



# How fans became future shapers of an ice-cream brand

Towards the next frontier in conducting 'insight communities'

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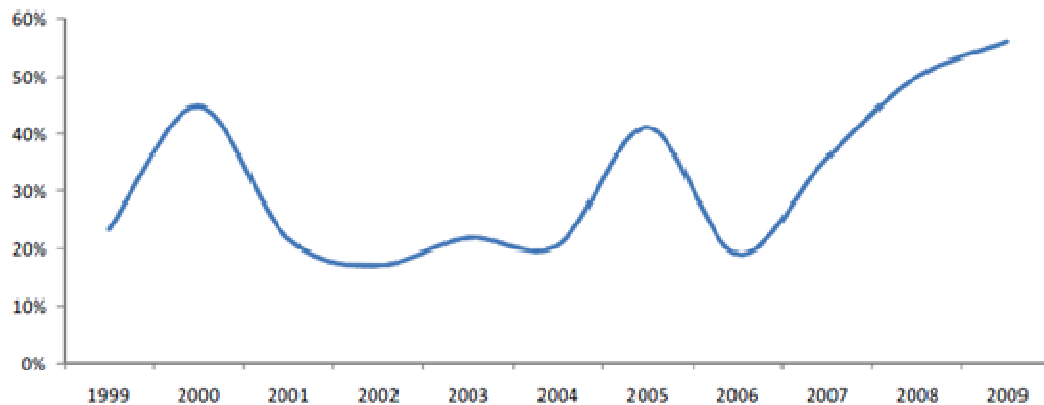
## Brands are joining the conversation

Over the past years, stimulated by the rise of social media, ‘conversational marketing’ techniques have gained tremendous importance. Lots of books and white papers were published on the topic and a large number of companies have rolled-out a program to observe, feed and manage the offline and online conversations that are taking place about their products and brands. We may call it a paradigm shift in the way we think about marketing in general and marketing communications in specific: it is the end of advertising as we know it. The empowered consumer has taken over the power to market a product or brand partly. Smart companies listen to what people say about them and try to take action based upon it (Van Belleghem, 2010). They try to unlock the power of their brand fans or so called ‘super promoters’ (Vogelaar, 2009). Those fans will spread the word about a brand or product with enthusiasm and passion.

Unilever, as a FMCG company, understands very well that the times are changing. Several initiatives are undertaken to integrate the concepts of word-of-mouth and word-of-mouse into marketing strategies. Social media has become a cornerstone of several brand strategies and recently, Yunomi was launched in the Benelux: Unilever’s very own marketing community via which they have an ongoing dialogue with more than 100.000 females.

## Let's make things better... together!

A recent study (InSites Consulting, Meet the Joneses, 2009) among marketers in Belgium and the Netherlands teaches us that two out of three marketers believe that they know their target audience very well: their gut feeling tells them what to do, they have lots of market data available and in the end they are consumers themselves. But when we let them take the test, by asking them questions about their target group and we match their answers with the answers given by consumers, we come to the conclusion that figures shift: only one out of three really understands their consumer. The other 66% fails in 'predicting' consumers' attitudes and behavior!



This study clearly shows that there is a 'knowledge gap' between what we really know and what we think we know about the consumers who are using our products and brands on a daily basis, even if we have done lots of market research in the recent past. The main problem is that some marketers have lost track of what their consumer base thinks, feels and needs. For Unilever this was the main reason behind starting its 'Closeness to Consumer' program. As part of that program Unilever asked its brand managers to go out and really live with consumers for a few days. That was a very nice first step to get in touch again. But when it comes to actually integrating the 'voice of the customer' into daily practices Unilever needed to go a step further. We should aim for an ongoing (research) conversation between marketing people behind the brand and consumers who buy and use the products. The good thing is that we have the opportunity to do this. Today, more than half of the (online) population is willing to have a dialogue with brands, to work together, to co-create products and services with brands. People are really reaching out to brands. They want to help them out in order to make things better for themselves and their peers (InSites Consulting, MCDC Report, 2009).

That's why Unilever wanted to experiment with starting a long term conversation with consumers through an 'Online Market Research Community' (MROC) (De Ruyck, Schillewaert and Caudron, 2008) or 'Insight Community'. As the team behind Ben & Jerry's was going through a process of revising the marketing plan for the brand by looking into conversational techniques and making use of the power of social media and brand fans, it seemed to be the perfect brand to take part in this pilot project.

## From haven to hell and back again

'Research Communities' are definitely not new as a research technique. If we take a closer look at its

history - via a study that analyzed all ESOMAR Congress papers of the last 10 years through text analytics<sup>1</sup>) we notice that the first papers about the method were already written in the period 1999-2004. Since then, we see a slow rise in positive buzz about the method until it reached a second tipping point in 2005. From then on, we observe a steep decline in buzz and rather negative sentiments are being attached to the research method in ESOMAR Congress papers. The method started recovering of this disbelief from beginning 2007 onwards (figure 1), with a steep increase in positive publications until today. This phenomenon is typical for a new research method or technology. In the beginning we all overestimate its power and underestimate the difficulties we (will) have to make it really work in the field. After a while the first studies that are rather disappointing in terms of results and the first dissatisfied clients turn up and we start reviewing the method critically. This is a good thing, it's a shake-out and a lot of researchers adapt their way of conducting

<sup>1</sup> Study by Annelies Verhaeghe and Niels Schillewaert, presented at ESOMAR Congress 2010 in Athens.

research with the method. The methodology matures and best practices are shared within the industry.

We may state that today, the discussion around MROCs or 'Insight Communities' is 'hot', both in terms of defining them and in terms of how to conduct them in the best possible way. There is a lively discussion going on among researchers and research buyers about the topic, both at conferences as online (Twitter, LinkedIn groups, research blogs), all contributing to the body of knowledge and helping us as an industry to define best practices.

Two years ago (De Ruyck, Schillewaert and Caudron, 2008), we took a first attempt to come up with a holistic view on how to conduct communities for research in the best possible way. We thought it was time to update this paper, to contribute to the discussion and share our current view on insight communities, to go beyond and take the leap forward.

Before we start, although marketing and research goals can be quite in line with one another, we need to be clear on the fact that we build research communities and not marketing communities. There is a clear line between both types of communities, and it's better to keep the two separate from one another as in the long run participants would be biased.

## Making the crowd go wild

We collaborated with the University of Maastricht to come to a richer community experience for participants, which results into more active and dynamic research communities and so: richer research insights at the end. Several studies (Ludwig, De Ruyck and Schillewaert, 2010) were conducted and we came up with a model that is able to predict on-topic participation of members in 'Insight Communities'. On-topic participation is defined as community conversations that contribute to finding answers to our research questions. While off-topic conversations are only interesting from a social perspective: they are the social glue between our research participants. Eight hypotheses were proven in previous research:

- Members' perceived importance of informational benefits is significantly and positively related with their on-topic participation;
- Members' perceived importance of social benefits is significantly and negatively related with their on-topic participation, however an absolute minimum is required to increase participation. The relationship is characterized as an inverted U shape – where a medium level of social benefits perceived achieves the best participation score;
- Members' satisfaction with the facilitator (moderator) is significantly and positively related with their on-topic participation;
- Members' level of identification with the research community (being part of their lives) is significantly

and positively related with their on-topic participation;

- Members' level of identification with the facilitating brand (level of fan ship) is significantly and positively related with their on-topic participation;
- Members' perceived time cost of participation is significantly and negatively related with their on-topic participation;
- Members' level of 'Informational Engagement' (attention they pay to and absorption by the on-topic/relevant community content) is significantly and positively related with their on-topic participation;
- Members' level of 'Social Engagement' (attention they pay to and absorption by the off-topic/social community content) is negatively related to their on-topic participation, such that a minimum social engagement is required but an excess of social engagement will reduce on-topic participation.

Based on this academic knowledge and experiences out of different client projects, we fine-tuned our approach (De Ruyck, Schillewaert and Caudron, 2008) of conducting communities for research purposes.

## Best practices in building and managing 'insight communities'

### Qualitative of nature

First of all, we believe that we need to be careful to not over and miss-use the method. We have to be wise in when and what to use it for. To fully understand this, let's take a look at the main characteristics of 'Insight Communities':

- By definition, they are not representative, as they work best with participants who identify with the topic and/or the brand hosting the platform (Ludwig, De Ruyck and Schillewaert, 2010). We screen participants on these criteria.
- Secondly, 150 people are the maximum number of participants a moderator can build a real relationship with. And, relationship is key in this case: no relationship = no community! We go for qualitative depth instead of quantitative reach. Never underestimate the power of N=1: one participant can inspire to change something very drastically. This number was cross validated by research done in collaboration with Maastricht University where we found that in order to gain an output of at least 30 posts of participants (the minimum we need to conduct proper qualitative analysis given the mean length of a post), over a three month period and at the speed of five posts a week (taking into account participation rates known from previous studies), 150 participants is

the ideal number to conduct research communities with.

This makes that communities for research are qualitative of nature. You can do some basic quantitative research on them, but only to have first feelings. If validation of insights afterwards is necessary, it needs to be done through a traditional (online) survey. Of course, you can also invite participants for in-depth interviews and online group discussions. Let's say that every method has its place within a community. In the end, it's all about fusing methods to get the insights you are looking for. In that sense, market researchers need to use a mix of research techniques. We have to become more like DJs:

*DJs play and select songs for an audience from their wealthy music collection. The successful ones provide a creative mix that makes the crowd go wild. They are the cool new super stars! What makes DJs also successful is that they have the guts to experiment without forgetting tradition: they re-use old riffs and blend it with contemporary elements.*

Integrating a community with quantitative questionnaires to validate can be conducted on a dedicated panel build around the qualitative community. This can be interesting from a cost perspective if you have a need for a lot of quantitative validation or are confronted with a difficult to find target group. Keeping up a certain relationship with them can then be beneficial in such a case.

### Are you able to manage an amusement park?

We also need to be careful in how long we want to keep the community in the air. Out of data collected from several research communities we conducted in the past we came to the conclusion that three weeks is like an ideal period to keep participants engaged in a short term, ad hoc community project. While three months is a sufficient amount of time to tackle broader and more strategic research questions and objectives during a more long term project. If you go for the long term version, be sure you have enough things to discuss with the consumers participating. It's like the manager of an amusement park who needs to be sure that there are enough attractions that can keep the visitors entertained over a longer period of time. We also believe that it's quite hard to keep a community open throughout the year (although not impossible). Just like an amusement park, both managers and visitors need a break from time to time and some visitors will come back, others will not and need to be replaced by new ones.

### Attention points throughout the research process

We believe that we need to go beyond the current practice of conducting communities in each step of the process of conducting such a research project:

- Pre-phase ('immersion'): we know out of previous experiences that it's nice to know upfront what the right vocabulary is that you need to use – to match your language with the natural language of the participants. Next to that knowing the hot topics within the product category could also be beneficial. In order to grasp these things, we 'scrape' a selection of relevant consumer conversations on 'natural' communities that are freely accessible on the web. By doing so, we get first feelings with the research topic and we get the things right from the start. We are able to dive into the world of brand fans or get really involved into a certain topic (Kozinets, 2010).
- Kick-off at the client side: we take half a day to create a sense of community at the client side. It's all about creating engagement with the whole project team (the researchers and the marketers). We also brainstorm about the story that we are going to tell to the participants, the research experience we want to create and the research questions. We inspire the audience with results from our pre-phase. We also discuss more practical issues like the incentives and who will be our 'gatekeeper' (project leader) at the client side. Finally, we try to manage the expectations and we make very clear how everything will be done and what is expected from everyone that is on board.
- Recruitment of participants: why recruit fans of a brand from (online) panels if they already come together themselves on fan pages on social networking sites like Facebook? We can also recruit research participants from client databases, natural communities on the web and online research panels. It depends on the topic and the availability of certain profiles on social networks/natural communities and specific sources within the company. All participants are screened on various variables. Especially brand and/or topic identification is important as we saw that it's an important predictor of active participation within the community. We also believe that we need to give back to participants in order to get them in and keep them going: promise them feedback in the invite to the project, next to a research related incentive. We know that the main driver to participate is having an impact on the future of a certain brand or product.
- Kick-off with the participants: out of past R&D research (De Ruyck, Schillewaert and Caudron, 2008) we know that the first weeks of a community are crucial. People need to generate trust with the community, each other and the brand behind the project. To fasten-up this process we conduct kick-off online discussion groups to brief the participants. We make sure that afterwards, they understand what the project is about. We connect them with us, one another and the client. We also try to show them what's in it for them. We get a lot of questions from the participants during this session. We get the ability to answer their questions and to create engagement. Next to that, it is a way to check

- participants' expectations of the community and to have the ability to adapt the topics of the topic/conversation guide if needed. Participants get a fee for taking part in this kick-off session, because we really find it important that they are there for sure.
- Questions/topics in our research/conversation guide: we make use of enriched content (photos, videos, audio material) to ask our questions to the participants. Each topic is asked as attractive and entertaining as possible. Forum discussions are combined with short surveys, photo uploads and different types of tasks/exercises (writing a review, projective techniques). Finally, there needs to be room for participants to come-up with unsolicited feedback and ideas they have.
  - Building blocks of a community: we can think about the following chunks of questions: 'meet & greet zone' (getting to know the participants regarding to the topic of the community), a 'feedback zone' (getting feedback from participants on stimuli material and certain questions), a 'test lab' (here they can come up with feedback on specific products they were able to use and test), the 'co-creation room' (finding solutions to certain problems together with consumers) and a 'social corner' (their own zone or space). We keep space for flexibility in terms of the questions we ask, but we try to make it as themed as possible, so there is a real research agenda and it's like a story. But of course when something happens within the company or with the brand, we can throw in an urgent question very easily. Clients get the possibility to observe all zones, but also connect with participants themselves in the 'meet and greet' zone.
  - Moderation: Values of an outstanding community moderator are: 'openness', 'dedication', 'being passionate' and 'forward thinking'.
    - 'Openness' towards the participants: being authentic, honest about the goals of the research project, but also honest about his/her own bio.
    - 'Dedicated' in the sense that it's not just a 9 to 5 job. Participants have the ability to be always on 24/7, so the moderator or community manager needs to have that ability too. He can check the community three times a day during working hours, but in the evening participants can have an urgent question or during the weekend something major can happen that calls for immediate action that needs to be taken.
    - We try to match projects with researchers who have a 'passion' for the topic or the brand. For the case we will present later in this paper, our moderator even met the founding fathers of the brand we did research for: Ben & Jerry's.
    - 'Forward thinking' in the sense that you need to foresee the actions that are needed to make sure that your community will still be healthy the next week!
  - Finally in terms of skills, a great community manager is a bit like a DJ, he knows how to get the perfect mix of research topics and social topics, of difficult questions and more easy the understand ones. He also knows which methods to use on top of the research forum of the community. He understands the art of getting the insights out of tons of data/information. Last but not least he is a great storyteller. He or she can make a crowd go wild – not only towards participants, but also in the board room, when it comes to translating insights into actions.
  - Incentives: in terms of incentives, we try to work with three types and we combine them into an attractive blend: topic related incentives, charity and project feedback.
    - Topic related incentives: we try to link the incentive to the brand or topic we are doing research for. If it's a daily one, like a free newspaper everyday when we work for a publisher, it also helps as a reminder for taking part in the research project.
    - Charity: works well especially if the work is done for a brand that has it in its DNA, like Ben & Jerry's. The more posts by the participants, the higher the amount of money that will be donated to a good cause that matches the brand's image.
    - Feedback about a project: the most important ingredient of our blend is the feedback we gave on the project. In this part there is quite some responsibility for the client. He has to speak out to the community, tell them what he or she learned and which actions that will be taken based on the input of the participants. Over the past years we learned that participants know that you cannot tell them everything, that some things cannot be implemented because there is no fit with the company's strategy or that it simply takes time to change things within big companies. In the end it's all about managing the expectations towards participants from the beginning during the kick-off session.
  - Measuring the community's 'health': during the project we try to give the community a doctor's visit by measuring the satisfaction of the participants with the community and the moderator via a monthly survey and by keeping track of the activity of the members. It allows the moderator to take action and make sure that his crowd keeps on 'dancing'. In this experience measurement exercise we keep track of general satisfaction, identification with the community, identification with the brand, time cost, perceived informational and social benefits, social engagement and informational engagement (Ludwig, De Ruyck and Schillewaert, 2010) – which, as seen before, are all predictors of active on-topic community participation.

- **Analysis:** traditional human analysis is needed. But by combining it with text analytics you are not only able to analyze the answers participants are giving on a question in a more objective and deeper way, you are also able to bring them in relation with their profile and what they have answered to other questions. It is all about connecting the dots between what has been said, how often and by whom. When using text analytics afterwards, the qualitative researcher gets an objective counterpart to help him out with getting the most out of the data and with making the right interpretation based on the conversations that have taken place. If segments or gender differences are important it can really help us to understand the differences between them. This is quite hard to do via traditional qualitative analysis, but can be done very fast and efficient when applying text analytics to the data (De Ruyc, Schillewaert, Verhaeghe and Friedman, 2009).
- **Reporting:** we have two types of reports, a 'tactical' one every two weeks, providing the client with answers to the questions they asked; and a 'strategic' report and workshop that delivers insights cross topics and cross questions. It's important to have very frequent calls based on the in between tactical 'feeling reports' that we provide the client. There are meetings between the community moderator and the gatekeeper at the client side, to determine to future direction of a topic or research theme.
- **Presentation:** we do not present, we co-create actions with the clients based on the insights we derived from all the community data. This happens during an interactive workshop of half a day at the client side. This makes our process circle complete by going back to the internal community and by making sure that they will do something with what they got from their community of customers. We first present the insights coming out of the community and afterwards in a brainstorm we try to go from insights to actions together with the client. Based on the objectives of the study, we define the 'lenses' by which we look at the insights to come to next steps and actions to be taken. This all happens together with a multidisciplinary team of all parties involved at the client side: marketing, research, R&D, etc.

We will illustrate this new way of working by means of an insight community that InSites Consulting conducted for Ben & Jerry's (Unilever).

## Ben & Jerry's 'I-scream' community

### Marketing problem

In this community, brand fans were given the opportunity to become future shapers of a brand they like. We discussed all aspects of the brand and the

marketing actions that were taken. By tackling different themes ('Getting to know the fans'; 'Innovation'; 'Branding'; 'Communication'; 'Social Media' and 'Fair trade & good causes') we went over all off the 4Ps, with special attention to 'conversational marketing' and how we could manage, feed and join the conversations that were taking place among fans already. The insights coming out of the community were used as input for a brainstorm in which we came up with concrete action points and ideas. Those actions became part of the new marketing plan for the brand and when this is ready it will again be tested and discussed with the same group of people to get the execution right, this during a three week follow-up period.

### Research solution

We set-up an 'Insight Community' following the process described above. The community was in the air during three months. Participants were recruited through a combination of fan pages on social networks (Hyves in the Netherlands and Facebook in Belgium. Both pages were owned by Unilever) and pop-up recruitment on the Ben & Jerry's website. We did research in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium and the Netherlands. In total we had 225 participants (BE= 75 & NL= 150). This was still manageable for the moderator as we created two sub communities (BE and NL) next to a general one. This was also a need for some of the topics as the brand is slightly different in both parts of the Benelux.

The name of the community itself was generated by the participants during the first week of the community. It immediately gave them the feeling that it was their community. To even strengthen this feeling we had the 'Ben & Jerry's Lounge' were they could chill-out and have an off-topic chat with one another (among fans). For the analysis we made use of a combination of traditional qualitative analysis as well as text analytics via Clementine (SPSS). Last but not least, a satisfaction survey was distributed among the research participants to keep track of how the community experience was perceived by the members of the community. This also allowed us to validate the model for community participation that we created together with the University of Maastricht.

## Results

We will illustrate the power of our research community through two concrete examples of research questions we tackled:

- **Who is the B&J fan?** The community was a perfect way to get to know the fans, their daily lives and their stories. Via different tasks we really got to know them step by step. It enabled us to come-up with 10 things that are important in live for a Ben & Jerry's fan. The pictures and stories of our participants also served as input for the researchers to deliver a fan profile that was handy to use in the marketer's daily job. Some of our

Figure 2 – Ben & Jerry fans (Research participants)



fans serve as personas, helping marketers to visualize who they are working for (figure 2).

Through text analytics and its power to unveil emotions in written text, we discovered that fans are not always positive about what 'their brand' is doing. Something you might fear for when working with fans: 'We will not learn anything new, because they will be too kind and too positive'. We almost could say that the opposite is true. They can indeed be very happy about an innovation or a great advertising campaign, but on the other hand they are very critical too. They are even disappointed when the brand is not well managed in their local supermarket for example.

- Via the different topics we gained input for the new Ben & Jerry's marketing plan. Every aspect was discussed on three levels: gaining insights into a certain issue, asking feedback on existing ideas and co-creating new ones together. One of the topics we discussed during our theme-week on 'Communication & Advertising' was the usage of social media and how the brand could make use of it. Some of the participants went even that far in the co-creation phase that they came-up with a social media plan of several pages with a lot of detail in terms of how to execute the plan.
- A last thing that was striking and that we discovered via text analytics on the community transcripts is that although you define specific themes for each week and you try to take care of the community story as a moderator, you will never hold the members back from telling what's on their mind at a given moment. An example: we discovered that availability of the product in general and the different tastes in specific was discussed in different themes and threads, not only the one that was intended for that discussion. It not only shows that it is something of major importance, it also learns that it is related to several other issues as well.

## Participant experience and the usage of text analytics

### Participant experience and validation of our model

Overall, the 'I-scream' community scored very well if we compare it with the benchmark figures we have collected over the past years. We can do a better job in terms of time cost (significant difference: 6.0 – Ben & Jerry's community vs. 4.7 – Historical benchmark), making it a bit easier for the participants to react and have fewer questions. We had about eight a week, five would have been better and is also closer to ideal, we know out of experience.

When it comes to the social element (significant difference: 5.1 – Ben & Jerry's community vs. 4.6 – Historical benchmark), we see that it contributed to on-topic participation. This is the only hypothesis that does not hold after validating the Maastricht 'on-topic community participation model'. So we could have stressed the social value even more, without making it too important as it is a fragile equilibrium that needs to be taken care of. Especially, knowing that right now already 25% of postings are social ones (off-topic) ones.

### Usage of text analytics

With text analytics you get a counterpart as researcher when it comes to certain thing you are not quite sure of (cfr. the role of fair trade in price perception). It is also your objective friend who assists you in making the right interpretations based on the data. Text analytics also helps you to prioritize and to see differences between different groups within the population of participants (cfr. the importance of availability in general and a broad portfolio of different tastes in specific).

## Discussion

### How to make it work at the client side?

From a client perspective it's a new way of doing research. A research community project needs to be managed in a slightly different way:

- The importance of the role of the gatekeeper within the company: be the ambassador of the project within the company, generate buzz around it, motivate other people of the team to do their jobs well, be the counterpart of the community moderator at the client side. The gatekeeper is in the driver seat of the community together with the moderator.
- Giving (feed)back is the new black: as a client you need to be open to giving enough feedback towards the research participants. Both in terms of frequency as in terms of content. At least every two weeks, the members of the community expect to hear something from you as a client researcher or marketer. And last but not least, don't be afraid to show your face and tell them a bit about your life and how your job looks like on a daily basis. It really helps to create a bond with them.
- Being flexible is a need: during the project, based on what's told in the community by the participants, the direction can change. Be prepared for this. You don't have full control over your project anymore. You could see this as a threat, but also as an interesting opportunity: when something happens within the company, you can ask a question very quickly.
- 'Always on' and how to integrate it into your daily job: learn to ask the right questions at the right moment, learn how to integrate findings directly and steer the discussion in the right direction. Making use of such a community as a source of inspiration during the process of creating and building a new marketing plan for a brand is something you need to learn and adapt to.

### Proactive is the new reactive!

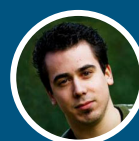
This case clearly shows what the power can be of exploring your brand by hosting a research community. It's a great way to collaborate with your target group and it even will bring you answers to questions you did not ask. It's a paradigm shift in two ways: in terms of listening more instead of asking a lot and in terms of being proactive instead of being rather reactive towards the consumer's needs and innovations. It demonstrates the power of making use of the love fans feel for your brand, both in terms of marketing research as in terms of marketing. They can become your ambassadors and they also deserve their seat in the boardroom.

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