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Online Services Brand Extension

Services Solution Management

Brand Extension of Online Services, Enterprise Relations, and Knowledge Base Effectiveness

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I. Introduction

"If you can't measure it, you can't manage it", motto by which online enterprises are implemented, for establishing viable online support services is not merely to achieve customer niches or temporal cost optimization, but executed as part of a brand extension and corporate collaboration strategy. In this manner, one can simultaneously optimize internal cost, secure new revenue channels, and expand one's corporate brand reputation via effective online customer services.

Whether it is products brand extension such as Harley Davidson motorcycles into "Motorclothes" action apparels and Courvoisier high-end cognac into luxury fashions, or services brand extension like Apple computers into iTunes music library or Nokia telecom into MOSH online social media-based network, creation of online enterprise services is closely aligned with these branding initiatives. This marcom extension leveraged existing corporate reputation, product/services quality, and customer goodwill into new vertical or horizontal markets. Its success will vest company as single point of resolution in clientele's mindset, thus serves as natural conduits for both technical resolution and post sales marcom channel.

For E-commerce corporations with significant online service and support presence, emerging brand extension challenge is Services Solution Management (SSM) : coordinated business model of online support offering, consistent knowledge base (KB) interface, standardized resolution metrics, external corporate collaboration, and post sales channel. Marcom drive is to transform ancillary corporate and customer perception of online support into robust services channel for effective technical self-service resolution, relevant marcom offering, and integrated 3rd-party knowledge bases. In other words, ultimate goal is to convert traditional cost center view of online support services into a revenue center.

To achieve this goal, multiple SSM criteria must be ascertained, namely : 1) Brand extension rationale, 2) Feature set effectiveness validated through solution sources, interfaces, and metrics, 3) Consolidated business efforts for cross-enterprise "best of breed" implementation

II. The Need for Extension

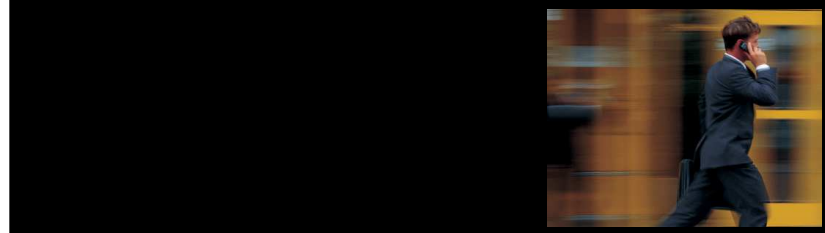
To some, online brand management is marcom fluff in attempting to project lifestyle nuance and



Figure 1. Services Solution Management Online model combines business disciplines of brand extension, enterprise relations, corporate collaboration, and expanded customer experience.

product/service images as determinate factors in business or technical resolution. Yet, reality has shown that perception is often more powerful than fact in customer mindsets. By our nature, we are social creatures, hence respond to social stimuli, site feature sets enhancing familiarity and recall, seamless online interactivity, etc.

These characteristics are paramount in today's global digital economy, by which the Internet and trade globalization has significantly expanded customer sophistication in product research and lifestyle preferences. Unfortunately, this also inundated mass media across multiple marcom realms among traditional channels (ex. Radio, TV, print, films) and new-economy channels (ex. web, email, forums, wireless, chat). Intensity was such that one study estimated the public was bombarded on average between 300 to 3,000 media impressions daily.



customer adoption, incorporating products/services quality, corporate governance, social prestige of affiliation, lifestyle enhancement, and to a degree even concept of employee branding (grapevine opinions of current and past employees). With this positioning, corporations can leverage new competitive paradigms beyond its traditional industry base (ex. Caterpillar tractor producing heavy-duty work gear apparel, Apple creation of iTunes online music store).

In this regard, two major drivers are clientele loyalty and offering relevance. "Loyalty" in that one's customer base is already satisfied with existing quality and performance, hence inclined to adopt new marcom offerings. If not, then

Brand Management



Figure 2. Brand management projects multiple attributes including brand awareness, penetration, and value. Strategic aspects are leveraged via brand extension into new vertical and horizontal markets.

Consequence of these aggressive tactics was rapid customer information overload and dissipated public interest, which diluted overall purchasing experience to mere commoditization whereby products/services were evaluated solely by its lowest price. To offset this dilemma, global brand management emerged as new discipline supplanting monotonous mass marketing rituals with clientele-specific relationship marketing appeal.

Global Branding's drive is to consolidate cross-corporate assets onto a single focal point for

corporations trying to tap into this new revenue potential would be inundated with customer complaints to effect "You haven't solve my current problem yet, so why the hell are you trying to sell me more stuff after my purchase?". "Relevance" in that monotonously propagating a brand name is not sufficient to secure mass appeal, the offerings must be aligned with current corporate posture (ex. HP expansion from its traditional printer base into digital photography). If products are not aligned (ex. Porsche sports sedan expansion into laptop computers) or service not up to par (ex. Dell

expansion into home HDTV installation), then customers would abandoned this channel in-masse.

For high-tech corporations, brand extension in manner by which integrated online service and support features are managed. Challenge is to transform public perception of online support as ancillary features into a bonafide revenue channel. Main caveat is not to throw unstructured support solutions for customers to sequentially self-resolve. For example, one corporation touted "We have 28,000 online technical solutions for customers to download", but irritated customers retorted "I don't care, I only want that ONE solution to solve my problem and I can't find it on your site". Therefore, by aligning customer expectation, online metrics, intelligent search engine, and multi-party knowledge bases, a comprehensive services solution can be established.

III. Know Your Source

First step in brand extending online technology services is to map out all information sources within one's corporate solution centers, generally divided among three areas : 1) Directed Source, 2) Collaborative Source, 3) External Source.

Directed Source (aka 1st-party) is traditionalist approach of inhouse content teams to create solutions based on internal recommendations (ex. engineering specs, tech agent customer liaison) or external customer inquiries (ex. customer call-in). Knowledge articles from this channel must be periodically managed for customer relevancy, thus some solutions should be tagged low-search rank or retired outright (ex. fixing Windows 95 IRQ device settings) while other articles' search ranking be increased (ex. trouble-shooting wireless routers). This should prevent negative brand perception of hosting "stale" solutions, which may impede customer adoption of one's online solution suite. For example, one technology firm discovered that among 28,000 unique online solutions hosted on their support site, 90% of customers only access 3,000 of these solutions on regular basis. Hence, nearly 25,000 of its hosted solutions had to be reviewed for so-called solution staleness.

Collaborative Source (aka 2nd-party) is a tactical scoop of information generated from online



Knowledge Base Sources

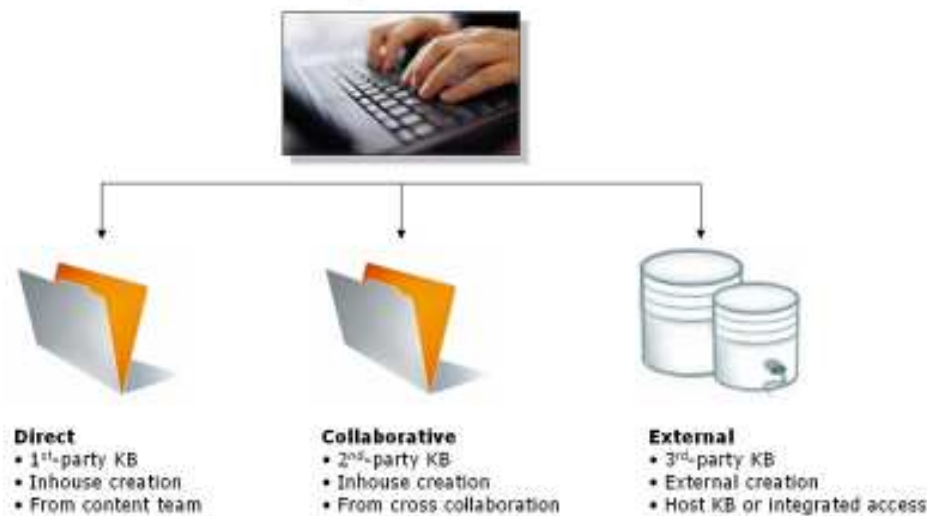


Figure 3. Information created from various collaborations can be divided among 1st-party, 2nd-party, and 3rd-party knowledge bases. Integration of 3rd-party KBs will require effective enterprise relations and strategic corporation collaboration.

forums, chat session logs between customers and tech agents, optimal solutions derived among tech agent discussions, etc. Via this strategy, inhouse "Tribal Knowledge" (mission-critical information retained by employees, but not documented in electronic or print media) can be preserved among synergetic business relationships. To capture this intelligence, some form of adaptive search and data mining technology is required to review the sheer volume of data and tag appropriate ones for adoption. For example, one online support site hosting customer/tech agent chat sessions generated about 1 million chat journal logs per week, resulting in 4 million journal logs per month. That volume would literally overwhelm corporate staff in manually reviewing each journal's relevancy, hence automated intelligent parsing is a definite requirement.

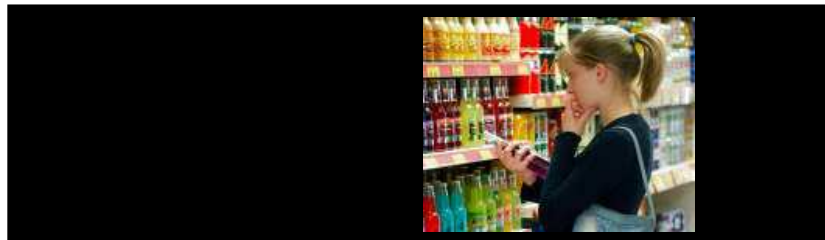
External Source (3rd-Party) is leveraging other corporate knowledge bases within one's own online support site. If properly balanced, this venture can achieve multiple aims, such as expanding customer selection of knowledge sources within single online focal point and brand extend its usage for customer self-service and tech agent assisted resolutions. Key caveat is to encapsulate information within one's corporate website (ex. online branding elements, information architecture, site navigation, webpage schematic) to leverage customer familiarity, usability, and adoption. Another legal consideration is that most public accessible support sites have restricted usage limited to personal/private customer usage, external corporate tech-agents are forbidden to use these sites unless legal agreement have been mutually attained on its commercial usage. By empirical observation, there have been frequent instances whereby corporate tech agents ignored this restriction to quickly resolve customer issues, thus potentially casting a legal demerit.

IV. Collaboration Logistics

With backend knowledge sources identified, next step turns to its frontend usage strategy, whether targeting stepwise refined web-based UI improvements or enacting full-fledged intelligent search engine / knowledge base capabilities / natural language IU feature sets. For medium-sized companies, this strategy can be readily executed via small business & technology teams with condensed products support offerings and select market venues. For larger corporations,

logistic intricacy may need to accommodate divergent business agendas, segmented market venues, or even differences in departmental corporate culture.

In addition, potential consequences of "mission creep" may impact project execution from of sudden competitive market changes, corporate reorganizations, and outsourcing expansion altering original project intentions. For example, Dell Solution Network (DSN) was originally conceived in Spring 2000 as a simple enhancement from FTP to web-based UI for downloading PC device drivers. However, after series of corporate reorganizations, departmental cost-cutting endeavors, and business group amalgamations, DSN dramatically expanded into a "Best of Breed" initiative. DSN project literally churned from one year to the next as successive teams were cycled in, its agenda incorporated, only to have it negated as new corporate reorgs dissolved the previous groups and formed new ones with newer agendas. By its deployment in Fall 2004, DSN evolved into a single-point service & support portal servicing both consumer and enterprise clientele with web-based frontend intelligence search engine, live technical agent chat sessions,



integrated email questionnaires, linkage to inhouse community forums, knowledge base content authoring, and 3rd-party knowledge base integration. *Note : DSN is currently called "Troubleshooting and FAQs" link on Dell Support site.*

Even with successful project rollout, reiterating industry proverb "If it cannot be measured, then it cannot be managed", hence metrics on knowledge base effectiveness must be reviewed and enacted upon accordingly. Depending on incorporated KB technology suite, one tactical feature is Rank Tuning : assigning weight values to knowledge base solutions based on customer keyword or mnemonic entries, thus ensuring optimal solutions are presented for customer online resolution. For example, customer

searching on "Blue Screen of Death" should by default be presented with Windows XP solutions and not Window 95/98 entries.



Rank tuning features are available from off-the-shelf knowledge base search engine products (ex. FAST search engine), its search strata values can be assigned manually or via automated tripwires based on website traffic. Implementing rank tuning for small to medium-sized companies are relatively straightforward since changes are usually reviewed and enacted by a single department. However, in large transnational corporations with multiple stakeholders across segmented business arenas

sharing a common knowledge base backend, changing a solution's search strata relevancy may benefit one group at the detriment of another. Coordinating this logistic will require some form of business governance council with representatives from all major stakeholders.

Regardless of market size, website penetration rate, or technical call agent call avoidance, the key caveat to successful collaborative rank tuning is "show me the money", which is priority rank adjustments are given to stakeholder teams with active financial and personnel contribution (ex. hardware purchases, software development, personnel salary) to the business governance council. This should preclude non-contributing business teams from vetoing certain rank tuning actions and avoid pitfalls of corporate bickering over jurisdiction. Once vested, then contributing teams can compare site metrics, revenue/cost impacts, and other market dynamics to enact priority tuned solutions (ex. determining searches on "wireless networking setup" to show Windows Vista versus Windows XP as priority online solutions).

Rank Tuning Samples

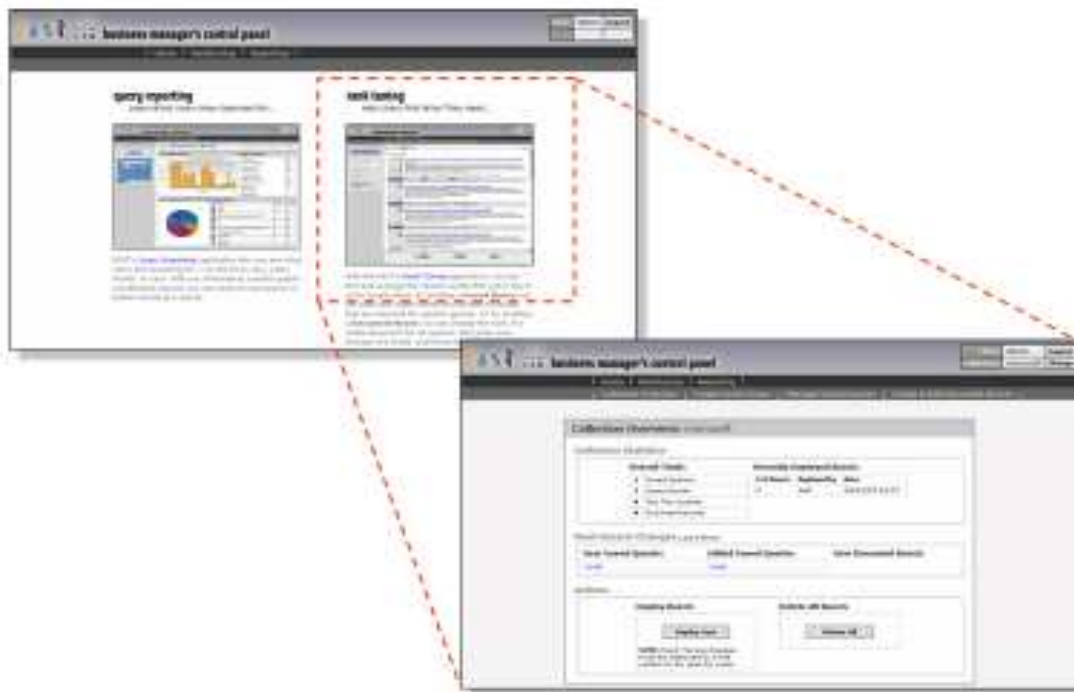


Figure 4. Rank Tuning enables specified KB articles to possess more search weight factor than other comparable articles. Example above shows FAST's Business Manager Control Panel feature in executing tuning parameters.

V. Consolidating Customer Experience

With stakeholders aligned and knowledge base methodology secured, next venue is to converge online customer experience onto the Visual Interface Design (VID) : umbrella term encompassing website's information architecture, graphical and content page schematics, online branding assets, and site usability. Depending customer sophistication, the VID is not simply a collection of service & support hotlinks, but rather a distinct online entity projecting corporate persona and single point effort for all customer resolution (ex. interlinking web-based knowledge base solutions with chat, forum, VOIP queue, email alert, etc). Effective channeling of customer expectations will enable amendable customer acceptance of additional Point-of-Sale (ex. more hardware & software purchases) and After Point-of-Sale offerings (ex. extension of service contracts & warranties).

In general, VID is broken down into three major components : 1) Master Header, 2) Content Body, 3) Master Footer. Master Header is the most important online branding component since customers tend to begin website navigation from top-to-bottom and left-to-right orientation. Hence, crucial brand identifiers (ex. corporate logo, brand tagline, official color palette, country-language selection) are positioned here. Content Body is where virtually all mission-critical marcom information and offerings are placed, whereby customers reviews, analyzes, and stores relevant knowledge, be it corporate news bulletins, products/services descriptions, business segmentation, POS/APOS marcom offerings, site personalization features. In addition, since "pictures are worth a thousand words", some companies utilize large lifestyle imageries to brand-emotionally bond with its customer base. Master Footer serves as terminal anchor for customer experience, it delineates copyright, legal disclaimers, localized company name, etc.

Wireframe Sample

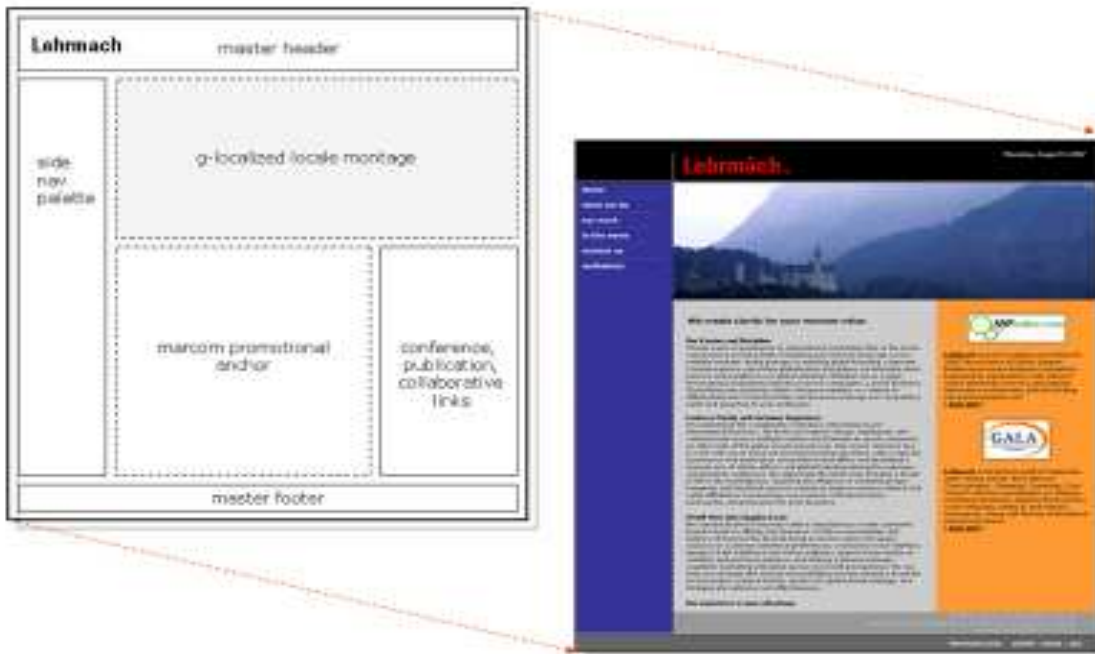
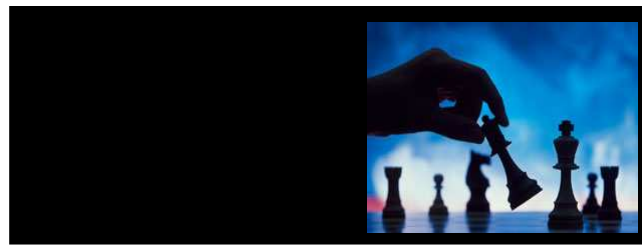


Figure 5. Wireframes enable VID collaboration to channel on information architectural layout, with emphasis on brand marcom impact and technical feasibility. Example above shows Lehmach VID from raw conception to final execution.



VID design usually commences with Wireframes (UI design outlining rudimentary information layout devoid of graphical and stylized content assets), its barebones nature channels collaborative teams into what needs to be displayed rather than style of its presentation since certain information displays may require significant IT resources to integrate dynamic backend information sources. In addition, this protocol prevents cosmopolitan teams (mixture of business, technology, marketing, sales) from incessant debate on trivial UI styling arguments (ex. lifestyle images, color palette, font typeface) before mission critical display elements are identified.



marcom identity onto new customers and brand reassurance for returning customers. This type of UI design is tempered to customer preferences, site usability, and localized attributes. For example, corporate blue-white colors conveys more conservatism contrasted

Online Brandings & Corporate VID

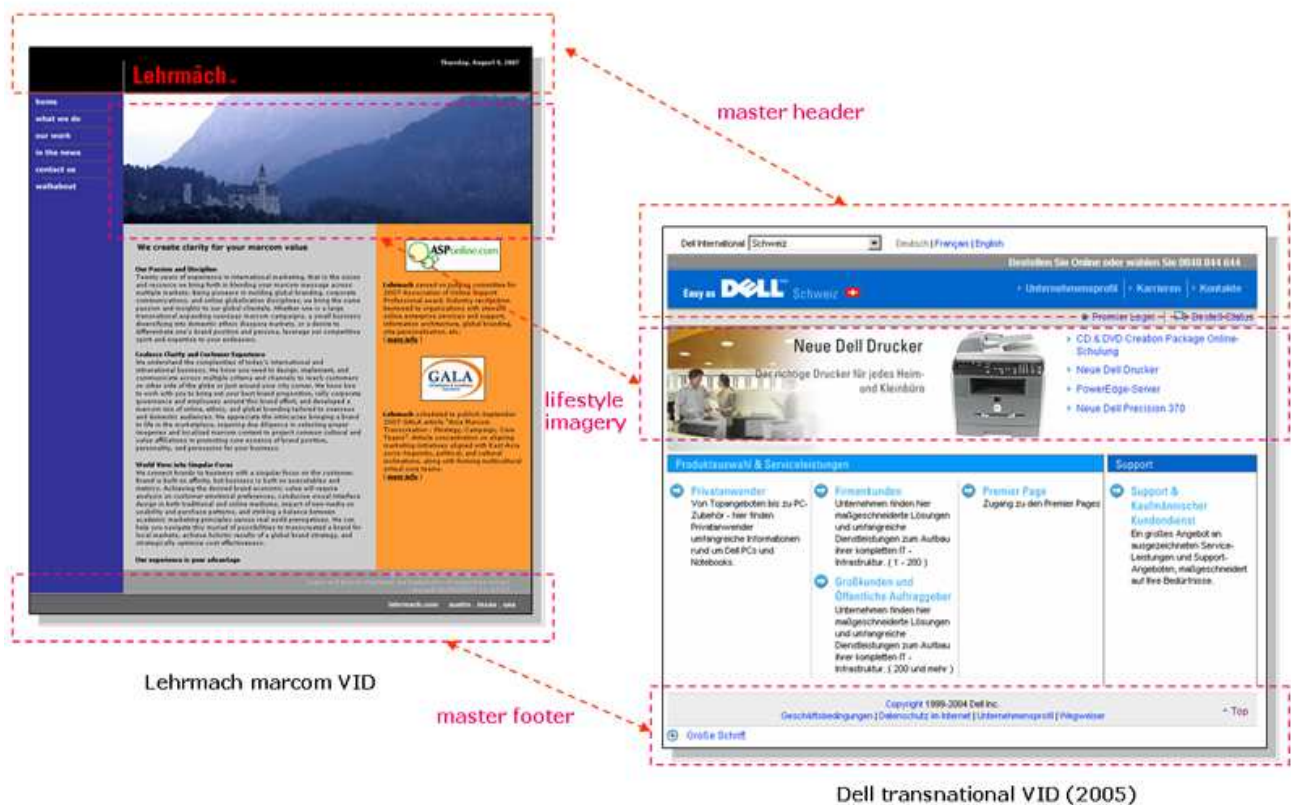


Figure 6. Online branding via corporate VIDs shows different approaches by various organizations, but major components can still be consistently identified, such as example between Lehmach marcom VID and Dell's transnational VID.

With VID wireframes formalized, efforts now shifts to creating online corporate persona via specific set of color palette, font typeface, content alignment, and graphical assets. When properly executed, these visual queues projects distinct corporate brand nuance, hence imparts

corporate VID showing professionals with African-descent was initially declined by Mexico segment since it did not accurately represent the true ethnic makeup of that country). All in all, examples above are subjective considerations, but essence of brand

management is to transform clientele subjective decision-making into an objective product/service offering and thus differentiate marcom positions among competitors.

For example, here are two online products I worked on in recent past : 1) Lehrmach VID and its marcom knowledge base, 2) Dell VID and its knowledge base services. Lehrmach, being a brand consultancy, its knowledge base consists of PDF downloads on business case studies, market research, and brand transcreation projects. Its red-black corporate brand colors, delivers online clientele experience via conservative black-blue-grey-amber VID

base colors (for visual information queue), geographic locale imageries (allusion to international markets), san-serif font typeface usage (portray conservative nuance). Key caveat is consistent site navigation rendered across all Lehrmach online resources.

Take this execution to a higher plane was Dell's Global VID (2000-2005) and its flagship knowledge base service product : Dell Solutions Network (DSN). Dell being a transnational in Internet technologies, information services, PC manufacturing, extensive overseas clientele, its VID incorporated full site globalization for 40 countries and languages (ex. localized lifestyle

Knowledge Base VID

Lehrmach self-service marcom KB

Dell self-service technical KB

PDF file download

Links to solution pages

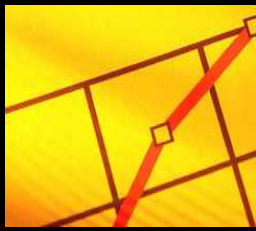
Figure 7. Corporate VID and knowledge bases can serve multi-facet initiatives, be it marcom centric or self-service technical resolution.



imageries, national name-flag-language indicators, multiple language toggle for designated countries, etc). Its brand recognized blue-white corporate colors and VID layout were infused among all online resources. As Dell's Enterprise DSN Manager Jason McDonald remarked at that time, advantage of this approach was that "subsequent online products

need not re-invent the wheel when it comes to designing effective user-interfaces since consistent UI rendition brings consistent customer adoption". With Dell VID market-tested, customer-accepted, corporate-sanctioned, all online UI resources can simply "piggy back" on tried-and-tested conduit for upfront e-commerce activities, after-point-of-sale marcom offering, technical resolution, etc.

Side note on corporate VID execution, its adoption by business and technical teams may relegate some knowledge base UI obsolete. For example, VID is created for external-facing customer applications (ex. corporate web portal, search engine, knowledge base), hence projects for consistent online customer experience for branding and navigation purposes. Internal-facing applications (ex. UIs solely used by inhouse technical support agents or marcom reporting teams) usually do not conform to corporate VID standards since there is no requirement for such integration.



However, situation may arise when corporate VID maturity supersede practicality of internal-facing UIs. Such was the case concerning 2005 Dell DSN technical agent portal (internal application combining natural language, intelligent search engine, localized knowledge bases). Originally, individual support teams created their own in-house knowledge base UIs for technical call agents during customer liaison on the phone queue. Unfortunately, after series of business reorganizations and shear employee attrition, personnel assignment – financial resources – "tribal knowledge" no longer existed to regularly maintain such internal UIs.

A quick review of web and phone queue metrics revealed there was no need to continue such internal operational expenses. Both customers and technical agents were using the same external-facing DSN application to resolve problems. Internet-savvy customers comfortable with self-service applications readily utilize DSN to rectify all technical problems.

Customers with phone queue preference were incrementally guided by technical agents on DSN usage with intention of persuading these customers to solely use Internet-based technical documents for future resolutions (thus reducing call center support costs). In addition, technical call agents found DSN UI usability superior to former in-house knowledge base UIs, hence by default abandoned the latter usage. Therefore, a simple marcom venue in branding online interfaces actually resulted in operation cost reduction.

VI. 3rd-Party Collaboration

With information silos identified, online branded VID established, and intelligent search/knowledge base technologies implemented, this customer conduit can be leveraged for strategic partnerships as in the case of incorporating 3rd-party knowledge bases (3PKB) to enhance one's solution services initiative. This mutual enterprise can serve simultaneous touchpoints :1) For corporation, it can dramatically expand knowledge base solutions by merely linking or mirroring partner sites, 2) For customers, they can come to a single online service site and secure cross-enterprise solutions from different vendors, 3) For partners, they can funnel solutions to service sites with effective customer adoption and navigation. Hence, this could be a win-win situation for all parties.

The 3PKB revenue model encompasses many facets including :1) On The Box, 2) Tech Agent Assisted, 3) On The Web. "On The Box" venue is premium option to load 3PKB images onto customer computing desktops or servers, thereby giving enterprise clientele direct local access to required information. "Tech Agent Assisted" venue is 3PKB premium usage to resolve customer inquiries via call centers. "On The Web" venue is customer 3PKB premium access for self-service resolution activities via one's online service & support websites. All three venues will require additional 3rd-party legal agreement to accommodate these usage types. In addition, for "On The Box" venue a "plug and play" approach since corporate branded VID has already been designed and implemented. The logistics covers four areas : 1) KB Replication, 2) Legal Scope, 3) VID Integration, 4) Marcom Options.

KB Replication refers to 3PKB integration via one of the following methods : 1) Hosted, 2)

3rd-party KB Revenue Model



Figure 8. 3rd-party Knowledge Base could be assigned premium access, thus expanding revenue for online "On The Web", locally replicated "On The Box", and "Tech Agent Assisted" call center resolutions.

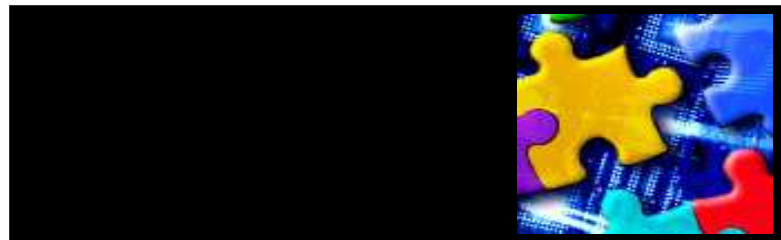
External, 3) Non-Disclosure Agreement. Hosted method mirrors 3PKB onto local inhouse repository, it offers better content filter controls (ex. not all 3rd-party content may be relevant to your localized audiences), with ability to rank-tune specific content search priority factor. Some 3rd-parties may be overtly sensitive concerning their proprietary KB solutions, hence may decline their KBs be externally mirrored.

External method executes web crawl of 3rd-party site, updates the KB index redirections, and setup filters to prevent realtime searches on 3rd-party site to avoid conflict with their site traffic. 3PKB results are generated on partner site and pulled into the local corporate VID, thereby presenting a seamless online solution suite to the customer. Unfortunately, not all partners are comfortable with regular external web crawls of their KBs due to Internet bandwidth sensitivities, hence other contingencies may need to be evaluated.

Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) method is External method with restricted login access due to sensitive or proprietary information (ex. bypassing OS account security via Back-Door feature). Login access are usually hardcoded based on Internet domain to prevent web lock-outs. Otherwise web crawls and KB index redirections updates are same as External method. For example, this NDA venue was how Dell DSN project initially incorporated 3PKB

content from Microsoft, Symantec, Roxio, and Linksys as premium online & tech agent assisted service feature to its clientele.

Legal Scope is 3rd-party "Terms of Use" agreement of its KB content. In general, 3rd-party support sites are open for customer self-service, and preclude external call center tech agent-assisted customer resolutions. Empirical observations have witnessed some tech agents ignoring this restriction (either for resolution expediency or usage of a superior external search engine/VID interface) and accessed 3rdparty sites while at work to secure customer resolutions. This inevitably creates legal default for perpetrating corporation in question. Hence, it is best to secure mutual agreement on proper 3PKM access and replication.



VID Integration can be most seamless feature since website's online brand persona, site navigation, and customer adoption have already been successfully established with Direct (or 1st-party) and Collaborative (or 2nd-party) KB

3rd-Party Collaboration

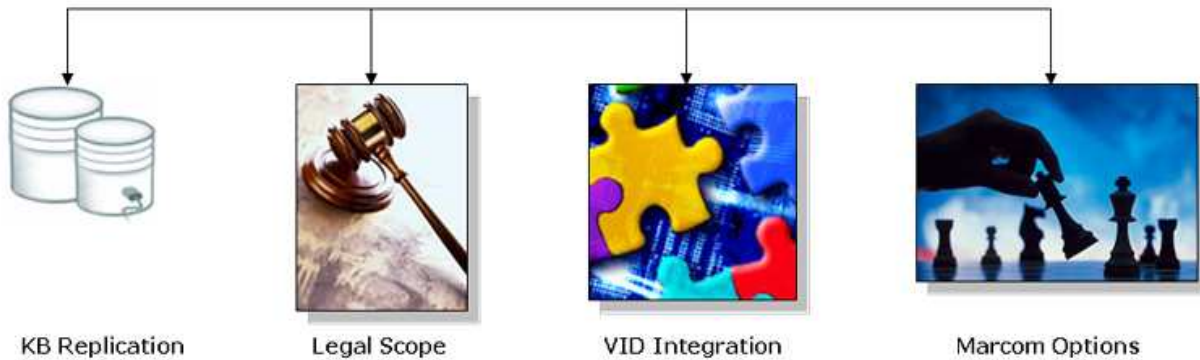


Figure 9. 3rd-party Knowledge Base integration into corporate VID expands both online customer experience and marcom options within legal confines.

content. 3PKB content is merely another information silo cycled into the customer experience. From a clientele perspective, they access a single corporate service site to gather all relevant 3rd-party support information, all encapsulated within a consistent online information architecture.

Results of 3PKB integration can be ascertained by its effectiveness metrics, every corporate has

its own criteria mix but can be generally divided among two tiers. Main 3PKB effectiveness tier directly impacts the bottom line (via revenue generation or cost savings efforts), such as Call Resolution (resolving customer problems on first call basis thus avoid multiple call backs on same problem), Call Avoidance (customers by-passing call center to self-resolved problem via corporate website), and Premium Subscription (customers willingness to paid additional fee for extra venue

3rd-party KB Effectiveness Metrics



Figure 10. 3rd-party Knowledge Bases effectiveness metrics can be divided between two tiers, with main tier vested on immediate revenue generation and cost savings, while second tier opting for internal cost optimization efforts.

to access 3PKB content). Second 3PKB effectiveness tier impacts internal cost optimization logistics, such as Article Replication (cost of creating the same article inhouse), Article Repurposing (cost of localizing the same article inhouse for international regions), Article Enterprise Usage (cost savings from using same article across multiple business segments). Consolidating these metrics will provide strong indicators showing viability of one's own enterprise service and support site.

VII. Summary

The marcom and logistics strategies outlined above is not a turnkey approach, and will require steadfast senior managerial commitment, business foresight, and technical team flexibility across multiple departments, market segments, and international regions. More poignantly, there is quasi-ideological paradigm both business and technology teams must surmount before full online services collaboration can be attained. For business teams, harsh caveat is that online branding is "marcom fluff" unless precise web metrics are integrated to gauge customer adoption and online services penetration to allot credit for resultant POS/APOS generation. For technology teams, fact that mere creation of a "better mousetrap" via intelligence search, natural language interfaces, and knowledge base capabilities are negated if customers are not channeled into a structured online experience, be it a branded VID layout, seamless site navigation, or even elimination of excessive techno-jargon for customer self-service KB articles. Ability to balance these demands will create effective Direct, Collaborative, External knowledge base integration as part of corporate branding and online services extension strategy.



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Lehrmach is a management consultancy with concentrations in transnational marketing, brand transcreation, corporate communication, and online globalization. For additional information, contact lehrmach@lehrmach.com

Lehrmach

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