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## Brandanimation: Debunking The Myth of Self Regulation

By Erik Hauser

I would be extremely wealthy if I had a nickel for every submission to the online forum I moderate that I have had to reject. The forum is designed to host discussions on myriad subject matters submitted by everyone from students to CEO's, and there's a delicate balance to encouraging conversation without micro-managing a community that has seen nurtured growth for the last four years. Being able to strike this balance over time has allowed the place to flourish, currently numbering in excess of 4,000 inquisitive minds. I've received numerous appreciative e-mails for the level of conversation and sometimes, oddly enough, nobody talks at all—which is perfectly okay. We are all busy folks here!

During the last six years I've also been a member of too many online discussion forums to count. Many started out enthusiastically with like-minded individuals, a few quick jokes and some intellectual banter along the way. Then, each seemed to hit a turning point when it began to devolve to a group of people simply huckstering condos off the coast of Nepal. Immediately following these groups, the new and improved ones emerged with social networking capabilities – how exciting! I started receiving literally hundreds of requests from people wanting to join my virtual business network. The serial networkers strike! To be honest, I am uncertain about their objective here, because I've failed to see one of them successfully capitalize their network.

My own main goal was to form an online community that evolved by offering valued services and features along with more convenience, control and choice. I believe this approach ultimately allows members to experience the discussions originating within the community on their own terms. One thing I've learned, however, is that a forum will not flourish if the discussion isn't moderated for quality purposes.

The notion that an online community will self-regulate is absolute hogwash. It's a myth that gets debunked everyday. Been to Craigslist lately? Sure, if a community member continues to ramble or talk nonsense someone will eventually say something, but by the time eventually rolls around the valued members of the community have unsubscribed. This leaves what I term the takers – those that take from the community by only engaging in self-promoting dialogue.

Here's a newsflash. Online communities are just like real communities, and therefore governance also exists for a reason. There needs to be order. Everyone knows that we didn't all grow up in the same house - so we're living with different definitions of

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what is acceptable behavior. Those flagrant violators that don't understand social etiquette in the physical world are the same ones that don't get it digitally. They SPAM message boards with sales messages, essentially taking value from the community like a virus that destroys its own host. There is a huge difference between engaging in meaningful and relevant discussions and continuously directing people to your own blog or latest endeavor. It's called giving.

The question, I think, comes down to what is considered acceptable community behavior. Much like the real world, where we have councils and homeowners associations to maintain standards, some online communities have the same infrastructures. Some groups allow things I don't in my forum, but I am convinced you can never build a thriving community when it is being monopolized by takers. We know, in physical space, we all have the right to make citizen arrests – but how many of us do so by policing our communities? I would venture to guess it's a small percentage. And you know those folks at a party that won't quit talking about themselves? Why, oh, why do some think that these people don't own computers? As a matter of fact they spend the majority of their time online.

Let me take a stab at it like this – self-regulation is a myth – a total myth. Sometimes, as a moderator, I have to make decisions based on the greater good. It's not an easy job, and if the takers knew what my inbox looked like the first 20 times I let their posts go through, they'd see how the community really polices itself.

I didn't arrive at this viewpoint overnight – it comes from learning through immersion over the last six years. The takers that try to foster a myth of a completely open forum, screaming they shouldn't be moderated, are the ones trying to monopolize the conversation. Their behavior is just as apparent online as it is face to face.

My message to the takers out there that are complaining? Try giving – it makes you feel good. And it is a big Internet out there. There are lots of Internet addresses where you can set up your digital digs. For the forum I built, and those in which I care to contribute, my position is 100% defensible. I sleep very well at night knowing that I am looking out for the community's time and interests.

*Erik Hauser is creative director/founder of San Francisco-based marketing firm Swivel Media and founder of IXMA, the International Experiential Marketing Association. He also moderates the Experiential Marketing Forum.*

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