INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Many examples are known of companies that have established communities (Siemens, IBM, Shell, Unilever). Mostly, these communities have an internal function: distribution of knowledge throughout the organization. How to build and maintain communities is no longer a question for these companies. At this phase, the companies want to know if and how they can benefit more from their communities.

We use the framework of McDermott (2001) to explain how communities mature (see Figure 1). Community activities are the first step. Then, at the next level, its output and value become important. Finally, you can look at how the community adds to business results. The triangle shape of the framework shows that most results can be expected on the level of community activities and least on business results. From what we have seen in company communities until now, we can conclude that most of these communities are on the level of “activities” and “output.” Some have value for teams or individuals (“value” level), but we hardly see communities that have a clear business result. Communities may grow to a higher level, but some companies are looking for ways to catalyze this process.

In the next section we generate ideas of how communities can support knowledge-based services. Examples and cases illustrate these.

MARKETING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

Several ways exist to benefit from communities. For example, loyalty of customers that participate in a community may increase, and as a result, these customers buy more of an organization’s products. Another way is to use communities as a knowledge base for customer services. This last issue will be addressed in this article. But first, let us elaborate on these customer services.

Knowledge-Based Products and Services

Table 1 lists a number of knowledge-based products and services. Such products and services add value to the company’s core product range. Next to a description we also address the knowledge that can be used in the product and the perceived value for the customer.

Various ways exist to generate revenues with these knowledge-based products. They can be charged as any other product. Other revenue models are to include such products in service contracts (like maintenance) or as a part of a product (like help desks). In all cases, knowledge products add value to the original products and give a company competitive advantage. Some of these products and services are common to many companies, since customers demand them with products (help desk, maintenance, product information).

The Contribution of (Internal) Communities to Customer Value

A community can play an important role in knowledge-based products and services offered to customers. Ex-