



BUILDING FAITH LOYALTY: Relationship Marketing Strategies and Brand Communities in the Hermandad de la Macarena

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses how the Hermandad de la Macarena has evolved from a religious entity to a global corporate brand. Through relationship marketing and the concept of brand community, it examines its strategic management with members and stakeholders to generate shared value. Using a case study approach and diverse sources, key variables such as brand architecture, values and globalisation are highlighted. The research shows how the Brotherhood has consolidated a solid and differentiated community, combining tradition and modernity, positioning itself as a benchmark among religious organisations.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, marketing theory and practice have moved towards a market-oriented approach, as described by Kotler and Armstrong (2013). Traditionally, brotherhoods and religious associations have adopted an approach more focused on their traditions and internal activities, prioritising the organisation of worship and processions as their main distinguishing features. However, in the current context, characterised by a boom in users-consumers in all aspects of brotherhoods and, therefore, growing competition between brotherhoods and the need to attract new audiences and devotees, market orientation is becoming increasingly important. This approach focuses on analysing the needs and expectations of its members, devotees and society in general, seeking to satisfy them through initiatives that connect more effectively with the community. In this sense, the Hermandad de la Macarena, as a leading organisation in the field of brotherhoods, has begun to integrate this philosophy into its overall communication and management strategy (Losa, 2021).

Within this framework, Cristófol (2024) describes the presence of religious marketing as a discipline in the making that emerges from religious and/or faith-based marketing (Luna, 2021) through the integration of social, relational, musical and artistic elements. The presence of the faithful is the backbone of any organisational strategy that any type of religious organisation, or in this case, brotherhoods and religious brotherhoods, wishes to undertake. Thus, the use of relational marketing has become a fundamental pillar, surpassing the traditional approach of transactional marketing (Santesmases, 2012). La Macarena has understood that the emotional and spiritual bond with its brothers and devotees is decisive in ensuring the sustainability of its mission and the strengthening of its identity. This bond is reinforced through personalised attention, the creation of meaningful experiences and the implementation of more direct and dynamic communication channels. In an environment marked by the globalisation of devotion, which has resulted in Pope Francis awarding the Golden Rose to the Virgin of La Macarena in 2024 (El Confidencial, 2024), increased competition between brotherhoods, and greater exposure on social media, the Brotherhood seeks to build loyalty among its community by responding to factors specific to relationship marketing, such as 360° connectivity (Salas-Canales, 2021), transparency, inclusion, and innovation in management.

The application of the brand community concept has proven to be an essential tool for brotherhoods and confraternities. In the case of La Macarena, its community of brothers, devotees and supporters acts as an intangible asset of incalculable value, similar to what happens with leading companies in other sectors such as Nike, Apple or Harley Davidson (Wirtz et al., 2013), which build different communities based on a mission, values and vision that flourishes among their members. The theoretical principles determined by Aaker (1997) are also reflected in communities based on faith and commitment, where not only is a sense of belonging promoted, but also an economic, cultural and social impact is generated in their environment, in this case consolidating the "Macarena" brand as a benchmark both within and outside the brotherhood sphere.

From this perspective, the objective of this study is to analyse the case study of the Brotherhood of La Macarena, a phenomenon of popular devotion that has transcended borders, becoming a cultural and spiritual symbol that transcends generations. The analysis will be carried out from the perspective of relational marketing and community building, issues that have been decisive in the impact and leadership achieved by religious organisations (Alonso, 2015; De Santiago and Barba, 2023).

The text is structured as follows: section 1 presents the methodology followed in this work, section 2 addresses the concepts and elements of relational marketing and brand community from a theoretical point of view, highlighting aspects such as social media management, engagement with devotees, institutional reputation, and collaboration with companies and brands and finally, section 3 develops the case study of the Hermandad de la Macarena, highlighting its relational marketing strategies and community building, elements that have been key to its leadership position in the religious brotherhood sphere.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Relationship marketing and brand community in religious organisations.

Relational marketing has emerged as one of the most significant contributions to the development of contemporary marketing science. Its influence has gained wide recognition in academic research, to the point of being considered by various authors as a new paradigm within the discipline (Córdoba, 2009;

Gummeson, 1999; Quero, 2002; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000; Webster, 1992). According to Grönroos (1994), relationship marketing involves identifying, establishing, maintaining, developing and, when necessary, concluding relationships with consumers and other actors, with the aim of generating mutual benefits.

In the religious sphere, brotherhoods and confraternities also encounter these difficulties, which are reflected in the need to consolidate their devotional bases, attract new members and devotees, and strengthen their cultural and spiritual relevance in an increasingly competitive and changing environment where globalisation has transformed the environment and the rise of confraternity consumption by internet users.

Various elements have favoured the development of relational marketing in the confraternal sphere. However, traditionally, brotherhoods and confraternities have tried to address these challenges, such as the increased costs of attracting new members or devotees, the impact of globalisation on faith and traditions, the unpredictability of religious and cultural demands, the growth of competition between brotherhoods, the adoption of new organisational management models, and the advancement of technologies that allow for the analysis of large volumes of data on their communities (such as CRMs applied to brotherhoods). Likewise, changes in the behaviour of devotees, who increasingly demand greater personalisation and attention, have been decisive in the implementation of relational strategies, as can be seen in the work of Cristófol et al. (2023) for brotherhoods and confraternities and that of Stolz and Usunier (2019) from the religious sphere of the Catholic Church.

For all these reasons, relational marketing forms part of Cristófol's (2024) construction of brotherhood marketing, where the premises of relational marketing are present in the strategic planning of all brotherhoods and confraternities. Thus, relational marketing can be observed in the strategic management of collaborative relationships with brothers, devotees and other key actors, with the aim of creating and distributing value equitably, in line with the statements of Christopher et al. (1994).

Relationship marketing not only drives profitability and organisational growth but also brings about profound structural change. Relationships cease to be confrontational or transactional and become cooperative; objectives are transformed, shifting from the number of devotees or acts to the quality of participation and community engagement (Tavira y Estrada, 2015). In this sense, relationship marketing is key for brotherhoods and confraternities because it allows them to strengthen the emotional and spiritual bond with their members, devotees and collaborators, fostering a loyal and committed community in the long term. It also helps to generate personalised strategies that enhance the acquisition of resources, participation and the promotion of their values and traditions.

2.2. Differential elements of relationship marketing.

Based on Talaya (2008), in the confraternal sphere, the relational marketing strategy seeks to personalise the offer for each brother, devotee or interest group, maximising the functional and social value, but also the emotional value for these actors and for the corporation. This dimension replaces "acting for the devotee" with "acting with the devotee," fostering constant contact and participation in value creation, an essential process for strengthening the ties between the community and the Brotherhood or Fraternity.

The success of relational marketing rests on a thorough understanding of the Brotherhood's stakeholders, analysing their needs, preferences and behaviours (social, cultural and spiritual), which are dynamic and require constant adaptation to maintain their commitment and attract new devotees (Mesa, 2005).

Below is a comparison between the characteristics of transactional and relational marketing, adapted to the context of brotherhoods (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison between the characteristics of transactional and relational marketing adapted to brotherhoods and confraternities.

Transactional marketing	Relational marketing
Focuses on individual contributions.	Focuses on retaining and building loyalty among members and devotees.
Oriented towards specific acts or events.	Aimed at generating meaningful, long-term experiences.
Short-term vision.	Long-term strategic vision.
Low emphasis on commitment to members.	High level of commitment and constant communication.
Quality focused on specific actions.	Quality as a shared responsibility throughout the Brotherhood.

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Cristófol-Rodríguez (2024) demonstrates in his work on the analysis of engagement 2020-2023 in the Rocío pilgrimage how the increase in the number of devotees and consumers of religious brotherhoods facilitates the use of relational marketing strategies through the application of prolonged dialogue with devotees, taking advantage of each interaction as a "moment of truth" to encourage mutual learning, highlighting the adaptability of the religious community and the relevance of digital platforms to maintain cohesion and devotion.

The benefits for brotherhoods and religious associations derived from this approach include:

- Organic and sustained growth.
- Consolidation of cultural barriers against external competition.
- Strengthening of the quality model in service and management.

Grönroos (1994) identified the following key dimensions of relationship marketing, which are also applicable to the management of a brotherhood:

- Focus on long-term relationships with devotees.
- Fulfilling promises made to members and the community.
- Involving the entire structure of the Brotherhood in marketing activities.
- Encouraging interactivity in management and communication processes.
- Developing a devotee-oriented culture of service.
- Obtain and use information about members and devotees to continuously improve.

Complementarily, Gordon (1998) points out eight components of relational marketing which, in the case of brotherhoods and confraternities, can be translated into fundamental pillars for their success, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Components of relationship marketing based on Gordon (1998) and Reinares and Ponzoa. (2024).

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

"Collaboration" is the essential pillar of relationship marketing, with a long-term strategic vision that benefits all parties involved. As Morgan and Hunt (1994) state, "the paradox of relationship marketing is that, to be an effective competitor in any field, it is also necessary to be an effective collaborator."

2.3. The brand community and the community manager.

Einstein (2007) demonstrated how the concept of community not only has a religious dimension for organisations linked to the Catholic Church, but also a cultural and social one. Historically, the idea of community has been associated with relationships built on emotional bonds, shared norms and values, and adherence to a group that generates a sense of belonging (Paruthi et al., 2023). In this context, attributes such as social interaction, common goals and collective commitment take on significant weight (Siles, 2005).

The brand community, introduced into the field of marketing by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), is described as a specialised community that does not depend on a geographical location, but rather on structured relationships between followers of a brand. In the case of brotherhoods and confraternities, this community includes not only brothers and devotees, but also those attracted by their cultural, artistic and symbolic impact (Naranjo, 2014; Redacción Europa Press, 2019).

The rise of the Internet and social media has revealed opportunities for brotherhoods to strengthen their community beyond the physical realm, as demonstrated by Amado (2023), Carreras (2012) and Cristófol-Rodríguez et al. (2024) on behalf of the scientific community. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter allow not only connection with current members and devotees, but also the attraction of new audiences interested in their mission and values (Palazón et al., 2014). The strategy here lies in promoting a sense of belonging both online and offline, through active interaction, relevant content and storytelling that reinforces their identity.

However, although reaching a large number of followers may seem attractive, experts warn that this is not the main objective. Gauthier (2016) indicates that what is relevant is strengthening the emotional connection and commitment to the brand, elements that are key to fostering a lasting and meaningful relationship with the community.

Other elements in brand community management include engagement marketing, corporate reputation, and influencer marketing, which strengthen the bond between brands and their audiences.

Engagement marketing, already used with the Catholic community (De Santiago and Barba, 2023), seeks to attract and retain users through interaction and personalisation. Aspects such as prioritising the user, segmenting messages for specific niches and generating viral content are key (Piñeiro-Otero, 2015). Examples such as the "Stay with Us" campaign show how to actively engage consumers. Digital platforms, such as Twitter, facilitate the analysis of consumer behaviour, but content must be relevant and designed to improve the user experience (Guerrero, 2017).

Similarly, Piñeiro-Otero (2015) indicates that corporate reputation requires careful management to avoid damage to the brand image and identifies listening to the audience, fostering participatory communities and monitoring the most loyal followers as its basic pillars. Encouraging positive experiences helps mitigate negative comments.

Finally, influencer marketing, supported by platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, uses the connection between influencers and their followers to increase brand recognition and foster two-way relationships. Before applying it, it is essential to analyse the consumer, the product, and the brand values (Iglesias, 2017).

3. Methodology

The methodology used to prepare this paper is based on exploratory and descriptive analysis, taking the form of a flexible review study. To this end, secondary sources have been used, in particular a review of the scientific literature on "relationship marketing" and "brand community", as well as bibliographic, documentary and statistical information related to the Hermandad de la Macarena, the subject of this case study.

The case study has been established as an essential methodology for the detailed analysis of phenomena and the testing of hypotheses in different disciplines, as highlighted by authors such as Hamel (1992), Becker (1979) y Young (1939). This technique is particularly useful and effective in the

study of social phenomena within organisations (Feagin et al., 1991), as it allows us to understand the dynamics between community, social intentions and their members, considering the various variables that influence their behaviour.

On this occasion, the object of study allows us to examine its evolution from a religious organisation to a global management organisation, integrating disciplines such as marketing into its strategic planning. The methodology, focused on organising data from a main unit, uses various sources such as documents, interviews, letters and statistics (Goode and Hatt, 1976) to answer key questions about current events (Arzaluz-Solano, 2005). According to Yin (1989), the single case is complemented by subunits of analysis in other religious organisations. The cross-referencing of historical information, documents and statements by executives, including an interview with the Grand Master in 2021, allowed us to advance the objectives of the study and highlight differences with similar institutions that have not achieved a comparable level of consolidation as a brand.

4. Results.

4.1. The case of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.

The history of the Brotherhood of La Macarena begins in 1595, with the request for its establishment as a brotherhood, establishing itself as a religious organisation with its own legal entity in the province of Seville (Brotherhood of La Macarena, 2024). Over the centuries, this institution has evolved from its local configuration to become a global brand, sustained by its profound religious and cultural value, the iconic image of the Virgin of Macarena, and its wide dissemination through the media and social networks. As Carrasco (2011, 2014) points out, its influence has transcended borders, attracting pilgrims and generating devotion throughout the world, especially in Latin America.

In this context, the Brotherhood has ceased to be solely a religious corporation and has established itself as an institution that projects values and identity beyond its devotional activities. This process, similar to that of large corporate brands (Mañas-Viniegra, 2018), reinforces its role in religious tourism and its ability to connect with diverse audiences, highlighting the added value of its institutional image (Miguel, 2024; Paruthi et al., 2023).

The Brotherhood of La Macarena, committed to today's society, has adopted the necessary strategies to meet the demands of the population. In this regard, the use of relational marketing, similar to that employed by leading companies in their sectors (Ramos, 2016), has become established in the corporation through tools such as the creation of a member's service office open Monday to Friday with extended hours, email marketing and social media channels (Imagen 1) under a CRM system. Through data analysis and personalised attention, it seeks to understand the interests and needs of its members in order to offer them a unique experience and reinforce their commitment to the institution (Ruíz, 2005).

Imagen 1. Advertising by the Hermandad de la Macarena on its official WhatsApp channel.



Source: Official website of the Hermandad de la Macarena.

Thanks to data analysis, the Brotherhood reflects what Casaló et al., 2013 emphasise with the identification of patterns of participation, preferences in worship and activities, and the needs of different segments of its community. This information is used to design an offering tailored to each audience, reinforcing the sense of belonging and loyalty to the Brotherhood. In its communication, criteria are used to organise and recommend content or activities based on what is trending, such as the penitential procession on Holy Thursday morning, which attracts the attention of thousands of devotees; what is popular, such as visits to the Basilica or participation in solidarity activities; and content related to previous interests, such as exhibitions or conferences on the history and heritage of the Brotherhood, as shown in imagen 2. Thanks to these tools, its communication and activities are adapted to the needs of different profiles of brothers and devotees. From recruitment campaigns aimed at young people interested in cultural heritage to spiritual programmes focused on older people, La Macarena segments its community to effectively and specifically serve each group.

Imagen 2. Advertisement on the use of email as a tool for visibility and communication of the external and internal activities of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.



Source: Official website of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.

This personalisation allows each brother or devotee to feel cared for, fostering a lasting emotional bond with the institution as a result of enthusiasm, as reflected in the work of Marín and Ruíz (2007). The Brotherhood of La Macarena has built a strong and diverse community that transcends local boundaries. This concept of brand community is based on the sense of belonging it generates, its shared values and its ability to adapt to the times without losing its essence. The community is structured into different levels of participation, from active members, who form part of the organisational core, to devotees who follow activities through social media or participate in specific events. González-Chans et al. (2020) demonstrate that this segmentation allows for more efficient management, similar to the isolation of micro-communities carried out by large international companies on their platforms to improve the user experience.

The corporation combines centuries-old tradition with technological and communicative innovation. For example, it uses social media (Imagen 3) to disseminate content related to its activities and events, achieving global reach. In addition, the incorporation of digital tools has facilitated administrative processes and improved interaction with its members. This relational strategy, based on knowing and satisfying the needs of its audiences, guarantees a positive experience and reinforces the emotional connection with the brotherhood.

Imagen 3. Tweet from the official profile of the Hermandad de la Macarena to disseminate general content.



Source: Official Twitter profile of the Hermandad de la Macarena.

Just as major international brands have transformed society with strategies based on knowledge and user satisfaction (González-Chans et al., 2020), the Hermandad de la Macarena has revolutionised the way brotherhoods relate to their audiences.

4.2. La Macarena on social media.

The "conversation" between brothers, devotees and the general public takes place mainly on social media. It is in this digital space that engagement with audiences is sought. Likes, comments and shares are indicators of commitment or loyalty to the brotherhood (Fernández et al., 2018).

Alonso (2015) states that religious users of social media feel the need to share content that they consider relevant, useful or that connects with their emotions and values. Thus, when the Brotherhood publishes surprising, historical or devotional content, it increases the likelihood of going viral on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok or Twitter.

For their part, Del Pino and Castelló-Martínez (2015) define "viral marketing" as those pieces that cause a chain reaction as a result of the spread of the message, making it a valuable tool for connecting with the faithful. In this sense, the Brotherhood's digital strategy seeks to humanise its publications, avoiding a purely institutional approach and opting for content that invites reflection, memories and devotion, such as specific hashtags (#EsperanzaMacarena), historical photographs, or live broadcasts of significant events, as was the case with the closing procession of the II International Congress of Brotherhoods and Popular Piety on 8th December in Seville (Imagen 4).

Imagen 4. Tweet from the official profile of the Brotherhood of La Macarena on the number of views of the closing procession of the Second International Congress of Brotherhoods and Popular Piety on 8th December in Seville.



Source: Official Twitter profile of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.

The use of memes or attractive visual elements is not foreign to the world of brotherhoods, although it is adapted to the solemn and respectful tone characteristic of brotherhoods and confraternities. For example, symbolic images of the Virgin Mary accompanied by devotional phrases that generate an emotional impact on the community may be used. Despite this, the case study has not used this type of resource to connect with the community, unlike other brotherhoods and confraternities such as the Brotherhood of Fátima de Osuna (Imagen 5).

Imagen 5. Post from the official profile of the Brotherhood of Fátima de Osuna.



Source: Official Instagram profile of the Brotherhood of Fatima of Osuna.

As for Twitter, the Brotherhood can employ strategies such as brevity in messages (concise tweets that include links to more extensive content), the use of visual elements (photographs of worship, processions or heritage), relevant hashtags, and direct interaction with users. These practices not only generate conversation but also reinforce the emotional bond with followers (Imagen 6).

Imagen 6. Tweet from the official profile of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.



Source: Official Twitter profile of the Hermandad de la Macarena.

These actions are in line with the concept of branded content, where the goal is to "offer experiences, not just information." Horrigan (2009) defines it as a fusion of institutional communication and emotional content that is integrated into the organisation's overall strategy, promoting its mission and values. Events such as the penitential procession or participation in charitable acts naturally generate a high level of engagement due to the spiritual and cultural connection they represent.

Email marketing is positioned as a traditional but effective tool for communicating with the community (Ramos, 2016). Through regular electronic newsletters, the Brotherhood can provide information about worship services, announcements and activities, strengthening ties with recipients.

Database segmentation is essential for personalising messages (Campines, 2024), ensuring that each brother receives relevant information according to their profile (e.g. news for costaleros, reminders or events for new brothers). Creativity in emails is key, with eye-catching subject lines and a design that makes the message easy to understand.

An example would be sending personalised invitations to the Triduum of the Virgin, accompanied by devotional images and a direct link to confirm attendance or make donations. This approach facilitates interaction and encourages active participation by recipients.

4.2.1. Influencer marketing in the Brotherhood of La Macarena.

Influencer marketing is a recent phenomenon that has a significant impact on consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions, as they place greater credibility in the opinions of other users on social media than in direct commercial messages from brands. This approach strengthens the relationship between brands and consumers by conveying shared values, fostering trust and authenticity in communication (Roldán and Sánchez, 2021).

Despite its recent development, traditionally, in the field of religious brotherhoods, influencers have had a significant impact that has been used since the origins of brotherhoods and religious orders. These are recognised figures within the world of brotherhoods (elder brothers, foremen, artists, or well-known devotees) who, due to their relevance, can positively influence the perception of the Brotherhood.

In the case of La Macarena, figures such as Joselito el Gallo (imagen 7) were key in shaping the current brotherhood. His participation was fundamental in the creation of the golden crown of the Virgin of Hope, culminating in 1913 with her popular coronation. He was also the generous donor of the emblematic mariquillas, symbols of devotion deeply linked to the image of the Virgin. His legacy, marked by his tragic fate, also left as a testimony the famous gold pen by Muñoz y Pabón, a valuable recognition of his figure and his link with the Brotherhood.

Imagen 7. Joselito El Gallo, bullfighter, dressed as a Nazarene of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.



Source: Official website of the Brotherhood of La Macarena.

Similarly, Juanita Reina, known as "La reina de la copla" (The Queen of Copla), was a prominent figure in Spain and a fervent devotee of the Virgin of Hope, to whose brotherhood she made significant donations. Her legacy not only contributed to personifying the musical tradition of the time, but also to spreading Marian devotion through the mass media, bringing this cultural and spiritual expression to a wider audience.

The Brotherhood has fostered this dynamic organically, with prominent figures who publicly identify with devotion to the Virgin of Hope. These individuals help to amplify the message and increase the visibility of activities such as conferences where leading Spanish bullfighters Pepe Luis Vargas,

Eduardo Dávila Miura and Juan Ortega have explained why they are devotees of the Virgin of Hope and how this devotion has helped them in difficult moments in their professional and personal lives (imagen 8).

Imagen 8. Round table discussion on bullfighters' devotion to the Virgin of Hope on 7 November 2024.



Source: Official website of the Brotherhood of La Macarena

On the other hand, social media allows the brothers and devotees themselves to become ambassadors for the Brotherhood, as indicated by Fernández and Sánchez (2018) and observed in the case of "Virgxlio" on TikTok (@virgilio) with more than 96.3k followers and more than 9.3M likes on the aforementioned social network. For example, sharing photographs of the Virgin's procession during the Madrugá or participating in charity campaigns reinforces the sense of belonging and encourages the virality of the content. This strategy, in addition to being effective, is economically accessible and aligned with the traditional and spiritual values of the institution.

5. Conclusions

This analysis has explored how relationship marketing can be key to understanding the success of institutions such as the Hermandad de la Macarena. Beyond attracting new devotees and supporters, the Hermandad has developed strategies that prioritise the preservation and loyalty of its community by satisfying its spiritual, cultural and social needs.

The Brotherhood of La Macarena, like globally recognised companies, has managed to build and consolidate a strong brand community, based on a set of meaningful social interactions between the institution and its audience, as well as among the members of the community themselves. This approach has generated such a deep sense of belonging and identification that many of its followers become active advocates of its legacy and values.

In this context, social media plays an essential role. The Brotherhood uses these platforms to establish two-way communication with its community, encouraging the active participation of its followers, who not only consume its content, but also share it and generate conversation around it. This model, which combines tradition with innovation, allows the Brotherhood to maintain its relevance and emotional connection with global audiences, especially in countries with strong Marian devotion such as those in Latin America.

However, as a possible improvement, the Brotherhood could further strengthen its two-way relationship with its community by diversifying and optimising its communication channels. Although it currently uses tools such as WhatsApp, email and the brotherhood's customer service office, expanding its two-way presence to other social platforms could enrich its reach and communication effectiveness. This would include implementing additional social media strategies that foster more dynamic and closer communication, which would help maintain constant dialogue and strengthen ties with its followers.

However, the result of the data analysed is how La Macarena has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and innovation, using low-cost but highly effective relational strategies. Its communication on social media not only amplifies the dissemination of its activities and values, but also

turns its iconic image, the Virgin of La Macarena, into a cultural phenomenon that transcends the strictly religious.

This relational approach is a model to be followed by other brotherhoods or similar institutions, which could benefit from adopting strategies aimed not only at attracting new followers, but also at building long-term bonds of trust and loyalty. This reinforces the idea that sustainable success lies in the ability to connect emotionally with communities and maintain constant dialogue with them.

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