodAmerica.com.

An example of one application of Neighborhood America's ideas for social networking is available at connect2elect.com, where you can quickly discover which political candidates are most (and least) aligned with you on a highly personalized level.