

Which brands are best at creating a sense of community among their customers?

"I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member." It's a classic Groucho Marx line that's still pretty funny after all these years. In its own twisted way, it also kind of captures how many of us feel about the elusive idea that brands can be 'communities.'

Brands seem more heavily invested in the idea of 'community' than ever before, likely because social networks afford them new ways to connect with current and potential devotees. But do these networks truly create communities? With this question in mind, we surveyed *Hub* readers. We simply paired well-respected brands and asked respondents to pick the one that provided the stronger sense of community.

For most brands, the notion that they offer anything remotely like a sense of community is a nonstarter. Based on responses, most people still basically identify with brands because of ad campaigns, price/value, convenience and quality. For the most part, they exhibit little to no interest in their fellow customers—it's really all about how well the brand serves their needs as individuals. It's all about *me*, not *us*.

One of the most interesting matchups was Lego and Nike. The dividing line was demographics. If you played with Legos as a kid, or have kids today, Lego was the choice. If Lego is no longer relevant to your lifestage, however, chances are you picked Nike. No mention was made whatsoever of Lego's development of multiplayer online games or Nike's organizing of running groups in local communities.

Granted, some brands—but very few—are indeed like communities. Harley-Davidson springs immediately to mind. But even here, some dismissed the community as just a bunch of old white guys. That hurts. Remember Saturn? The only thing crazier than the bond between owners of that car was that General Motors killed their joy. For all its fanboys, it's not clear that Apple is exactly a community, either. It's more like the world's largest cult. But its stores certainly have made a point of becoming a gathering place for true believers.

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Amazon vs. Apple



Harley vs. Tesla



Chipotle vs. Whole Foods



Costco vs. Target



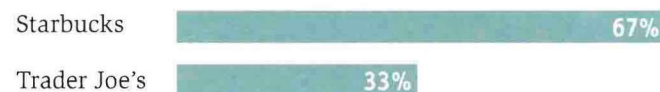
Lego vs. Nike



Coca-Cola vs. Disney



Starbucks vs. Trader Joe's

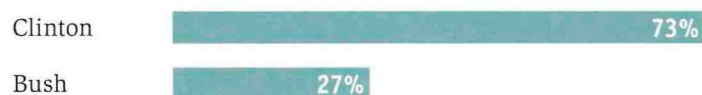


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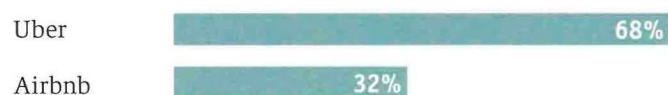
TOMS vs. Warby-Parker



Bush vs. Clinton



Airbnb vs. Uber



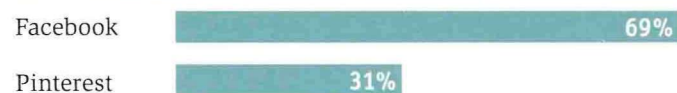
JetBlue vs. Southwest



Burberry vs. Nordstrom



Facebook vs. Pinterest



HBO vs. Netflix



To a lesser degree, Starbucks, Whole Foods and Trader Joe's engender a sense of community. Starbucks, in particular, often doubles as a neighborhood gathering place. That's largely because Starbucks gives its customers (and noncustomers) a place to linger and engage with one another. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's do exude a community-like warmth, but perhaps grocery shopping really does not naturally lend itself to the kind of social interaction on which true communities are built.

Then you have retailers like Costco, which position themselves as 'clubs' with 'memberships.' Would Groucho Marx join Costco? Of course not, but we do know that the model creates a certain sense of belonging among its customers. If you're into buying stuff in bulk and paying an annual fee for the privilege, you're in. But it's unlikely that Costco shoppers are meeting up to talk about their club-store shopping experiences at, say, Starbucks. Possibly because they have ten pounds of perfectly good coffee beans in the freezer.

The faceoff between TOMS and Warby-Parker was interesting, too—as was Uber versus Airbnb. A surprising number of respondents never heard of these companies. Granted, they are relatively new, but seriously? Each of these next-generation companies was born of the networking potential of the World Wide Web; community is part of their DNA. TOMS trounced Warby, mostly because it is much better known. Uber also buried Airbnb, primarily because of its relative ubiquity. Accessibility surely is a prerequisite of community.

At the end of the survey, we asked respondents to pick the one brand with which they felt the strongest sense of community. There was no clear winner, with likely suspects Apple, Starbucks and Whole Foods in a virtual dead heat. Airbnb did pretty well, too. Slightly ahead of that pack was Facebook, whose very brand premise is, of course, community. The Groucho Marx community on Facebook currently has about 62,500 members.

Complete results:

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