

The Social Contract:

Customers, Companies, Communities, Conversations in the Age of the Collaborative Relationship

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Yes, You Can Sell That Here

Kevin Ryan | Vice President, Social Media at Barnes & Noble.com, Content

There's a thread running through community circles that suggests you can't monetize your social activities in the traditional sense. The ROI, it's said, should be measured in diverted costs and the knowledge you gain through customer engagement.

By and large, that's still true. But smart community folks can also drive sales through their social efforts, sometimes in measurable ways. Dell is probably the best example, with \$6.5 million in worldwide revenue through its Twitter accounts. But others are making headway, too.

At Barnes & Noble, we created opportunities for user-generated commerce by adding a product search-and-buy feature to the message editor in our online community. The B&N Book Clubs—message boards run on the Lithium Technologies platform—were a discussion space for readers and writers. We had dozens of conversations taking place on a range of literary topics.

We learned early on that the participants (in addition to being good customers in their own right) were good social sellers. They spent considerable time making book recommendations to other users (and linking to the product pages on our site in the process). The mechanism for this linking was kind of clunky: users had to leave the forum, search the site, and copy a URL into the message editor in order to make their links.

In late 2008, we added an "add product" widget to the message editor that allowed users to search, link and buy without ever leaving the community. Posters who wanted to make a book recommendation simply hit the "add product" button on the editor, entered their search terms and selected the book or books they wanted to add to their message.

People reading the boards now had a nice visual representation of the recommended titles. And because they were part of the contributors' content, the product placement was appropriate for the discussion. And when readers moused over the image, they saw our standard product details popup, and could add the item to their cart right from the message.

With little fanfare, we turned user-generated content into user-generated commerce, and encouraged customer merchandising that was contextually appropriate and useful to the community.

Barnes & Noble doesn't disclose usage of or sales through the widget. But you can see that it's in use across the community in nearly any message containing a book image. And you can see that users miss the feature when it's (sometimes) not there.

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Yes, You Can Sell That Here (cont'd)

I always thought the widget was the perfect complement to our book club discussions. And I think a similar tool would bring value to the community on any e-commerce site, or to any forum where a product (digital or otherwise) might be a solution to a user question.

In our case, where the recommendations were personal, any participant could use the tool. But it's not hard to imagine a situation where the commerce recommendation would be available only to super-users or to members of the moderation team.

But either way, it's evidence that you can mix commerce with community—provided it's appropriate for the discussion and it doesn't get in the way.

About the Author

Kevin S. Ryan is a digital media and social commerce strategist focused on helping brands navigate the changing social landscape in search of customer engagement, loyalty and sales. Kevin ran content and digital community programs at Barnes & Noble.com for nearly a decade, turning user-generated content into user-inspired commerce. He believes social media tools are fundamentally altering the balance between companies and consumers, and has experience managing that change. Kevin began his career as a journalist, and worked as an editor at *New York Newsday* and *The New York Times* before entering the digital space more than a dozen years ago. Kevin blogs at KevinSRyan.com, and communicates on Twitter [@KevinSRyan](https://twitter.com/KevinSRyan).



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