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New word-of-mouth marketing tools, assisted by the Internet, are connecting people as never before, enabling them to form specialized communities online. These virtual communities are places to build relationships around a shared interest, point-of-view, or belief. The Internet enables the membership of these online communities to extend far beyond geographical and organizational boundaries. They can make a small town in eastern Washington State a click away from a large city in Pennsylvania, or a farm in New Zealand. Their possibilities are limitless.

Many Types of Online Communities

Quick question: On which of the following new media tools can you build community? Blogs, social networks, podcasts, wikis, online forums, news groups, or user generated content?

Answer: On all of them. Wherever you have individuals connecting with other individuals, you have the possibility of community.

All new word-of-mouth tools have the potential to create community. A sense of community can form, for example, around comments on a rating system (the kind you would find on Amazon or eBay) or on a photo sharing service (such as Flickr), around images of a particular subject, place, or theme. They are particularly potent around a shared interest, of the kind you might find on a music or video discovery site, a fan's blog, or on a network surrounding a favorite author.

Small Business United

I would be remiss if I didn't remind you that when you made a submission to the Intuit Small Business United Grant Competition, you also registered as a member of the [Intuit Community](#).

Online communities offer special benefits to small businesses. In addition to being able to reach out to customers anywhere in the world, these virtual neighborhoods enable smaller companies or individuals to network, build partnerships and create associations that were never before available to them. The online groups allow a small business to look and act like larger businesses –

and compete vigorously.

Let's explore a few of them.

The communities formed around a particular product, market or specialty are powerful. Many companies have online communities for their customer base. Big companies may have many around each one of their products; a small company may have one.

[Backpacking Light](#) is a store based in Bozeman, Montana. It is also an online business, wilderness trekking center, and community for people who enjoy "lightweight hiking and backcountry travels". Backpacking Light sponsors [customer forums](#) on gear, philosophy & technique, food and hydration, reader tips and scouting. They even mention competitors with good offerings that complement what they do.

Backpacking Light encourages readers to connect and contribute. I don't know how many people in Bozeman like to backpack light, but I can tell you that by using new word-of-mouth tools, Backpacking Light has created a business and group of passionate customers far beyond the borders of Montana. Their market is the world of backpacking enthusiasts.

The music business is *tough* these days, especially if you are a talented but unknown artist. The big recording companies aren't even going to give you an audience. But there are infinite possibilities for a musician to self-promote using the web. You can set up a blog or fan group on the social network MySpace (discussed in the next chapter), as [Brad Perry](#) did, and build a customer base. There are a gazillion of them – so many that