Turning your Insight Community into a strategic asset

The Complete Guide to
Insight Communities in 2021

Book 3 of 3

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About this book

This is the last of three books from Researchbods exploring insight communities - tools that bring the customer voice directly into your business and boardroom, creating a two-way relationship that builds revenue and growth.

We don't bite! If you have questions about setting up or running an Insight Community, feel free to reach out.

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Why every brand needs an Insight Community

Book 1 of 3

- What is an Insight Community?
- Seven reasons your business needs an insight community.
- How insight communities drive growth.
- Use cases by business function and industry sector.
- Building the business case.

10 steps to creating and running the very best Insight Community

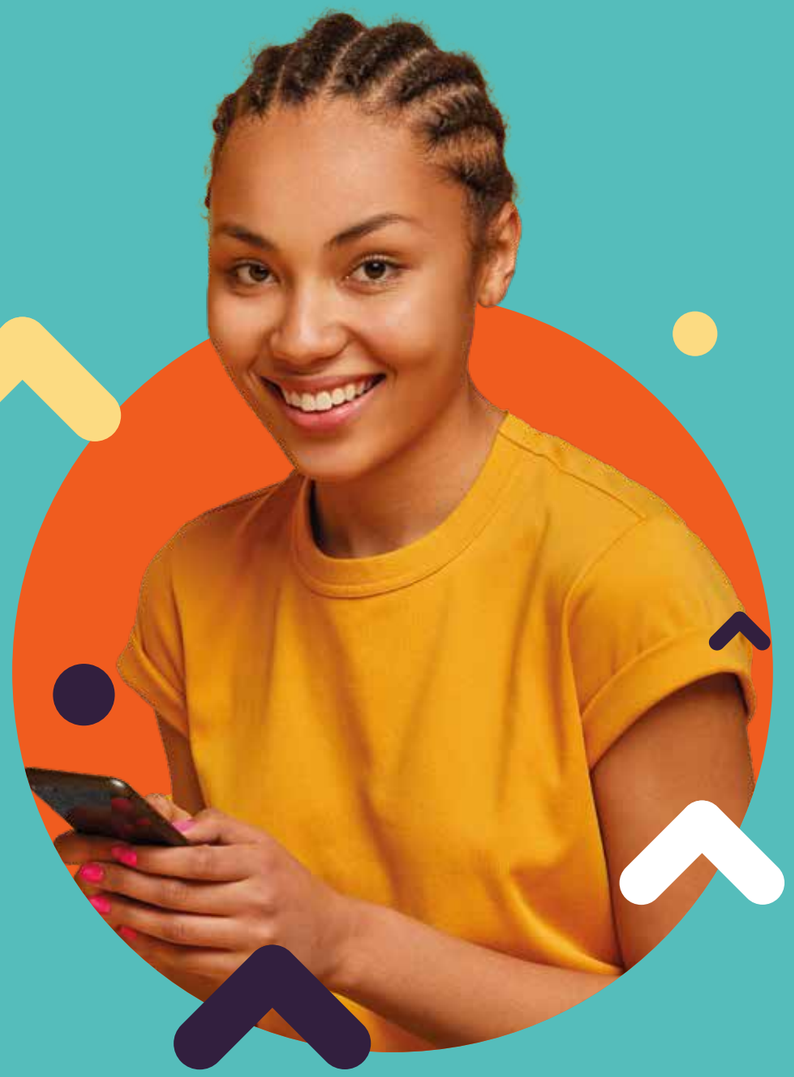
Book 2 of 3

- How platform functionality plays a vital role in its success.
- How to engage with members and create value exchange.
- How to socialise your insights with impactful output
- How to gain stakeholder buy in and deliver visible ROI

A few of our insight community clients:

ASDA, GREGGS, Morrisons, deliveroo, Coca-Cola, COSTA, TESCO, TWININGS, itv, Penguin Random House, dmg::media, The Telegraph, HEARST, nickelodeon, HSBC, LV=, YBS GROUP, O2, AA, first direct

The story so far



The story so far

Insight Communities are older than you might think! They trace their origins back to the early days of the World Wide Web. Large consumer-facing brands like PepsiCo had set up multiple online communities by the end of the 90s.

The major difference was that they were designed as direct marketing channels, rather than as a customer voice tool. This provided an early model for brands' use of social media and reflects the mindset of the time. Brands saw new channels as an extension of the one-sided conversations they were having where the emphasis was on talking rather than listening.

By the early 00s, Market Research agencies developed the first dedicated Insight Communities. They were usually short-term discussion groups, centred on a succession of online qual tasks.

These functions remain a central capability of Insight Communities, but the tools have evolved way beyond that. The development of Insight Communities has run along three tracks: new features, a better and easier user experience, and better business integration.

New features: The feature set of Insight Communities has expanded dramatically, to include survey data, live chat, video data and live video chat, collaborative tools like whiteboards, and more. All these increase the range of tasks for members and widen the scope of data the Insight Community directly collects.

User experience: Alongside this the experience of taking part in an Insight Community has greatly improved. The basic interfaces - posting, commenting, uploading - are smoother, the information in a community is better organised, and mobile support is far stronger. Behind the scenes, it's easier to track and reward activity and what motivates participants is better understood.

Business integration: Data integration is crucial. A modern Insight Community can better integrate with existing survey, CRM and other data streams. But data is only a part of integration - a community also needs to mesh with an organisation's structure, processes and workflows and align with its goals. This is an area in which technology can only do so much of the work, but it's the area in which the future of Insight Communities will be determined.

Top-class technology on its own won't transform the value a community brings to a business. What matters is the third domain - improvements in analysis and business integration.

What we see today are businesses using Insight Communities that are massively more technically advanced than their equivalents of 10 or 15 years ago.

But too often the way in which they are being used is still the same - the communities are siloed within a research or insight function, producing reports which are fascinating and detail rich but which go unused because they aren't integrated with the actual needs of the business.

To solve this, Insight Communities must become strategic assets within an organisation.

02 Data integration

Data integration

An Insight Community can't become a strategic asset if it doesn't speak the same language as the rest of that organisation. This means aligning itself with business processes, KPIs and goals, but even before that it means making sure the Insight Community can link to the data the rest of its organisation uses.

Data integration widens the scope of what the community can do. An Insight Community without integration can tell you a huge amount about the members of that community. What it can't do as well is tell you how well those insights apply to your wider customer base.

For instance, you might run a project on your Insight Community which develops multiple innovation paths based around the idea of sustainability. Data integration lets you know if the community's sustainability priorities are mirrored in the wider customer universe or is just a niche concern.

In this section we'll explore the different types of data you can integrate with your Insight Community, and the ways they expand how it can be used.

CRM data

The most basic level of data integration is linking your Insight Community to your organisation's CRM data. CRM integration is vital because it positions community members within the customer life cycle defined by an organisation. It lets the community owner target customers at particular stages of their connection with a brand, and gives each member a rounded profile, so as an analyst you can immediately understand the level of customer you're dealing with and whether your community insights are broad or niche.

Behavioural & transactional data

The next level of data integration is pulling real behavioural and transactional data into member profiles. This data sometimes exists as part of CRM programmes or loyalty cards, and almost always requires some level of customer permission to record, store and use.

So much traditional research deals with creating models of behaviour and customer decisions, so incorporating this into your community will save a loads of time and effort. It can also help you to unpick the different behaviours of prospective customers vs existing customers.

Sales & financial data

The next step in integration is to link the customer-level transactional data with the sales and financial data. CRM and financial data will likely have some kind of relationship anyway and becoming part of that relationship is vital for an Insight Community. It creates the link between the community and real business outcomes which is so important.
The question is, though, what can the Insight Community bring to that relationship? How can integration help the Finance and Sales departments drive performance via customer knowledge?

Well, your Insight Community is a source of attitudinal data such as customer sentiment, opinion and predicted behaviour around the brand. Traditionally it has been hard to marry this 'soft' attitudinal data with the 'hard' financial data. It's difficult for any researchers to prove the link between attitude and outcome in a way that's rigorous enough to work at the Finance level. But when your community is integrated with your CRM, there's a much more direct relationship to financial outcomes.

You can then analyse the attitudinal data looking for leading indicators - things that predict changes in customer behaviour and drive financial outcomes. The success of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) is an example of this - it's an attitudinal measure which nevertheless has been found to predict changes in customer behaviour which map on to actual results.

Identifying the factors which predict or drive changes in customer life cycles allows for better customer value modelling. Modelling not just which groups are the most valuable now but which groups are likely to be the most valuable in the near-term. This chain of attitudinal, CRM, behavioural and financial data can provide the clearest link between the Insight Community and its contribution to profitable growth.

Multi-agency data

A community creates the opportunity to draw in data from other research projects. Common examples of this are consumer segmentation and brand tracking. These are core research needs but aren't always suitable as primary tasks for an Insight Community. A community can be too skewed towards existing customers to provide a sound basis for a segmentation, for instance.

But if that segmentation shares a language with the community - if community members can be accurately allotted to segments, or if both sets of data can mesh with other data (e.g. CRM) then the segmentation can inform the Insight Community's work without being dependent on it.

Purpose of integration

With each level of integration the Insight Community becomes more deeply linked to the 'real world' of customer behaviour and needs, and also to the aims of the business.

The aim is not just to increase the number of things a community can do. Rather it's to create a 'data lake' - a repository in which all of a company's customer knowledge can be pooled, analysed and accessed.

Can brands create these data lakes without an Insight Community as a basis? Many do! But ultimately what that creates is a larger database, which is more powerful for analysis but does little to democratise data within an organisation and make insight truly accessible.

A data lake with an Insight Community at its centre solves this problem. It makes it easier for organisations to access, interrogate and humanise their data. Access is easier because the community brings together all of a company's customer experience data in one place. This goes beyond other data portals by allowing direct contact with customers in the form of the community members. They can explain, not simply report, what the data says.

Advanced analytics & AI

So far we've looked at the kinds of 1st and 3rd party data an Insight Community can integrate. But there are also major advances in ways that data can be analysed.

Now, it's important to say that while AI has been getting smarter, a lot of claims you may have seen about Artificial Intelligence have been overstated.

'Machine learning' is not some magical programme that spins data straw into insight gold. Any vendor who promises as much should be carefully questioned as to how their techniques work and what they can deliver which others can't.

There are two areas where AI has proven its worth:

Predictive analytics is the science of analysing current and historical data to identify likely future outcomes. It's the kind of modelling that an integrated Insight Community can enable by combining transactional, behavioural, attitudinal and sales data. The number of variables involved means you often need AI assistance to spot the relevant patterns.

The other area where machine learning is useful is handling unstructured data. From customer feedback forms, through focus groups to social media posts, a lot of customer knowledge has always been in the form of unstructured text. Increasingly, unstructured data also comes in the form of images and video. Unstructured data can be analysed at the qualitative level by human analysts, but AI can bring structure to it and find the underlying statistical patterns that let you make sense of it.

Both uses for AI have something in common: they work best when blended with human analysis, not as a replacement for it. AI predictions need human sense-checkers and testers. Models derived from unstructured data also need sense-checking and can be greatly enriched by qualitative insight. The best AI results come from hybrid AI/human analysis.

This theme, of technology and humanity working together, is crucial for our final section, where we look at how to create business integration - meshing an Insight Community or Insight Hub into the rhythms, processes and structure of a business. It's where the technology of Insight Community software hits its limits, and human understanding and expertise plays the most critical role.

03 Business integration

Business integration

The ultimate aim of an Insight Community is to become a resource which makes it easier for the organisation to function, to grow, and to achieve its financial goals.

This won't happen overnight and it certainly won't happen automatically. There's no roadmap to getting there and given the dynamic nature of organisations and their goals, a one-size-fits-all guide would be counterproductive. What we can do in this guide is outline some of the barriers to success and the foundations that need to be in place for business integration to be achievable.

Tip 1: More than just research

Data is everywhere. What most people take for granted is that it takes commercial nous and more than a little know-how to turn that data into actionable insight. If your Insight team are the only ones who can do this, then you risk the danger that they become a roadblock. To get the most value from your community you need to train a cross-section of the business in what the insight platform is, how you use it and how to draw data from it. Teaching them a little on how to read that data isn't a bad idea either!

Tip 2: Cross-pollination

With different business users all using your community, it becomes increasingly important to marry together research outputs with business outputs. Research outputs tend to be reports, summaries and recommendations where business outputs tend to be decisions and actions.

To get from one to the other it's important to build:

Collaboration spaces where data can be annotated and discussed.

Co-creation and workshopping tools to build on data.

Data visualisation and insight dissemination tools.

All of which are designed to increase the active role key stakeholders and consultants have in interpreting, shaping and sharing the insight.

This means better informed decisions, taken more quickly, which fit clearly within existing strategies and goals and are easier for the wider organisation to understand.

Tip 3: Change management

It's pretty easy to write about your data and your business needs becoming best friends, but the reality is more difficult. Whenever you are changing the way in which your organisation works, you should consider employing some form of change management. You need to have a project owner, sign off and support from your C-level management, a plan and timeline for the change to take place and some reinforcement to make sure it sticks.

The point of good insight is to make better informed decisions, but without the right tools, training and appetite within the business this can often feel like another hoop to jump through. Your brand will get much more value out of an Insight Community if every part of your organisation can understand the benefits, can easily access and understand the data and can transform that data into the insight edge.

Tip 4: Consultancy

Many brands are now integrating consultancy into their managed communities to add direction to the insight and data. This marriage of insight and consultancy needs to happen at both a strategic and tactical level in an organisation. At the strategic level, there's a role for expert consultants who understand the goals and immediate pain points in a brand and have experience in giving advice. At the tactical level, you need people with operational and project management skills who can iterate how the tool is used.

The consultants would work with the brand to make sure the tools have the right remit to fit their goals. Ensuring that critical KPIs and metrics and outputs are fed through to different stakeholders. The tactical people working at a more junior level would fine tune, by understanding on a practical level what the tool needs to deliver, to who and when. Their role would be to deliver the data according to the needs of the business, talk up the community, and share the output to normalise use of the community and squeeze more value out of the data.

It's a dictum of technology that the more essential a tool becomes, the less visible it is. It becomes part of the fabric of an organisation. The future of Insight Communities is along these lines - evolving to become an invisible, but vital channel between a business and the customers it relies on to survive.

End note

We hope this book has been useful when thinking about how to turn an Insight Community into a powerful strategic asset.

If you've found this book useful, be sure to download the other two books in our series, which will take you through building a business case for your community and the ins and outs of running one.

Thanks for reading!

About Researchbods

Researchbods is a STRAT7 company that helps brands and agencies find their insight edge. It blends powerful, innovative insight technology and vast in-house experience to fuel its clients' strategic decision making and competitive advantage.

Working across Retail & FMCG, Financial Services, Media & Technology, Travel & Entertainment, and Pharma & Healthcare, Researchbods help brands engage with millions of consumers in real-time. This enables organisations to understand what customers really think of them, want from them, and how emerging trends might alter their strategies.

Thanks to unique tools like ex-plor, Researchbods' market-leading Insight Community platform, brands can uncover greater levels of customer closeness; stress-test their brand strategies; stay on top of a changing world with fast access to millions of global consumers; maximise campaign impact; innovate and create better products and services by identifying what works and what doesn't. Researchbods is a game-changer for brands who want to move ahead of the competition and stay there.

For more information visit researchbods.strat7.com.

Demo the ex-plor platform **today**

Bring the customer voice to life. Get 24/7 insights from deeply profiled consumers in a safe and secure online environment. Gain a single view of your customer's changing needs, by combining your data sources to truly supercharge your strategy.

Massive quantitative toolkit

Dig deeper with hundreds of question types at your disposal. From brand affinity, heatmaps, media evaluators, to complex pricing/statistical techniques such as Gabor-Granger and Van Westendorp, we've got you covered.

Immersive qualitative modules

Discover what's driving customer choices with tools such as discussion rooms, forums, diary studies, interactive maps and online focus groups. We make it super easy to pull out trends and themes your customers are talking about.

Reporting and analysis

We make it effortless to interpret, understand and visualise the data you're collecting. These include live cross tabs (with sign testing and weighting), automated PowerPoint charting and interactive dashboards. Share insight across your organisation with just a few clicks.

Intuitive admin site

Manage the key metrics of your community's health and learn about your members past and future behaviours. AI and machine learning gets you those key metrics quick and our team help you to understand what actions to take to keep your community engaged.

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