



Crowdsourcing Customers

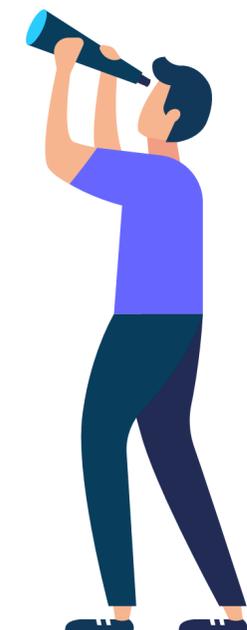
USING SOCIAL VALIDATION TO ACQUIRE AND DELIGHT MORE CUSTOMERS

Khoros 



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Executive summary

Gaining the attention and earning the trust of audiences has always been rocky for marketers, but nowadays, it's a massive uphill battle. The same digital transformation that gave us one-click access to millions of new products and ideas has made it nearly impossible to stand out. On the other hand, it's now easier than ever to connect and communicate with people around the globe to hear their experiences. Seeking peer input to influence decisions is known as social validation, and it should be a priority for marketing leaders.

Social validation is not new; many of the most popular sites in the world like Facebook, Amazon, Reddit, and Quora have become online juggernauts because they help people learn from their peers. But brands relying exclusively on these sites cannot maintain a consistent customer experience and do not have equal access to customer data. Social validation happens more effectively in a **branded community**: a central place designed and managed by the brand where prospects and customers alike gather to meet, learn from, and support each other. Branded communities provide all of the same social validation capabilities and the brand can tailor the experience and ensure customer data privacy. Three best practices can further help brands use their communities to delight and attract new customers:

- **Collaborate internally:** Social media has changed traditional business in many ways, but one of the most important changes is the breaking down of silos, particularly between marketing and support. To improve the overall customer experience, teams must now share insights with each other. Branded communities offer a structured way for marketing and customer care teams to collaborate and interact.
- **Support customers:** Having the ability to easily communicate with others who can help solve a problem builds strong relationships. Branded communities are a natural place to host such interactions.
- **Create super users:** Traditionally, super fans are uncovered during product releases and events, or intentionally created through celebrity or influencer campaigns. However, creating super users in a branded community is far less expensive and more authentic than hiring paid representatives to speak on your brand's behalf.





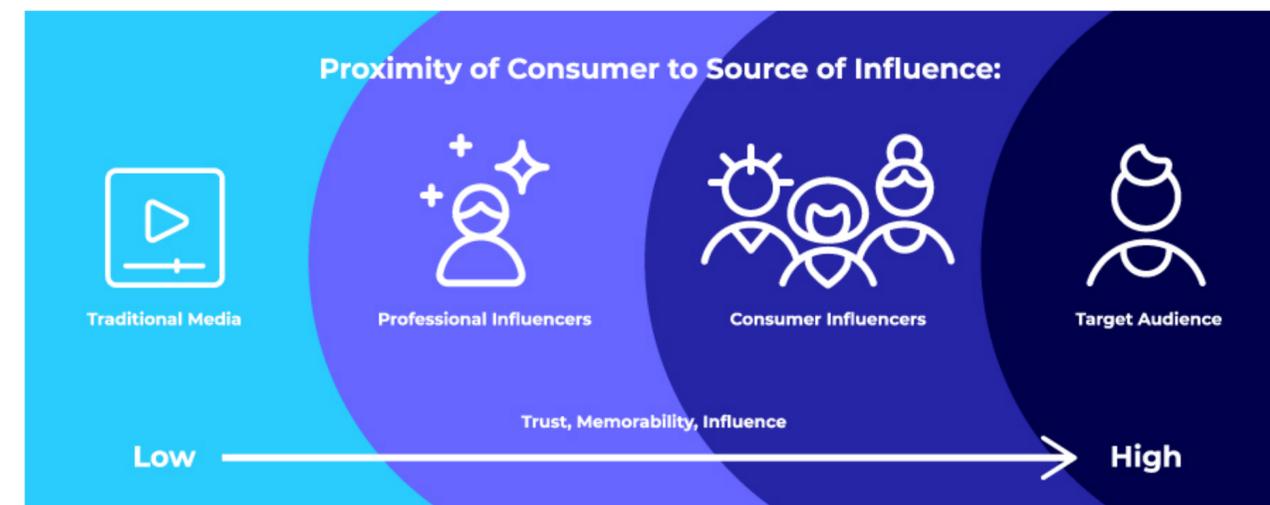
Your customers have trust issues

In the past decade, the volume of marketing communications has exploded while trust in traditional institutions has eroded. Our attention span — especially for marketing and advertising — is **shorter than ever**. At the same time, trust is down an average of **37 points from 2017-2018** in the US across all institutions, while **81% of consumers say trust is a deciding factor** in their purchasing decisions. Trying to make informed decisions in a tidal wave of information causes most consumers to look to their peers for help.

For marketers seeking to overcome the noise and reach their audience with relevant, authentic messages, social validation is a new core requirement.

Why social validation is vital

Social validation describes the behavior where people facing uncertainty look to those around them for guidance. In today's world, trust and influence by source usually looks something like the graphic below. At the heart of the influence are other people just like them — who share the same goals and struggles. At the opposite end — the least trusted — is traditional media.



Graphic showing trust for social influences

You probably get social validation online at least 2-3 times a day in your own life. Do you read reviews and ratings when shopping online? How about when searching for a restaurant or local business? Like most consumers, you use social validation because it confirms your decision with a trusted source. As an example of the value of social validation, A Harvard Business School study found that a 1-star increase on **Yelp increased sales between 5-9% for local restaurants**. While most marketers use social validation in their business to some extent, there are many, many more opportunities to innovate with new technologies.

Social validation and the customer journey

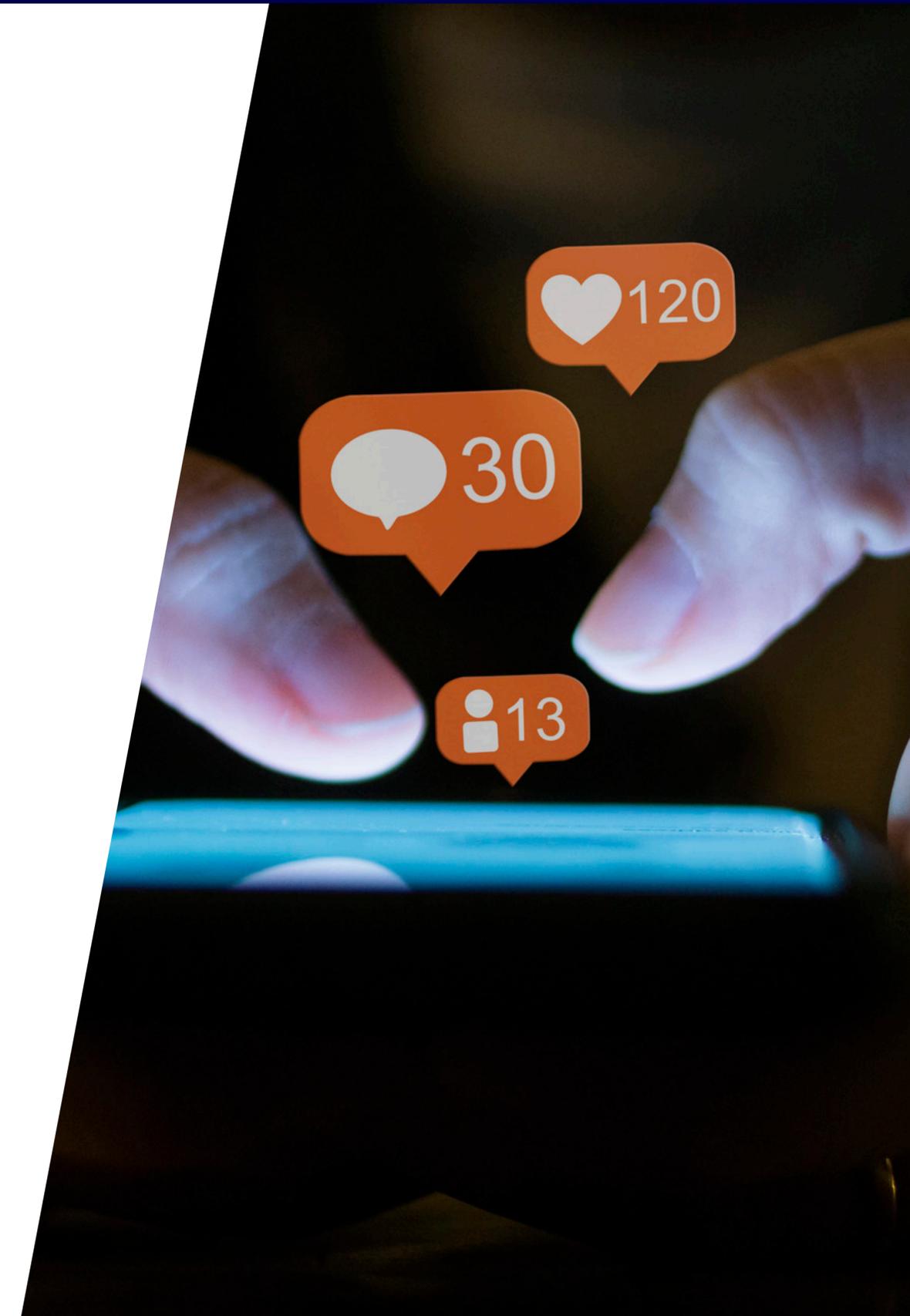
Social validation is all around you. Four of the top ten sites on the internet today exist because of social validation: Youtube, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Reddit are all based on user-generated content. And most people use at least one of these sites every day to provide guidance at some point in a journey to solve a problem.

So how can a modern marketer harness the power of social validation? The first step should be to set up a branded presence in all the arenas where validation happens today: create YouTube videos, drive Amazon ratings, join Facebook groups, monitor sub-Reddits, answer Quoras, post on Twitter and Instagram, etc. This helps you connect your brand to more customers, and you can gain some trust by being a part of the conversation. However, every one of these sites is a different user experience that isn't connected to any brand, and there are data privacy concerns. The next step should be to provide a central area that matches your brand experience and **empower customers to connect with each other by hosting the conversation.**

A **branded community** is a central place — designed and managed by the brand — where prospects and customers alike gather to meet, learn from, and support each other. Online communities can help marketers bring people with the same interests together in one place, simplifying the process of getting that necessary social validation and increasing customer satisfaction.

Customer Journey Stage	Branded Community Content	Validation Activity & Benefit	Related Marketing Outcomes
DISCOVERY	Forums, discussion boards, or knowledge bases (wikis)	Find possible solutions to a problem	Increased demand and awareness
EVALUATION	Q&A pages, ratings and reviews, blogs, videos	Compare different solutions and match to their specific needs	Higher conversion rate
SUPPORT	Knowledge bases, forums, Q&A/FAQ pages	Quickly solve problems or answer questions about product usage	More customer satisfaction
ADVOCACY	Gamification, contests, and idea boards	Gain trust and market share by delighting customers	Increased brand reputation and loyalty

Throughout this ebook, we'll offer examples from top enterprise companies that are using branded communities to offer their consumers the social validation they crave at every phase of the customer journey.





Where social validation happens today

The customer journey looks much different online than it does in person: Consumers no longer walk a straight line from seeing an ad, walking into a store, and making a purchase — although marketers may long for those good old days. Instead, the path from awareness to purchase can look quite different for each potential customer, making a marketer's job more complicated. Not only that, but consumers now want input about products and services directly from other people like them. Consumers often seek this social validation on social media, but it can be difficult for brands to keep up with constantly evolving expectations and technologies. Social validation happens primarily online, and leading brands continue to leverage it most productively with their own branded communities.

In a branded community, consumers can view products and services, conduct research, and ask questions, and brands can be right there the entire time to monitor discussions, prevent misinformation, and ensure a good experience for everyone.

Social validation happens primarily online, and the most productive conversations happen in branded communities.



Aligning with online consumer preferences

Leading marketers know their audience like the back of their hands and understand each stage of the journey they take to go from being unaware (or just plain uninterested) to being a super fan. The key to connecting with online consumers throughout each stage of their journey is to align with their preferences. With **93% of online experiences** kicked off with a search engine, your brand must both pop up in their search and provide the content/experience they were searching for. Branded communities offer three benefits to help you do both: improved search engine visibility, natural content experiences, and peer reviews.

1. Improving search engine visibility with a branded community

Search algorithms actually rank peer-generated content higher than branded website content. This is especially true for content with a lot of likes, views, and replies. This means that building and maintaining a robust branded community that supports interaction between members will help put your brand's products and services higher in search results while also drawing in consumers who might not have even heard of your brand's products or services yet.

2. Creating natural experiences with branded community content

Unfortunately for marketers, consumers don't always naturally search for the short, punchy keywords and SEO-scrutinized content hosted on a brand's webpage. Instead, many Google searches are unique (15% of all searches are completely brand new) and long (four words or more). No matter how big your wallet is, it's impossible for your brand to create and maintain content that will match every possible long, unique search, but the good news is that very specific searches naturally match well with the peer-generated content found in branded communities. In fact, most communities get 60-90% of their traffic from search engines.

For example, a consumer looking to book a flight with their pet might search, "How do I make sure my dog is entertained during a long flight?" While an airline might not be able to host such specific content on their website, a member of the airline's branded community might have already asked that same question and generated several ideas from other community members, and the results of those conversations are likely to be high in the original consumer's search results, naturally putting them on the path to purchase from the airline.

3. Featuring branded community ratings and reviews to increase conversion

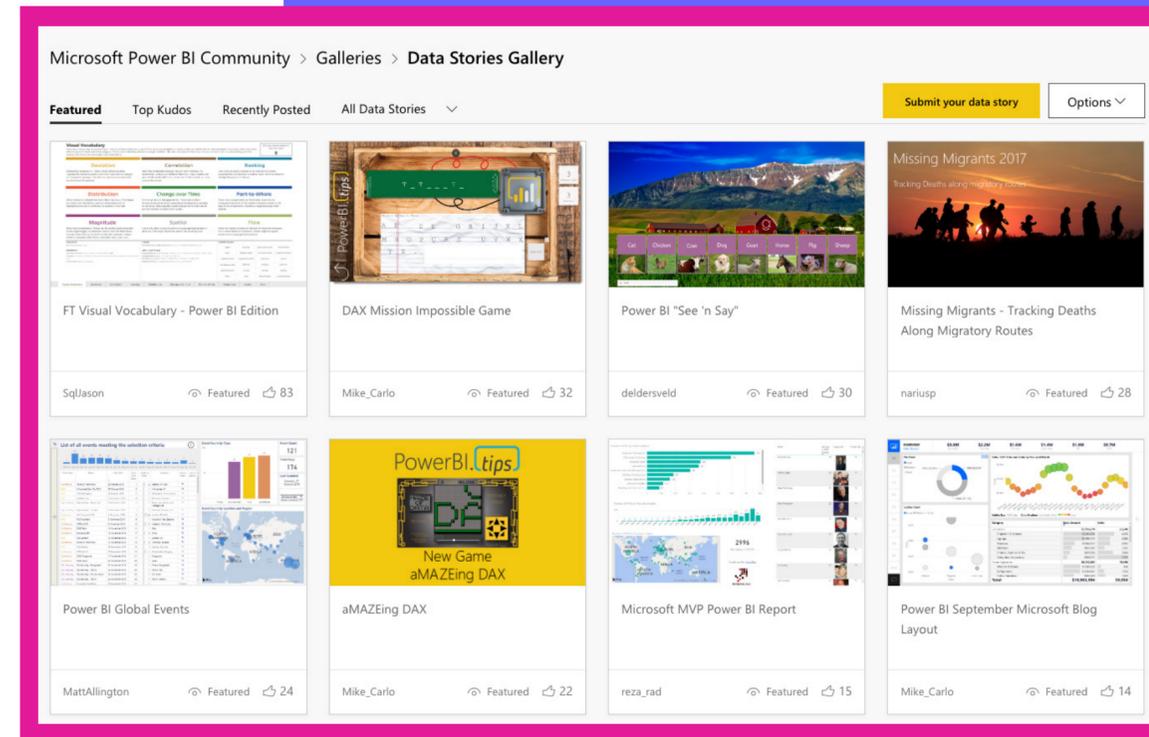
Marketers already understand that consumers often research and evaluate products and services online before making a purchase, and these days, one of the most important ways that consumers evaluate is with ratings and reviews. Research has found that when brands feature ratings and reviews about their products or services, conversion increases by 270%. Branded communities are an excellent way to host — and maintain some measure of control over — product and service ratings and reviews.



Microsoft's community

Microsoft created a branded community for their new PowerBI product, part of their Power family of products. The questions and answers featured on the PowerBI community not only helped existing Microsoft community members, but they were also quickly indexed by search engines, meaning that new people could discover Microsoft's community and product even when they hadn't been specifically looking for them.

In the Microsoft Power BI Community, users create and share beautiful data stories to inspire others



Very specific searches — the kind that are increasingly more common — match naturally with the peer-generated content found in online communities.

SEPHORA

Sephora's community

Sephora has become a leader in personal beauty by encouraging social validation in their Beauty Insider Community. Customers fill out a beauty profile to help them connect with similar people and get better product recommendations. Once in Beauty Insider, technology highlights content from people with similar beauty profiles — including recommendations, reviews, and best practices.

In Sephora's community, users actively recommend their favorite beauty products to other users

The screenshot displays the 'Ratings & Reviews' section for a product. It features a star rating breakdown: 5 stars (2981), 4 stars (1095), 3 stars (208), 2 stars (54), and 1 star (44). The overall rating is 4.6 / 5 stars, with 88% of users recommending the product. A chat window titled 'Chat Live with other Sephora Shoppers' is open on the right, showing a question: 'Is there a 15% off for insiders?' and a 'SEND MY QUESTION' button. Below the reviews, there are filters for 'Color: All', 'Filter', and 'Sort by: Most helpful'. A review from user 'jstbee' is highlighted, stating: 'Amazing while it lasts. This is my favourite pencil, the texture is perfect. I can draw on perfect hair strokes and fill without it making my brow hairs waxy and fake looking. The only problem is the amount of product. This is literally half the amount of most eye pencils. And the packaging is kind of obnoxious unnecessary. I love the product so much though; it's just a pain to repurchase every 3-4 weeks.' Another review from 'ashhersh' is partially visible, mentioning 'Eye Color Gray' and 'Hair color Brunette'.

Best practices to increase social validation

Now that you understand the *what* and *why* behind branded communities, let's dive into the juicy stuff: *how* your brand can get the most value out of them, increasing social validation and long-term growth. Three of the most important best practices are to collaborate, support customers, and create super users.

1. Collaborate Internally

Many brands view online communities primarily as opportunities to offer support. While branded communities are excellent at supporting traditional care models — and even at taking on the majority of customer care needs — they are uniquely positioned to offer more than customer support. In fact, branded communities offer an excellent chance for marketers to reach and interact with new audiences, and they also offer brands ways to seamlessly collaborate between teams.

Social media has changed traditional ways of doing business in many ways, but one of the most important changes is the breaking down of silos, particularly between marketing and support. To provide a better overall customer experience, the two teams must now share insights. Branded communities offer a structured way for marketing and customer care teams to collaborate and interact. In fact, many brands coordinate their communities with the release of new products or services and are therefore able to anticipate the support needs of customers purchasing a new product or service, improving the customer experience as a whole while also strengthening the brand's community ties.

2. Support customers

The best, most natural social validation occurs when consumers are stuck in a stressful situation. Having the ability to easily communicate with others who can help solve a problem helps to build strong relationships. Branded communities are a natural place to host such interactions. The most well-known example is [Quora](#), with 400,000 topics driving 300 million monthly visits. The issues that customers can run into with products and services will vary, but snags and disappointments can lead to a lot of uncontrolled negative conversations across social media and other digital channels.

Hosting a branded community can mean replacing negative sentiment with positive: A community can capture unsatisfied users and connect them with peers who have been there too so that they can constructively work to solve their problems. This strategy also quickly builds a dynamic, custom base of knowledge that future customers can use to overcome their own issues — regardless of the products or services your brand offers. This has the compound benefit of cutting down on support costs while increasing customer satisfaction.

3. Create super users

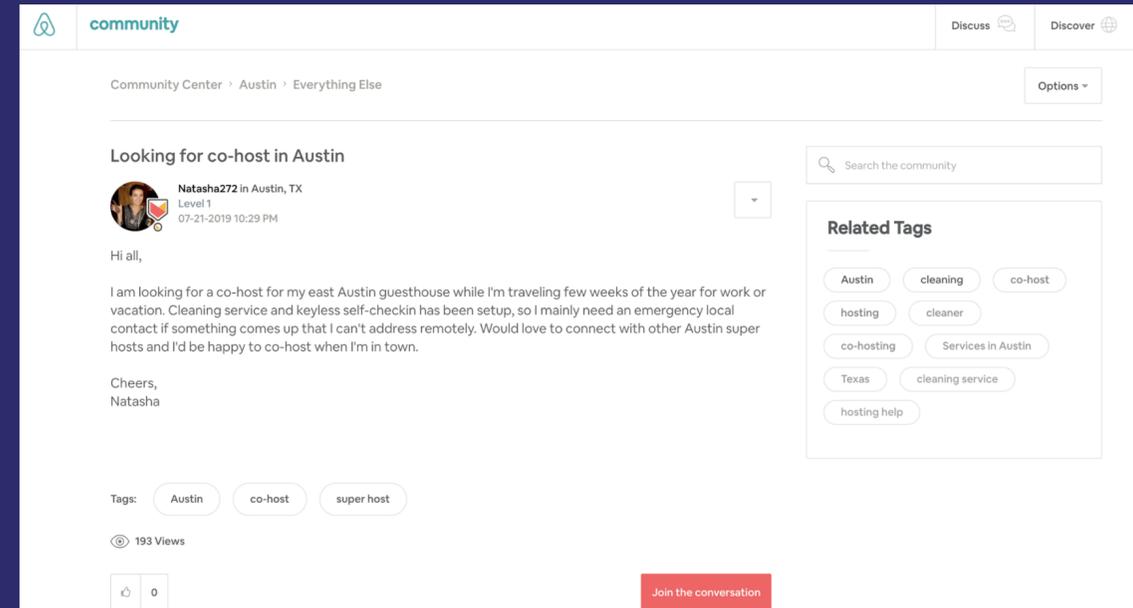
Almost every brand on the planet relies on super fans to help them accomplish a wide variety of tasks. Traditionally, super fans are uncovered during product releases and events, or they are intentionally created through celebrity or influencer campaigns. However, creating super users in a branded community is far less expensive and more authentic than hiring paid representatives to speak on your brand's behalf because the enthusiasm of a super user comes from their direct experience with your brand's products or services. Advocacy programs can happen organically in vibrant communities, however, when they are intentionally incentivized and managed with a specific goal in mind, they can become amazing resources for growing your brand. Beyond extending support, many brands leverage their super users for product roadmaps and customer councils that provide end-user feedback and insights to help the company grow and improve.



Airbnb's community

As Airbnb grew, many hosts ran into unexpected hurdles with municipal rules and neighborhood restrictions. Since Airbnb's business model is dependent on hosts booking stays at their property, Airbnb needed to help them resolve a variety of challenges that were different in every market. The Airbnb team built a peer-driven, branded community to help their hosts find answers and build momentum for "community-driven hospitality." Local hosts began posting their issues and others quickly responded with solutions. This localization and peer engagement not only solved immediate host problems, it also created networks of hosts that could then mobilize to advocate for home sharing in their area – helping Airbnb continue their incredible growth.

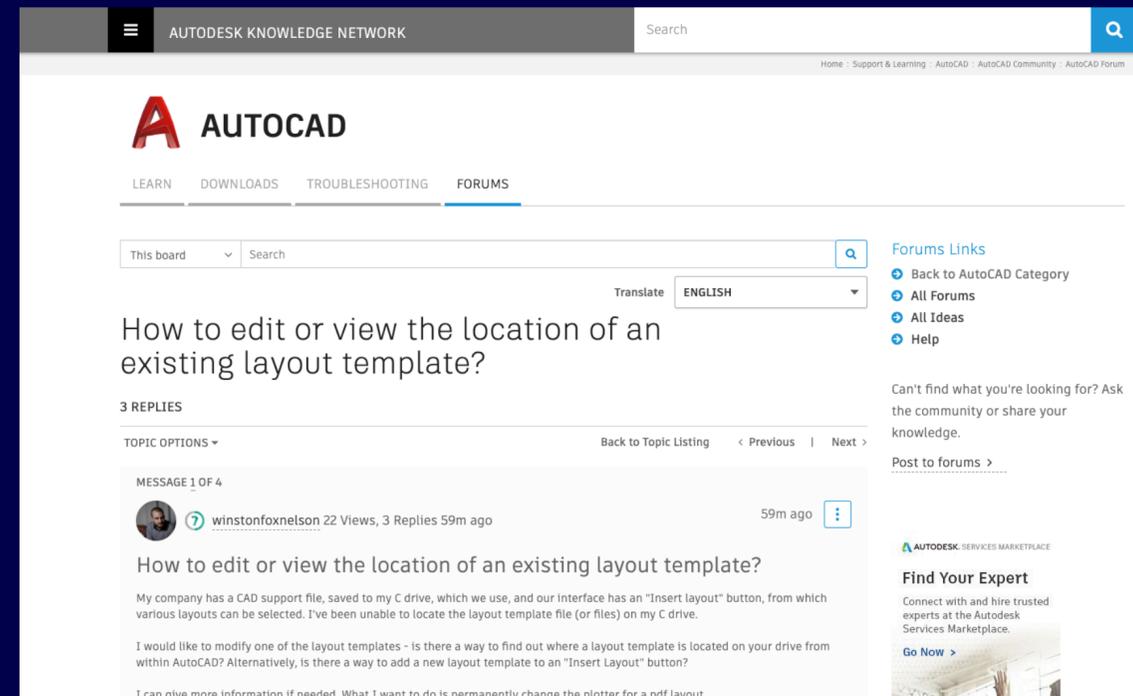
In Airbnb's community, local hosts post their issues and help each other find solutions



Autodesk's community

Autodesk has some of the best super users out there because they've actively nurtured and supported those community members since day one. Now they have over 450 global Expert Elites who were nominated by peers and approved by a committee of other experts. Only a select few are admitted to the program every year, and they are given special status and access to inside information. These incentives lead the Expert Elites to accomplish amazing things — for example, in 2017 they answered over 25,000 questions and received over 7,000,000 views. This not only helps the broader Autodesk community, it is also an amazing return on investment for the Autodesk brand.

In Autodesk's community, super users are recognized as Expert Elites



How Khoros can help

By hosting branded communities, marketing teams are able to build trust and gain attention by helping their customers discover ideas, evaluate solutions, solve problems, and become advocates alongside their peers. When customers start answering questions, providing product feedback, and speaking to critics on behalf of your brand, it creates a virtuous cycle that can drive sustainable, long-term growth. In other words, every marketer's dream.

At Khoros, we help brands create customers for life, and we have been a leader in building branded communities for over 18 years. In that time, we've built and supported over 650 branded communities for B2B and B2C companies in every industry. Not only can Khoros help to build branded communities that engage people and provide social validation throughout their journey, but Khoros also has powerful capabilities like Community Syndication to extend communities throughout your website (such as featuring community reviews on product pages) to differentiate your customer experience.

[Request A Demo](#)

About Khoros

Digital engagement is a rapidly evolving space that requires proven technology — and expertise — to thrive in. With 2,000+ brands using Khoros, including more than half of the Interbrand 100, our software powers approximately 500 million digital interactions every day. From social media to online communities and messaging to digital customer care, Khoros helps companies authentically connect with customers throughout their journey.

