

Online technical support forums build social capital

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Consumers in search of product related information and technical support often turn to virtual communities for help. A forthcoming examination in the April 2008 *Journal of Consumer Research* of virtual P3 communities – peer-to-peer problem solving communities – presents evidence that social capital, widely described as declining in face-to-face neighborhood communities, has migrated online.

“Social capital not only exists online, it strengthens over time, serving as the foundation for the development of community assets including archived technical assistance and broad social connections,” explain Charla Mathwick (Portland State University), Caroline Wiertz (City University London), and Ko de Ruyter (Maastricht University, the Netherlands).

“With time, the community members come to think of each other as ‘extended family,’ available to serve as a sounding board, offering moral support and valuable advice as they work through the technical complexities of the products or services they consume,” they add.

A collectively owned, intangible reserve of support, social capital has been described as the combination of resources that individuals and groups gain from their connections to one another. As the researchers explain, the value of social capital is based on the perception of its mutual benefits arising from social investments.

Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter observe a moral code of behavior in

online social forums among the established volunteer experts of virtual P3 communities – known as “wikis” – who routinely come to the aid of floundering “newbies.”

“Virtual communities are maintained by the normative influences that impose a moral responsibility to volunteer, to reciprocate, and to act in a trustworthy manner,” the researchers write.

Newbies initially click into the community seeking answers to very specific technical problems. Wikis, a small but vital subgroup of the community, rise to their coveted status through demonstrated expertise and a level of civic engagement that translates into months and even years of personal commitment to the needs of their peers.

“As newbies mature into wikis, the social capital that accumulates heightens the perceived value of community interaction and cements their commitment to the group,” the researchers write.

P3 communities are also characterized by shared rituals that include a specific language that is only meaningful to informed members. In addition, members of virtual P3 communities often combine forces to achieve broader community goals.

“As time passes, the strength of the social connections these individuals build comes to define their community experience, turning what begins as a technical user group interaction into a social experience they cherish and are willing to work to maintain,” the researchers conclude.

Source: University of Chicago

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