

The CMOcircle

A Global Room of Distinct Voices

Community-Led Growth in Digital Economies

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Table of Contents

A practical exploration of how today's CMOs are rethinking growth through experience-led marketing.

- 01 About TheCMOcircle**
- 02 Who's in the Room**
- 03 The Question That Opened the Room**
- 04 What the Room Revealed**
- 05 What This Demands of the CMO**
- 06 Frameworks Born from the Room**
- 07 Final Reflections**

About TheCMOcircle

At **TheCMOcircle**, each edition brings senior marketers from different industries into a single room to challenge assumptions and reason aloud about the forces' reshaping growth. No decks, no scripts, just candid dialogue among peers. The format stays deliberately small and closed-door.

Each room seats a group of CMOs for a single evening. A curator opens with one question and lets the conversation run from there: no panels, no pitches, no press in the room.

This is the fourth edition, and the first to return to Bengaluru after a full circuit through Mumbai and Gurugram. Each city draws a different mix of industries; this edition brought together leaders from healthcare, retail, consumer brands, technology, education, financial services, AI, and professional services.

Each edition builds on the one before it, moving from how brands earn trust, to how they personalize at scale, to how they design experience. This edition poses a harder question. What happens once growth stops being something a brand manufactures alone, and becomes something a community builds alongside it?



Who's in the Room

The circle brought together marketers across industries and experiences, united by a common question: What does leadership look like when experience becomes the brand?



Deepthi Nagarajan
VP Marketing, Netcore



Gaurav Goel
CEO at Toprankers



Madhumita Phukan
AVP and Global Marketing
Head, FirstSource



Manu Sankar Das
CMO, HealthCare Global



Paridhi Gupta
Chief Marketing Officer, SEW



Rahul Malhotra
Marketing Head, Brigade
Group



Saibal Biswas
Chief Growth Officer, Prosperr.io



Shawn Chandy
CMO, Paragon Footwear



Shruti Kaushik Agrawal
Group Chief Marketing
Officer, DivyaSree
Developers



Varun Oberoi
Head Marketing, Indo Nissin
Foods Pvt Ltd

The Question That Opened the Room

What's a community you admire being part of, and what's the one thing it gets exceptionally right?

The answers were rarely about brands. Across the room, the communities people named shared little on the surface.

- A retreat group of near strangers.
- A first-time parent's forum.
- A scattered network of former colleagues, still trading notes years later.
- A curated circle of women leaders within the same industry.
- An old friend group built around books and ideas.

Three insights came out of that round:

What follows is a distilled summary of the patterns, frameworks, and operating priorities that emerged from that conversation.

- **Psychological safety was the one trait every example shared.**

Whatever the format, people stayed in communities where they could show up in uncertainty and remain welcome. No exceptions came up.

- **Loyalty wasn't tied to size or polish.**

The smallest, least produced communities were often the ones people valued most and stayed in longest.

- **Every leader in the room trusted their own communities more than they trusted most brand messaging.**

That gap is the reason "Community-Led Growth in Digital Economies" became the theme for the evening, and the reason this playbook exists.

What the Room Revealed

Four shifts reshaping how customers behave and what they now expect of brands.

Trust now travels peer-to-peer, long before it reaches the brand

In healthcare, patients turn to survivor groups and caregiver forums before they ever speak to a provider.



Manu Sankar Das:

"People trust opinions from communities rather than coming directly to a hospital brand."

That trust doesn't transfer automatically to brands, even when they try to earn it. One FMCG CMO described trying to enter gaming and fan communities where the product genuinely fits and is still being seen as leeching off a culture the brand didn't build.

Not every brand needs to build a community, either.



Shruti Kaushik Agrawal :

"The real question isn't whether communities are important. It's whether your customers genuinely need one."

Takeaway:

Trust built inside a community cannot be rented, only earned, and most brands underestimate how long that takes.

Belonging outperforms broadcasting

Launching a community is easy now. Keeping it alive is not.



Shawn Chandy:

“The communities that work are the ones where people can genuinely be themselves.”

Size doesn't keep people coming back either.



Saibal Biswas :

“The only communities I've remained active in are those that continuously give me a reason to come back.”

And people don't participate because a platform prompts them to. They participate when something genuinely pulls at them, curiosity, disagreement, and ambition.



Gaurav Goel:

“People respond when something genuinely matters to them. Emotion is often the trigger that turns observation into participation.”

Takeaway:

Stop asking how many people you can bring into a room. Ask what would make them want to stay.

Advocacy is becoming the growth engine, even in silence

Customers today don't simply buy. They recommend, review, educate peers, and shape perception long after the transaction concludes.



Madhumita Phukan:

"The conversation is moving beyond acquisition. Customers are becoming advocates, and advocates are becoming growth drivers."

Not every advocate is visible, though. Many customers consume, validate, and quietly influence a purchase decision without ever posting.



Paridhi Gupta:

"A person may never post, but that doesn't mean they are not benefiting from the community."

The goal isn't compelling contribution from everyone. It's generating enough value that people keep returning, seen or not. And that value must be continuous: communities do not run on campaign cycles; they endure on consistency.



Rahul Malhotra:

"Communities remain relevant only when members continue to see value in returning."

Takeaway:

Most of your advocates are invisible. If you're only counting posts and shares, you're measuring the smallest part of it.

Communities have outgrown the marketing department

Community isn't a channel marketing owns. It's a business decision.



Deepthi Nagarajan:

"Community is no longer just an engagement channel. It is becoming a critical growth lever."

At Netcore, the product community doubles as onboarding and support. New customers watch existing ones solve the same problems in different ways, which cuts the time it takes them to see value, and keeps them from switching to a competitor. It also costs less than flying customers to a conference.



Varun Oberoi:

"Community is not merely a marketing initiative. It has implications across the entire business."

Takeaway:

A community that's run well shows up as retention and reduced churn long before it shows up on a marketing dashboard.

What This Demands of the CMO

Growth in a network-driven economy depends less on what a brand broadcasts, and more on how well marketing, product, service, and customer-facing teams align to create one consistent, shareable experience.

● Build Trust Before Demand

Trust builds in peer conversations and communities long before a customer ever reaches the brand. Campaigns can only amplify trust that already exists, they can't create it from nothing.

Takeaway: One marketing leader's peer group of mall managers runs on exactly this. Members trade notes so newer entrants don't repeat the same mistakes before any campaign is even planned.

● Treat Communities as Listening Systems, Not Audiences

A strong community surfaces sentiment, feedback, and early churn before a survey ever would.

Takeaway: Most brands only listen to their own campaigns. By the time a problem shows up in a survey, the community already knows.

● Design for Participation, Not Broadcast

Customers want to shape the product, not just receive updates about it. The role is shifting from communication to facilitation.

Takeaway: One CMO described a highly engaged community member who kept commenting on product updates with roadmap requests, comments the team fed directly to the product team.

● Measure Advocacy Alongside Revenue

Traditional attribution misses advocacy because it builds slowly and rarely shows up in a single campaign report.

Takeaway: One CMO recalled running a 100,000-member developer community earlier in her career. It generated ideas and goodwill that never showed up as direct ROI, only indirect ROI-the exact gap most brands undercount.

● Orchestrate the Whole Experience

Customers don't separate marketing from product from service; they experience it all as one relationship.

Takeaway: A gap in one team becomes everyone's problem, whether that team knows it yet.

Frameworks Born from the Room

Two frameworks came out of the discussion: one to measure community health, one to run a community day to day.

The Community Health Scorecard

Most teams track only reach and engagement. That view is too narrow.

- » Reach
- » Engagement
- » Sentiment
- » Advocacy
- » Retention
- » Business Impact

A community can score high on reach and engagement and still fail on the other four. Track all six together.

Listen → Co-Create → Sustain

This is the operating rhythm behind every community that lasted.

- Listen
- Co-Create
- Sustain

In practice, this is a role, not just a mindset. Someone has to sit between the brand's social presence and its community, watching what's happening, finding the advocates inside it, and amplifying what already works.

Final Reflections

Communities differ by industry, purpose, and audience. There's no single blueprint here.

But the room agreed on one thing, whether the topic was trust, participation, or advocacy: people don't commit to a community because of its size or its content calendar.

They commit because it's a safe place to be uncertain out loud. That's the real shift for CMOs. Growth used to be something a brand engineered for a customer. Now it's something a brand builds alongside them.

The CMO's Working Agenda

Four moves for CMOs to build into how they run marketing, not just how they launch it.

01

Map where trust already forms

Find the peer conversations and communities customers consult before they reach you.

Design for psychological safety

Before launching anything, ask if this space will let people be honest, not just whether they'll post.

02

03

Track silent participation:

Most members never comment or post. Build a way to sense their value anyway.

Make Community Actionable

Ensure community insights reach product and service teams, with clear ownership for decision-making.

04

None of this works as a one-time push. Community-led growth compounds slowly, and the CMOs who commit early will be the ones customers thank later.

Which leaves one final question for every CMO in the room to sit with:

Are you building a community around your brand, or are you building your brand inside a community?



Where the Circle Goes From Here



Every edition runs on the same principle: just enough structure to spark a genuine conversation, not so much that it collapses into performance. Leaders show up, speak honestly, and challenge one another without needing to impress anyone in the room.

The next edition will follow the same format, this time in Mumbai. A closed-door room. A small, deliberately chosen group. A conversation built around whatever challenge CMOs are genuinely grappling with, not a rehearsed panel topic.

If you're a senior marketing leader and wish to join the next room, or simply want to learn more, reach out at: TheCMOCircle@verbinden.ai

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