

Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Profitability...From Customer Acquisition to Advocacy

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

An Interview with Mark Yolton, Senior Vice President, SAP Community Network, SAP

Since SAP launched its online community initiatives six years ago, the SAP Community Network has evolved from the SAP developer network (SDN) into five unique communities with more 1.7 million members in 200 countries and territories around the world, in occupations as varied as IT professionals, systems administrators, business process experts, students, university professors, and others who work with SAP's enterprise software. The senior vice president of SAP's community network, Mark Yolton, recently caught up with Frost & Sullivan's eBulletin editor, Erin Lindholm, to discuss the online sharing of best practices, co-innovation and how to monitor a community's emerging needs — especially one this large.

EL: How do you take into account the fact that what a student is looking for is so much different than what someone from BPX community is looking for, yet they're related? How do you help these communities talk to each other?

MY: The SAP Community Network really is a network of individual communities, each one catering to different roles, responsibilities and titles within our customer and partner base. Yet, they're adjacent to each other and easy to navigate from one to the other. So students can ask a question, and they can have it answered by a professor, by another student or by a real-world practitioner who might be halfway around the world but is implementing that software. If you only want to pay attention to a particular topic or particular set of topics that might be around your role, that would be perfectly okay, but if you want to go across the boundaries of your role to communicate, collaborate and innovate with the roles and the individuals who are adjacent to you, that's available to you, as well.

EL: The part that's really interesting to me is maybe when people are crossing boundaries and connecting with people maybe they otherwise wouldn't have access to. Do you have any stories on this type of collaboration?

MY: It happens every day. One specific example is between the developers and the business process experts; the developers are typically in the IT organization and the business process experts are very often times the project managers for different projects. So the business process experts might ask the developers what's possible with a certain software module so they can implement in their projects, or they might ask the developer community if there's been a customization implemented that they could reuse.

There is some sharing of best practices across the lines and across industries as well. For example, there was a company that was moving into China, and they were looking for best practices about how to implement the software in the Chinese market. Folks who were in China, as well as some who had done related work, offered solutions. The company had estimated it would take them six months to implement, but they actually got it done in a month by sharing best practices with other people.

Another example is that the state of Florida introduced a new Tax and Revenue Management system, which helped them capture millions in revenue that would have otherwise been lost. The state of Maryland learned of the experience of the state of Florida and, when implementing a similar solution in their state, they saved a ton of money and a ton of time by being able to implement faster.

EL: Can we talk about some of the tools that are available to users when they come to these communities?

MY: In our discussion forums, we have more than 200 topic areas and we see in the neighborhood of 6,000 posts in the discussion forums, every single day, 365 days a year. They tend to be the place where someone asks a quick question and gets a quick answer. And by quick we mean somewhere between 15 and 20 minutes to get your first answer to a question, and you'll typically get three or four answers or responses to every question. The first answer might be the quick, cursory answer, "Do it this way." And then you'll get a second, third or fourth answers: "Here's a little bit more detail, here's where to find the documentation, don't do this because I did that and it was a mistake."

There are also blogs. We have more than 5,000 people who are authorized to blog within our communities, two-thirds of whom are not SAP employees. They're actually our customers, our partners, independent bloggers and consultants who we've given access to the blogging platform. So we see 12-15 blog posts a day on a variety of subjects being posted, and then, of course, questions and comments being posted on those blogs.

We have an external-facing Wiki that we implemented this about 18 months ago. The idea behind the Wiki was to develop a place for Frequently Asked Questions. Because we have had more than 5 million posts in the lifetime of our discussion forums, and more than 1 million threads for question or comment themes, it becomes really difficult to navigate your way through all of that. We started noticing something called "answer fatigue," which means when the third, or fourth, or 12th or 20th person asks the same question, you get tired of answering it again and your answers get shorter and shorter. So what we decided to



Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Profitability...From Customer Acquisition to Advocacy

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

do was take those questions that get asked over and over again and move them over to the Wiki, provide very complete answers, and if someone asks that question in the forums, you can just point them to the complete answer in the Wiki.

We have eLearning, as well. We have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of eLearning modules that help individuals to learn the technology and to be self-sufficient. They don't have to travel to a class, they don't have to pay fees to attend a formal training class, and, to a large extent they can train themselves, at least on the basics, before they take the next step and become certified.

Then there are the Web 2.0 tools. For example, the blogs that are written on our site are fed to Twitter, where they acquire a bunch of activity, officially from the SAP Community Network and unofficially from members, mentors, enthusiasts and so on. There's a vibrant conversation on Twitter. There's a YouTube channel where videos produced by the community and community members are posted. We use Facebook to promote our events. Our Tech Ed event has had a lot of activity on its Facebook page. There are hundreds of official and unofficial SAP-related LinkedIn groups, where there are conversations, as well.

We are also engaging the use of viral widgets to take information that is on the site and push it out to people's daily blog readers (i.e. Google Reader). As opposed to expecting them to come to the site, they can find the latest from SAP when they open their homepage each morning. So we are heavily engaged in adapting core content and pushing it out, using the new Web 2.0 tools.

EL: The theme of the second part of the Web Experience Excellence series is elevating that online engagement beyond the essentials and to use the Web not just to give your customers answers, but to really strengthen the bonds and create a real allegiance to your company through these tools, really create a community. How has SAP's community changed as it has evolved?

MY: Essentially, you get more elegant in what you offer to the community members, and that means adding new functionality, adding new programs to satisfy those new, emerging needs. Once you satisfy the basic needs of the community, they come up with additional needs and wants and desires. One of the things we're working on right now is moving the community to do more co-innovation, both with us, and also with our partners and each other.

We think about it as "connect, collaborate and co-innovate." The first thing is to connect people with each other, so we can share information. Then, to collaborate on solutions and best practices to really help people move beyond connection and information sharing to collaboration on solving each other's business challenges, or technology challenges: What's going on in a certain industry? What are emerging trends in the marketplace? Enterprise software is our core, so what's going on in the enterprise software world, whether it's software as a service (SaaS), cloud computing, sustainability or green IT? What are the big themes that are emerging? Let's collaborate about that and then, co-innovate. Let's invent something beyond what we have today.

EL: How does SAP study these communities to really make sure that the customer service and the functionalities and the tools that you're providing are what people need? And how do you decide what's next, what you should be adding to the forums and the features?

MY: As a part of our reputation management program, we've put in place something called SAP Mentors, the most valuable players in the community. They're not just experts who collaborate well; they also display a degree of professionalism that's above and beyond. There are only 70 of those on the planet. They are nominated by other community members and then we select them a couple times a year.

The SAP Mentors get inside, early information from us about new programs we're about to launch, new products we're about to launch, new policies we're about to put in place. We ask them for advice; they give us feedback. In the communities, we listen to the Mentors very carefully, because they have broad expertise in a variety of areas and they're well-respected. So really, we use them as a proxy for the larger community of 1.7 million people. It's hard to really aggregate the views of 1.7 million, but if we narrow it down to really strong, respected advocates in different areas — the SAP Mentors — we can pay attention to 70 people and we can understand what their priorities are. So the Mentors are very influential for us. They influence the direction of our communities and sometimes even influence the direction of our products and the policies of our company.

Additionally, we listen very generally to the feedback in the discussion forums and blogs, to understand what things are missing, what policy we should change, what's the next new feature capability we should offer. Also, there is a semi-annual satisfaction survey. So to your question of how it's monitored, it's measured twice a year. There are open-ended questions that allow people to suggest things, and the response rate is good. There's one for each community.



Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Profitability...From Customer Acquisition to Advocacy

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

EL: There are a lot of businesses out there, large and small, that are really looking to start integrating these kinds of tools with their online portals. What are some of the advantages of taking this kind of strategy on?

MY: Because our company is really built around innovation, there's nothing more valuable than the sort of product feedback we're getting from the community. But what we really care about is innovation and emerging customer needs. These things are constantly changing because we're in the high-tech world, and so the inbound product feedback is one of the greatest benefits we gain from engaging with our community.

For our customers, they get free access to other customers who are doing similar things. Really, the underlying goal for us is to make our customers more successful with the products and the services we offer. And by giving them access to other customers who have "been there and done that" before them, and who can offer advice on best practices or worst practices to avoid, that's one of the most valuable things we can do. It also strengthens the entire ecosystem of partners, customers and suppliers around SAP. It gives our partners greater access to our customer base, so that they are able to offer them assistance and support and solutions.

EL: Given the scope of SAP's community, you can't really imagine SAP without it.

MY: Once you have a community, I don't think you can ever stop. Number one, because you see so much value in it. And number two, because your customers will see so much value in it; you won't go back. Community-building is a really important skill companies need to be looking at.