

# WINNING OVER THE PROSUMERS:

CRAFTING A  
COMMUNITY  
THAT DRIVES  
BRAND LOVE



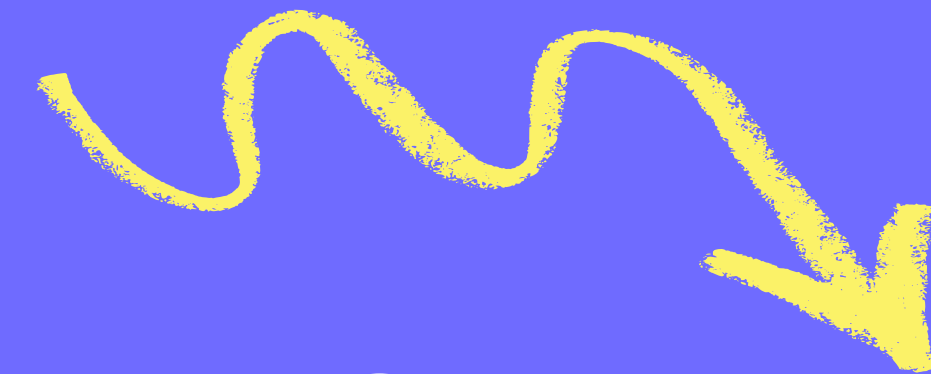
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The ongoing pandemic has brought about a consumer revolution, delivering as much change in 18 months as we might usually expect over five years or more. At its most basic level, the onset of COVID-19 has altered many of our shopping habits as we adapted to social distancing. According to the EY Future Consumer Index Report, 43% of shoppers now feel uncomfortable to physically enter shops due to COVID-19. That's a big change in itself.

Consumers now realise that they have real power and can be a part of setting the agenda for brands. Don't feel comfortable going into stores? We'll switch to delivery or contactless click-and-collect. Want businesses to make more ethical choices? We'll stop buying if they get it wrong. Product choice not up to scratch? We'll tell them directly what we need in our lives.



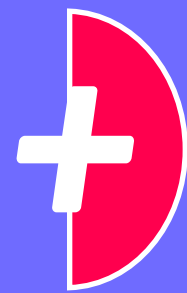
Here we explore how to win over this new breed of consumer who wants to be an active part of brands' stories and help shape the companies they care about – the prosumers.



# WHO ARE THE PROSUMERS?



The term “prosumer” was originally coined by futurist Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book “The Third Wave” and was used to describe the active role consumers might play in the commercialisation of goods. The portmanteau combines the words “producer” and “consumer” and gives a name to consumers who are increasingly able to not just decide the brands they want to buy from, but how those brands operate and what they stand for. Prosumers no longer just change companies indirectly by ‘voting with their wallets’. They also actively change brands by engaging with them directly.



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As the pandemic has moved even more of our lives online, it’s opened up increasing ways to interact directly with brands. Suddenly everyone has the ability and time to speak with the brands they care about, and many of these brands are talking back.

The pandemic has also meant economic uncertainty for many, and with that comes a reassessment of spending. Even those not hit hard financially realised that many of their regular outgoings were unnecessary when they really stopped to think about it. As consumers become more choosy about where their money goes, they increasingly trend towards becoming prosumers.

In 2021 and beyond, increasing numbers of consumers will switch over to become prosumers. People see society becoming more divided and confusing and seek brands that they can engage with and steer the direction of. New data from Sprout Social in 2021 found that 64% want brands to connect with them more and 70% feel more connected to brands with CEOs that are actively engaging with them on social. These trends predate the pandemic, but during a time of great political and societal uncertainty, consumers are increasingly looking to brands for positivity and inspiration. Brands are therefore left with both challenges and opportunities. Take the time to win over prosumers successfully and you’ll end up with not just customers, but passionate individuals ready to make your brand the best it can be.





## PLANNING YOUR BRAND COMMUNITY: *KEY PRINCIPLES FOR FINDING YOUR PROSUMER PEOPLE*

So how do you engage and reward prosumers who already love your brand, as well as attract and retain new fans? The answer is to think long-term in building a community and, crucially, opportunities for a two-way dialogue with your brand fans. There needs to be somewhere, most likely online, where your biggest advocates can both find one another and engage with you. According to Gartner, 77% of consumers started 2021 saying that they no longer feel comfortable socialising the way that they did pre-pandemic and would continue to socialise remotely, so the opportunity very much still exists. The location will differ by brand. For gaming brands this might exist on Discord, while for beauty brands it might exist on Instagram.



And this is just the first step. Building an engaged social community is important but brands can go even further by building their own ecosystem. The most successful communities exist in bespoke forums that brands create. Take the smartphone brand OnePlus as an example. From a small and dedicated community at launch, OnePlus grew their community sustainably using a system of early invitations to purchase and an owned system of forums on their website. Today, the forum acts as the go-to place to learn about new products and get exclusive access.

*Whatever the platform, there are 4 key principles for building a successful community to win over the prosumers in 2021 and beyond.*

## 1. MAKE SURE YOUR BRAND IS GENUINELY ALL EARS

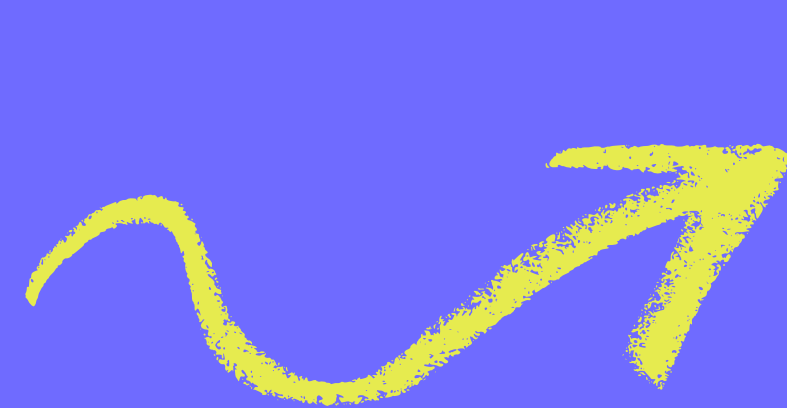
We all participate in different communities as we progress through life, whether it's with our neighbours, a hobby group, or our extended family. However, the quality of the community depends on how much you feel you are able to participate and how much you get back. In a recent survey reported in Campaign, 25% of UK consumers said that they want their favourite brands to make them feel "valued and special." This is why it's so important that the community you build is a place where your customers feel listened to. The prosumer wants to be an active part of the product journey, but this simply isn't possible if they feel their ideas are being ignored. They might participate once, but if you do not properly engage, these all-important prosumers will go off and find another brand who will. Get this right and your prosumers will help you not just develop better products or services, but become an integral part of their lives.

It's a great time to welcome back those that might be just getting back into online communities for the first time. A recent study from GWI found that 55% of previously self-identified "Digital Detoxers" have returned to social media to help them feel less anxious or stressed. Many of them left social media in the first place because connections did not feel meaningful for them. Building a community that is actively listening will help not just welcome them back, but also stick around and become the prosumers that give your brand meaningful direction.

## 2. ENCOURAGE AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is an increasingly important brand quality, particularly amongst the growing cohort of Gen Z shoppers. According to recent Stackla data, 90% of customers mention authenticity as an important factor in deciding which brands they like and support. They want the brands they engage with to be authentic, but that's also because they themselves want to live in an authentic way. After a decade of Instagram-worthy perfection, society now craves reality. This is best exemplified by the rise and rise of TikTok which actively shuns picture-perfect for rough and ready video. Last year in the UK alone, regulator OFCOM reported an increase from 5.4 million users to a whopping 12.9 million in less than a year. Content is now more about an authentic chat to camera than it is a perfectly lit photo in front of a sunset.

You've probably heard people talk about the desire to bring their 'whole selves' to their job, family, and yes, community. Any community you build, therefore, needs to be a place where everyone is accepted and celebrated, and where there is space to break outside the mould, no photo editing required.



### 3. BUILD SAFE SPACES

People cannot be their whole selves if they feel unsafe. Online interactions, particularly anonymous ones, can quickly become toxic if left unchecked. That's why it's so important that content moderation, clear enforcement policies and resources are put in place at the outset of community building. What sort of behaviour will your brand not tolerate? How will your brand determine when the speech of one group is threatening another?

This only really works if your brand also decides what you stand for proactively before you are forced by circumstances to do so reactively. This is important too because your customers now increasingly expect the brands they engage with to take a stand. Turning again to Sprout Social, 48% say that they expect brands to raise the moral standards for others, while 64% say that they want brands to use their power to help people.

These are not easy decisions, but the lines drawn must be clear and must align with your brand's values. Senior decision-makers will need to make the final call: 30% of large businesses expect content moderation policy to be a decision made by the C-suite by 2024. Meanwhile, the C-suite must also recognise that their own behaviour will impact the ability to build a network of loyal brand advocates. According to Forrester, 47% of all respondents (and 51% of Gen-Z) associate the social, environmental and political views of CEOs with those of the businesses they head up. In addition, 35% say they're more likely to trust brands when they take a stance, with 43% favouring companies that do so on social, environmental and political issues in particular.

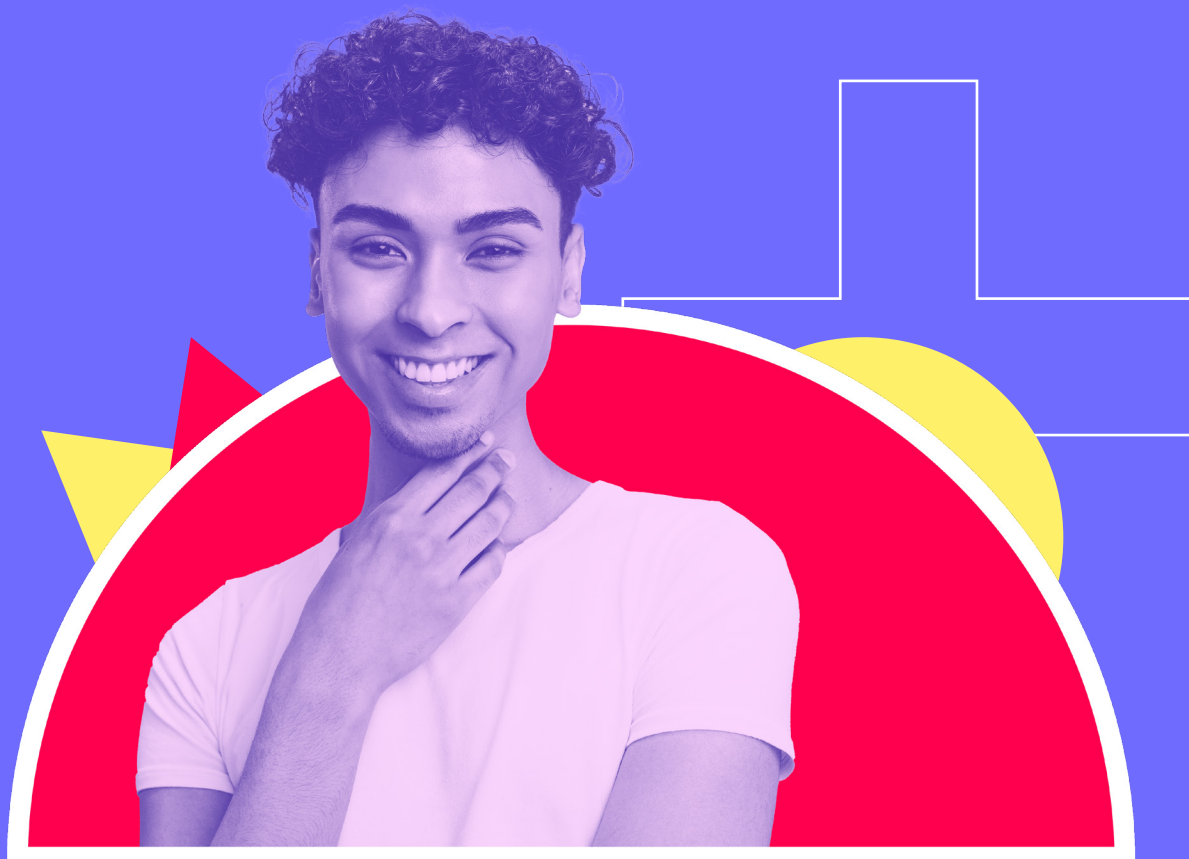
### 4. ALLOW USER-GENERATED CONTENT TO REIGN

A community where people feel listened to and where they can be their authentic self is one with strong foundations, but the real quality of a community tends to lie in the content its users produce. User-generated content, or UGC, is rightly a priority for many marketers wanting to unleash fans' creativity. Great UGC shows how your product or service impacts people in the real world. Prosumers want to hear about how products work from people like them, rather than being talked at by the brand directly.

So what's new in 2021? Whereas in previous years UGC was more of a 'one-and-done' activity with the post of a picture including the brand or a one-off tweet, the UGC of 2021 involves responses and then responses on those responses. Look at the brand challenges now taking place on TikTok, the social media platform of the moment. The best brand challenges often end as something different from how they begin as people put their own spin and evolve the challenge as it goes along.

A great example can be found in the TikTok challenges set by Budweiser. This summer, the Beer Poster trend went viral as people were challenged to put themselves into famous summer-y beer posters. This evolved as more brands got involved and celebrities put their own twists on the challenge. Prepare for your content to snowball as people have fun with your challenge.

# BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY: HOW TO WIN OVER THE PROSUMERS



*It's not easy to create a safe, authentic, joyous and creative community overnight. So once you've done the upfront groundwork how do you build your community? Here are just a few top tips:*

## 1. ALWAYS SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

Everyone loves a treat, particularly one that comes out of the blue. Little somethings to show that you care are key to winning the advocacy war and turning passive consumers into active prosumers. A little bit of love goes a long way.

But remember that this doesn't always mean giving out free products which is costly. Instead, surprises should come in the form of invitations to live events or early reveals of products. Your biggest fans will often just want to be the first to get their hands on your products for bragging rights.



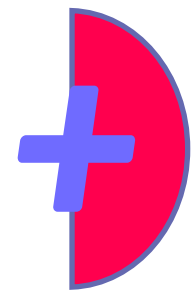
**“CLEVER AND CONSISTENT MONITORING OF YOUR COMMUNITY IS THE KEY TO FINDING AND MAKING THE MOST OF THESE SUPERFANS.”**

What matters is finding who those high-value passionate fans are so you can surprise them when the time comes. Restaurant brand Nandos does an excellent job of this with their Black Card programme of free meals. These are costly but used in a very targeted way. Clever and consistent monitoring of your community is the key to finding and making the most of these superfans.



## 2. USE EMPLOYEE VOICES

Authentic is a word we usually apply to humans, not brands. That's why it's always best to interact with your community at the human level with a variety of faces and voices. Finding real value and wisdom that your employees can impart, from the C-suite all the way to designers, packers and customer support, shows real authenticity and gives your fans something they can't get elsewhere.



**“COME TO THEM WITH THE PLAN FOR THE CONTENT YOU WANT TO CREATE AND ASK FOR THEIR COLLABORATION AND INPUT.”**

Communications teams need to engage their employees with a plan, don't leave the thinking to them when they're busy enough with the day job. Come to them with the plan for the content you want to create and ask for their collaboration and input. This takes time and effort, but the results from effectively engaging your employees and their passion points will be worth the investment.

In the world of games, take the example of external development studio Keywords Studios who put their talented artists front and centre. View their website and social channels and you can see amazing artwork produced by their animators in their spare time. It's not just great content, it shows the human side of it

## 3. THINK ABOUT TYING YOUR COMMUNITY TO A SOCIAL CAUSE

Some brands lend themselves well to a community as people come together for a common cause. Charities, for example, find it relatively easy to build a community as they act together for their charitable goals. Pet brands are also another area where building a community can be more simple. People love to share pictures of their pets and get advice for how to take care of them the best they can, which is why communities like those around pet food thrive.

Some brands can be more difficult to get people excited about. Moreover, if you sell batteries, or bleach, or bin bags, it can be harder to convince people to get involved and share. When brands face this challenge, they need to develop their purpose and CSR stories and initiatives. Consumers might not join a community about bleach, but they might join one that's all about campaigning for cleaner environments in hospitals.

Take a look at the community around Unilever's Handwashing for Life campaign. The community built is just as much about their CSR campaign to bring hand washing around the world as it is about the product. By engaging people with the causes they care about, you can get consumers into your ecosystem and build a meaningful relationship



## 4. COMMIT TO THE COMMUNITY FOR THE LONG TERM

Once a commitment has been made to set up a community of passionate brand advocates, it can be tempting to step on the accelerator and open up every possible avenue for engagement. Your ongoing strategy needs to direct your efforts to the channels with the best potential for long term engagement.

If your team is spread too thin, it is impossible to deliver the meaningful engagement that your fans will expect. Moreover if you aren't able to properly monitor and moderate a community, it risks going off-message and out of control.



**“YOU CAN ENSURE THAT THE PLAN DEVELOPED IS EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE.”**

Much like a new puppy, a community is not just for Christmas, it's for life. You need to commit to your community for the long term and understand that a badly managed or abandoned community can do more damage than no community at all.

Before establishing a strategy of building communities, it's vital to build not just a launch plan, but a plan that looks five or 10 years into the future. This plan also needs to have the buy-in from the senior team from day one so the resources are available. By engaging with an agency like us who have seen it all before, you can ensure that the plan developed is effective and sustainable.

# CONCLUSION



The evolution of consumers to prosumers will ultimately mean that brands need to work harder to win over and keep new customers. Prosumers feel more engaged in the brands they use, and so are stickier. A community where they can engage with like-minded others and feel supported, educated, entertained and inspired will build long-term brand love. Get this right and your brand can benefit from a community that not only loves your brand, but will act on your behalf to develop your brand and make it as successful as it possibly can be.

*Ready to build and evolve a community to attract and retain the prosumers? Get in contact with the team at [MIT-Europe@allisonpr.com](mailto:MIT-Europe@allisonpr.com)*



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