



## ECOYSYSTEMS AND COMMUNITIES

By Deborah Potter

Specialization is all the rage. Contemporary technology is both the result of specialization and the birthplace of it. The more we assume economic success depends on specialization, the more we seek it, and the more it defines the fundamental way we look at the world. Subsequently, the more we narrow the questions we ask of the world, scientifically, economically, religiously, and philosophically, the more we are likely to receive a specific answer. Specific, controllable answers tend to satisfy us.

Specialization means compartmentalization. Compartmentalization, in every aspect of life, gives the perception of more control. Control sells! Think California closets. Think office supplies. Think about storage bins. Surely, if I invest significant dollars to have a separate compartment for every pair of my shoes, my closet will be neater, my life more orderly, and I will be happier. The great "Happiness Project" involves isolating difficulties in our lives and fixing them. Greater control means greater happiness. Control of individual pieces means greater satisfaction for the whole.

And this approach is sexy. Last week I listened to a stranger on an airplane describe his company's unique approach to business and marketing. "Marketing and Sales is the worst," he said. "People go in, they throw a bunch of money at the problem with a whole bunch of solutions and it works. Meanwhile, they have no idea which piece created the success. What we have to do is isolate the variable that created the desired effect by trying one thing at a time." I was drawn in. "So true," I thought, "I love this thinking." I began applying the idea to the three communities where I'm working, for whom I am advocating. These communities are spending money for a "fix" of some kind and trusting me with that "fix". What a great idea. Control. Money. Happiness. Awesome!

This idea of one elusive answer seduces our communities too. It is easier to win consulting engagements when you have the one marketing trick that captures attention or the perfect script, right down to the exact words that are proven to produce sales. This allure is especially true if the marketing trick is digital, mysterious, new, and highly measurable. Thus, more and more consulting firms sit at a distance from their communities, monitoring data from the comfort of their home office and dropping in for cursory visits.

This approach has never been Retirement Dynamics' (RD) style. Our success has come from working closely with teams, rolling up our sleeves and working on-site, examining every part of our communities' lives: the people, programming, product, promotions, and pricing. The problem with asking a very specific, narrow question to chase the narrow magic bullet is that the underlying assumption is a singular fix, one variable



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changes to create one solution. This underlying assumption leaves no room for the complex relationship between variables and definitely puts consultants in danger of asking the wrong question.

What if, in fact, it is the interaction of many variables that creates an overall better, more productive, higher revenue environment? What if it wasn't only the pay-per-click campaign that was started, but the relationship of that pay-per-click campaign to team training and development? What if it's the relationship between the new website branding campaign and the renovations in the community's entry way? What if the customer service offered affected the tone of an event which then caused someone to search the website and find the more relevant branding? Is there a way of describing this interaction, the complex environment that must be created for success?

One could call it a "system", I guess. "System" accommodates a relationship between variables, but it does so with the specializing, isolation assumption still undergirding it. In a system, each variable is still contained within itself. Each variable is machinated and dead; it moves only through the control of the operator. "Culture" offers the other extreme, so ambiguous and amorphous that nothing at all is measurable and every variable bleeds into the others. Are there even "variables" in a "culture"?

I believe sales departments, businesses, and our communities are "ecosystems". Choosing to describe them as such will help us to develop better communities, better sales departments, and increased revenue. Ecosystems are alive. In an ecosystem, each "variable" is self-contained, but can change; they cannot bleed into other variables, but they do grow, change and react-- not just to the distant operator, but to each other and the entire environment as it grows and develops.

This is why RD consultants roll up their sleeves. Ecosystems require nurturing. Yes, we have to "turn the dials" from our remote control centers, measure what works, and resist what doesn't. But that's not all. Ecosystems require knowledge of best practices. They require commitment to each variable and its growth. They also require fostering relationships between people, between messages, and between media, in order to ensure that they all fit together to form a unique, rich, and thriving environment that not only sells today, but is equipped to sell and thrive over time.

So if your community is an ecosystem, is it time to till the soil, secure hardy plants, water regularly, and get the right amount of light? Is it time to prune and plant the right distance from each other and decide which palate matches your landscape? The ecosystem of your sales department requires nurturing every piece of what makes your community unique and helps it to thrive. Your consultant should arrive with a watering can in tow.



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