

# Knowledge network positioning

System should become smarter than any individual or institution.

By **Pujan Roka**

More than 10 years ago, the co-author of "The Cluetrain Manifesto," David Weinberger, asserted that markets are conversations and that the only way to win markets is to participate in those conversations. His theory influenced many companies to join the blogosphere, online forums and now social networking.

Weinberger has a new book titled "Too Big to Know" (Basic Books, January 2012) in which he argues that the proliferation of computer networks like Cloud and social networking is moving knowledge from individuals and organizations to the network.

He calls this the networking of knowledge: Nodes of individual and institutional knowledge bond together to form an intricate network of expertise that makes the network smarter than any individual or institution.

According to Weinberger, this shift – from individuals and organizations to the network – is natural as the world gets inundated with information. No single person or entity is now capable of knowing it all and filtering a sea of information.

Along with the shift in the movement of knowledge, "ex-



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pertise" also moves from individuals and organizations to the network. This is evident from many organizations that have started "crowd-sourcing" – a process of soliciting expertise from the public, usually with remuneration, rather than employing experts.

Take the example of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. It gets assistance from thousands of "citizen experts" who volunteer to sort through millions of backlog patent applications. Other government agencies have also started crowd-sourcing some of their initiatives at [challenge.gov](http://challenge.gov).

Many profit organizations find crowd-sourcing an easier way to find expertise in their respective industries. Instead of investing in their own R&D, they are reaching out to online crowd-sourcing agents like Innovation Exchange ([innovationexchange.com](http://innovationexchange.com)).

Ideas and opinions in a knowledge network can bounce around effectively. This could be a blessing for many people and organizations if the message being passed around is positive. For those in advertis-

ing, branding and public relations, this network of knowledge could create "an echo chamber effect," that is, a certain idea could be claimed as useful and accurate by constantly reinforcing it.

If the message is negative, then it could be a disappointment, too.

Bank of America recently learned this soon after introducing a monthly \$5 debit card fee. Consumer rage erupted over social media, which eventually led the bank to retract the fee. In such cases, the knowledge network not only reveals accurate information (e.g., banks earning profits without debit card fees), but it also advertises unfair practices. "Networked knowledge brings us closer to the truth about knowledge," Weinberger says.

In his book, Weinberger also points out that large diversity of opinions and disagreements can dilute the real value or meaning of a genuine idea if the knowledge network leans toward one opinion over the other.

Knowledge networks can also dilute the value of traditional bearers of knowledge like educational institutions. In fact, nontraditional institutions like Wikipedia ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)) and the Khan Academy ([khanacademy.org](http://khanacademy.org)) are now viewed as sources of knowledge much like schools and universities. Many universities and professors are already responding

to this trend by making their lectures and course materials available to the public, free of charge. They have realized that curators of knowledge will diminish their credibility if they cannot disperse the knowledge in the knowledge network.

Contributing knowledge to the knowledge network can also create revenue opportunities for everyone in the network, including the contributor. A good example of this is open source software, such as Linux and Google's Android. Google makes billions of dollars in advertising revenue in return of its open-sourced Android operating system that enables its search-based advertising on a slew of mobile devices.

Weinberger writes about open ecology like Android created by all types of shared knowledge networks. This ecology requires individuals and businesses to create "hooks" that can easily connect to their respective networks. From the technology standpoint, Web 2.0 materialized out of the needs of connected enterprises and markets to connect to each other for collaboration and growth opportunities.

In the coming years, business success will be determined by how well each organization has positioned itself in the knowledge network. Its business value will be determined by how well it can contribute knowledge to the knowledge network.