The rise of Community-As-A-Business model and how to make it work

Recently, I took a 3 hour train to Edinburgh to meet with 8 of the 580 members of my paid community. As we sat chatting informally about life and business, I asked them what it was that made them join and stay in my community, over the many, many others currently flooding the online business world.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Because the first thing to understand - deeply - before you decide to launch a paid community (and continue to understand throughout running your community), is WHAT people want from it. I would be the first to admit that the original iteration of my community is barely recognisable compared to what it has evolved into now, just over two years down the line.

Most of us spend far too much time living through our phones or at our computers as it is, and you want them to spend MORE time on them? There better be a good reason for it.

I see the mistake often. Communities are launching fast and failing faster, because the founder foolishly believes that it's a nice passive or low-effort, high return income. They gather a few thousands followers on a social media platform and assume that they can simply convert those followers into paying members, hop on a call with them once a week, and people will flock in their hundreds to get a piece of the action.

But, in my experience, that is NOT the case. In fact, it's kind of audacious to call it a community, if that's all you're offering. I'd be more inclined to label it a membership. The difference between the two, as I see it, is that a membership provides a service from the leaders or experts to the members. The members receive that service and they're off on their merry way, rarely opening the app unless they have a question. The relationship built is between those experts and the members, whereas a community encourages and nurtures multiway relationships, not just between the community leaders, but with each other.

And therein lies the success of the community I have built. While we provide an extensive volume and range of expert masterclasses that yes, WILL improve your business skills, and YES will save you stacks of cash buying endless courses, the true value lies in the relationships built between the community members, the knowledge and advice shared, the non-judgemental support from everyone, and the opportunities that arise to work with one another or refer work to one another.

That's also why we have such active chat channels, unlike a *lot* of other communities. The members are from a diverse range of professions and industries, meaning there's endless potential to actually become one another's clients, so they are motivated to actively network and build relationships with other people inside the safe confines of the app.

It is, in effect, a social media platform where we don't rely on algorithms to be seen and to start conversations.

So, if you're considering starting a community, let me bestow some hard-earned wisdom from the gruelling journey I've been on for the past 2.5 years, to create the coveted recurring income and steady growth we now see each month.

1. Decide who your community is for, why they need it, and whether they

realistically have time to utilise it. Speak to a sample of those people and ask what they would be motivated to buy and be part of, what reservations they may have about joining, and what they'd want to achieve that would make them stay.

2. Determine your minimum number of members to make the community worth building, and worth the time you will need to invest to maintain, nurture and grow that community. Times that number by 10 and don't launch your community until you have that many people on a waiting list.

3. Launch to a limited number of founding members, test everything, gather feedback, and make improvements before you let more people in.

4. Do NOT have the community always open. It's not about FOMO or scummy scarcity tactics. Regular launches keep people excited and interested, yes, but it is much easier as a community leader to welcome regular new groups of people, on specific days, than to let dribs and drabs in constantly. Churn rate will reduce, and sign ups will increase, when you operate a waiting list model.

5. Over-deliver on value. There is no better marketing strategy when it comes to community growth, than unexpected delight leading to glowing word-of-mouth referrals. Impress members when they arrive with smooth onboarding, warm welcomes, and lots to explore.

6. Pick a platform that will support the number of members you are aiming for long-term. I made this mistake, and it was insanely costly and time-consuming moving people to a better platform with more functionality when we outgrew the first one. I still get a sweat on thinking back to that chaotic experience. I personally *love* Heartbeat, and it's my platform of choice for my community.

7. Be present in the community, and offer opportunities and reasons for people to keep logging in and getting involved in conversations. For a lot of people who are launching a community, people are paying for proximity to that leader, at least at first. So be in there, get to know

people, answer questions, and dedicate at least an hour a day to be *in* your community. It inspires loyalty from members.

8. Set out clear rules and boundaries when it comes behaviour within the community. When we re-branded earlier this year, we asked members to feedback what they loved about the community, and the top mentioned features was how 'safe' it felt. We have a strict and well publicised 'no knobs' policy, which we are unapologetic about enforcing. A safe community is a happy community.

9. Keep innovating. Your first version of the community is not the final version. Actively listen to what members want, observe how they use different aspects of what you provide, and communicate with them, and respond to their needs. Obviously, you can't please everyone all of the time, but if you're in your community a sufficient amount of time, you will learn from members and be able to make changes that will sustain their loyalty and interest.

Communities are on a sharp rise in popularity, but few last beyond their first year, and a considerable number struggle to maintain steady growth, leading to founders becoming demotivated and giving up. But, if you have the tenacity, time and patience to build a successful community, it is an exceptionally successful and rewarding business model, both financially and personally.

It is unquestionably the best part of business for me, but it has absolutely been the hardest, too.

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