THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITIES

HOW TO BUILD AN ONLINE COMMUNITY THAT WORKS, GROWS AND PAYS

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Your community. Your way.

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Foreword

Treat this position as a necessary read for anyone who wishes to create a successful online community.

Community is not something that can be forced. It needs to grow organically. Commonality works like this magical force that attracts and gathers people. We are, after all, social animals.

The Internet helped us overcome many limitations including, but not limited to, our physical location. In the beginning we were able to find other people interested in the same or similar things on dial-up bulletin boards.

The dawn of the Internet was already yearning for some form of idea exchange and technology was born from the sheer need for it. Mailing lists and Usenet groups led to the birth of online forums.

All of it worked well, but people wanted something more. More social, more human interaction. That's how social networking was born. Now it's not only huge, it's collectively one of the biggest business sectors ever created.

All it took was a couple of decades for the technology to meet mass acceptance.

All good and well, but some claim the big social networks grew too big. We lost something. There's no intimacy. There's no privacy. There are too many distractions. There's way too much advertising. People want to take a step back.

But to where? A step back to the comforting space of smaller, focused communities where they can take an active part and feel heard.

That's where you come in.

This is your time to shine; your time to create that space. Are you up for it?

Introduction - What Is An Online Community?

Social networks are now a mature industry. Almost two decades have passed since the launch of Friendster, more than fifteen since Mark Zuckerberg started collecting headshots at Harvard. In that time, two things have happened.

First, the social media companies have figured out what works and what doesn't work. They've experimented with suggestions, created story features, counted which kinds of posts generate the most engagement, and figured out, with varying degrees of success, which content to push into their users' timelines.

They've also collected vast amounts of user data, collecting information about everything from users' favorite television shows to the nature of their relationships, the food they like to eat, and the brands they like to use. It's allowed them to become industrial giants. Facebook now has more than two billion monthly active users and is worth about $630 billion.

At the same time, social media sites still struggle with that power. Facebook has suffered from data leaks and has become a platform for spreading political disinformation. Twitter's trolls and bots have driven users away, including many of the celebrities the company needs to keep eyes on the screen. Reddit has quarantined a popular forum used by supporters of Donald Trump even as its CEO Steve Huffman has said that the company wouldn't try to block hate speech.

The result, nearly twenty years after online communities became a central feature of the Internet, is that the sector has been both a giant success and a colossal failure. It's brought people together. It's managed to create multi-billion dollar companies out of that interaction. It's met a real need and it's brought value to people's lives.

At the same time though, it's taken personal information from people without their full knowledge and it's failed to keep that data safe and secure. It's allowed into communities harmful elements that have done much to spread suspicion, fear, and hate. It still hasn't come up with an answer to how to police an online community, let alone what rules those police should enforce.

The other thing that's happened is that the big community sites have become too big to be useful. The reason that Facebook, Reddit and others struggle with community rules is that they need a single set of rules to cover communities as different as Bridge players and gun rights. It's an impossible task; a Bridge-playing community might choose to agree among themselves not to discuss politics or religion in order to keep the focus on card games and Bridge strategies. A political community would want much looser rules.

So while the giant social networking platforms are still going strong, users are also finding that they're too strong to meet all their needs. The result has been the development of thousands of independent niche communities, filling the holes that Mark Zuckerberg's all-encompassing giant has created. While over a billion people are speaking to everyone they've met about everything they do, many are looking for focus. They want to connect with other like-minded individuals around the particular passions that inspire them, without all the extra "noise" that Facebook generates, and according to rules that they can determine and govern.

Online communities are being built by artists and schools, by thought leaders and by local communities. They're being set up by individuals and by groups and by anyone who wants to bring together people who share an interest and a passion.

Businesses, too, are building brands, creating loyalty and discovering valuable intelligence on what customers want and expect. And they're earning from it. When a company gives space to its customers to gather and talk, it stops being a place where people go when they need to make a purchase. It becomes a pillar of the community, the only place where people go when they want to buy something related to their interests.

And today, building those online communities is easier than ever.

The Internet means that anyone can now create their own community. They can build a website that gives their customers all the tools they need to easily hold discussions, meet like-minded people and form strong bonds. They keep people coming back day after day, month after month, providing a virtual and valuable forum for people who share an interest.

Built right and maintained properly, a community website hugs customers close, strengthens a business, and advances an activity. But having the right kind of software to create that community isn't enough. You also need the right strategy to make your community grow steadily and organically, without spending millions.

This book will cover everything you need to know to create a successful online community, from the essential first steps to proven strategies for growth and engagement. Once you finish reading, you will have a clear understanding of what you should — and shouldn't — be doing to get your social network moving in the right direction.

We'll start by looking at what makes a community. What are the bonds that hold it together, and how do its members define themselves?

We'll then look at the right way to build an online community, but not just any community: a community that remains active and thriving. A community whose members don't register, look and leave but one whose members come back again and again, post comments and contribute to discussions. A community that people don't just want to join but want to be a part of.

Building that kind of community may mean taking steps that can feel counterintuitive. We'll explain why you should be taking those steps anyway.

We'll talk you through the process of launching a community.

The start is the worst time for a new community. There are few members, few discussions and little reaction to the content that's being posted—not that there's much content either. We'll explain how to find those all-important first members and discuss why it's better to engage a small number of highly dedicated early users than attract a large number of users who don't return.

We'll then talk about building on that foundation. We'll discuss the importance of maintaining a group identity and show you how to do it. We'll talk you through the role of the community manager; and describe the best strategies you should be using to increase participation.

We'll also talk about extending your community across platforms, and about the content that will keep that community together.

Finally, we'll talk metrics and money.

Although communities don't have the same monetizing process as other forms of online marketing it is possible to turn a community into cash and online communities do generate figures.

You should know how to find those figures, how to read them and what to do with them.

While so many businesses and community leaders focus on building their Facebook pages or fret about their Twitter content, others are having a ball discussing their favorite topics with people who genuinely care about them and who return day after day to their website to see what's new.

Building that website is easy. Building that community is a little harder but with a little effort, it's an option available to any business owner and any community leader. And this is the time to do it.

We've now reached peak social networking. Facebook, which has dominated online communities for the best part of two decades, now has little room to grow and users are increasingly suspicious of its power. Young users are turning to entertainment-oriented platforms like Tik Tok while forums like Reddit are suffering from a lack of agreed rules and policing that can make any community unpleasant. For brands, businesses, and community leaders who want to create their own online communities with their own focus and rules, there has never been a better time.

Understanding and Building Community Identity

Imagine that you want to grow a bonsai tree. You search the web for advice about planting, wiring, and pruning. You find a number of videos on YouTube that explain how to take care of the tree and how to find the right species for your climate. You also go to the library and borrow a book about bonsai-growing, and visit the local nursery and talk to the gardeners about moisture levels and the dangers of morning frost.

With dedication and determination, you can learn everything you need to know about growing bonsai trees—and that may be sufficient. If all you want to do is plant one tree one time, then forget about it, that learning will give you all need.

But let's say you want to go further. You want to experiment with other species of miniature trees. You want to hear what other enthusiasts are doing, how they cope with the changing seasons and find out what they do when midges start to attack the leaves. You want to talk about a topic you've come to love, and you want to have those conversations with people who feel the same way you do.
You're no longer someone with a bonsai tree. You're a bonsai grower—and the difference is important. We all have interests that might include gardening, sports, or particular television shows. But some of those interests will root deeper than others. They become not just things that interest us but parts of who we are. They make up elements of our identities. Or rather, they become another identity among the many that make up who we are, because we all have more than one identity. At various times and in different contexts, we

define ourselves in different ways. When we're abroad, we're often seen—and we see ourselves—according to our national identity. At home, our cities or our regions are more important markers of who we are, and we can take pride in a local dialect, accent, or terms that mark our differences. We also define ourselves by our jobs, saying not that we write software or unblock sinks but that we are a software engineer or a plumber.

Identity is not what we do; it's who we are. And it's around identities that communities are built.

In a 1986 paper[1], David McMillan and David Chavis of the George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University attempted to define the criteria that make up a sense of community. They proposed four elements:

- **Membership**: A feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness.
- **Influence**: An individual's sense that they matter, that they make a difference to the group, and that the group makes a difference to its members.
- **Integration and fulfillment of needs**: The feeling that membership of the group will supply resources that meet the members' needs.
- **Shared emotional connection**: The belief that members share a common history and similar experiences.

McMillan and Chavis's paper was an attempt to understand and define communities. But for people looking to build communities, those definitions can also be seen as the most important ingredients of successful, growing communities. Without each of those elements in place—without a sense of belonging, of influence, of the meeting

[1] David McMillion and David Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 14, January 1986

of needs, and of a shared emotional connection—it doesn't matter how much effort you put into encouraging members to create content or tell their friends to come and join. The community won't grow and members won't participate.

Before you begin building your community, before you start marketing and looking for new members, it's essential to understand what a community is and how it works.

The Boundaries of Membership

McMillan and Chavis define membership as "a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong." It's a sense of belonging, they continue, of being a part of something larger than oneself.

Perhaps another way to put it is that membership provides a feeling of being at home, and that this community is a place for people like you. Other members may differ in a host of different ways but you all have at least one characteristic, one shared interest that binds everyone together.

That also means that membership has boundaries. Everyone who shares that unifying characteristic lies on one side of the boundary; everyone who lacks that unifying characteristic stands on the other side of the boundary.
That boundary is sometimes visible and even deliberate. When fans watch their sports team play, they often wear the team uniform. That decision doesn't just show support; it also creates a boundary between one group and another: anyone who wears the shirt is one of us. Ritual provides another kind of boundary. The ritual of the Catholic Mass draws a line between those who participate in it, and those who do not. Language can perform the same role even within linguistic groups. Jargon is one way for group members to denote

who is in and who is out. When Agile practitioners, for example, talk about scrums, stand-ups, Gantt charts, and flow, they tell each other that they're part of the in-group; and they remind those who wonder what they're talking about that they aren't members of their magic circle.

McMillan and Chavis warn that those boundaries are "troublesome." Boundaries, they note, can generate the pain of rejection and isolation among those who are on the "wrong" side of the line.

But membership also provides emotional safety by protecting group intimacy. Gangs represent one form of community, membership of which can provide physical protection (as well as additional danger.) And membership can work against a sense of isolation. Membership of a self-help group such as Alcoholics Anonymous enables members to recognize that they are not alone and that they have additional sources of strength to draw on.

And membership is also marked by a common symbol system. Military regiments have their own badges. Fraternities can have special handshakes. Religious sects have their own iconography. Each of those symbols tells everyone who is in and who is out.

Each of these elements of membership—and McMillan and Chavis also add a sense of belonging and identification, and the personal investment required to join a group—is important to people building a community. They tell you where a community ends and where it begins.

Members Influence the Community, the Community Influences Its Members

The community boundary draws a line between one group of people and another. But it also draws a line between one kind of activity and

another. Inside the community, influence is being exerted. Members are molding the group's behavior. They're affecting its nature and its rules. A community of supporters of a particular K-Pop band, for example, may agree that they will support each member of the band equally. But if one of the band members were to leave and start a solo career, the community would need to decide how they would relate to that former member. Would they still be referenced in the community's activities? Or, as a former member, are they now outside the community? The decision will be made by the community. The members will influence the community's nature.

But influence in a community flows in both directions. Not only do members influence the community, the community also influences its members, pressuring them to conform. If the K-Pop community agrees that a former member is beyond the boundaries of the community, members who disagree will either have to conform or leave.

Like boundaries that exclude some people and include others, that makes this element of community troubling. A strong community has the power to enforce conformity on its members and ostracize those who refuse.

That conformity isn't entirely negative. It has a role. People join a community in part because they want to know that their feelings, thoughts, and desires are shared by others. They don't want to be alone. Someone who finds that they like listening to K-Pop will be reassured by the discovery of a community of people who feel the same way they do. As that community evolves, however, as its members' behavior changes the nature of the community, the pressure to conform changes—and members resist. Some may choose to leave. Others will attempt to exert influence in a different direction and express their own individual freedom. McMillan and Chavis note that "this emphasizes the need to develop communities that can appreciate individual differences." They conclude by arguing

that members are more attracted to a community in which they feel that they have influence but they also point out that the pressure to conform is a result of the members' needs for consensual validation.

That creates a challenge for builders of communities. On the one hand, you want everyone to feel at home. You want everyone to believe that they can influence the direction of the community, and you want as many people as possible to stand on your side of your community's boundary. But you also need enough conformity and clear enough boundaries for members to feel that this community really is for them. Make the boundaries too broad and you'll lose both a sense of identity and the feeling among members that they can set those rules.

One option is for large communities to create sub-communities. That K-Pop community, for example, could contain groups for people who like individual artists. The community as a whole would have a broad boundary over which members have relatively little influence and allows in everyone with an interest in the topic. But the sub-communities could have tighter boundaries with greater member autonomy.
Alternatively, you can try to encourage a tolerant attitude towards community identity, making everyone who qualifies for the group or has a link to the community feel welcome.

Need Fulfillment

But why do people want to join a community in the first place? Why would they risk negotiating the community's boundaries, determining whether they fit, and attempting to influence the group at all? What do they get out of community membership?

McMillan and Chavis talk about the importance of "integration and fulfillment of needs," which they translate as "reinforcement." For any

group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, they say, “the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members.”

They don’t describe what exactly is being reinforced or why it’s a need that has to be fulfilled but the inference is that membership of a community delivers a positive effect that encourages people to join, remain, and participate.

The researchers note that the complexity of individuals and groups makes it impossible to identify every kind of reinforcement that membership of a community can deliver, but they do identify three.

The first is **competence**. People, they say, are attracted to others whose skill or competence can benefit them. So one of the attractions of a community for Ford Mustang enthusiasts would be the presence of other members who understand the car even better than they do. Those members can advise them on ways to enhance their car or answer their questions. They provide a means of obtaining more knowledge and of solving their problems. They allow other members to level up.

For builders of community, that describes an important asset. Communities should aim to identify members with the most experience and the largest amount of knowledge or skills so that they stand out and can provide the reinforcement that other members are looking for. Some forums do that by giving members ranks. They might start as “newbies,” and rise to be “experts” based on the number of contributions they make. That status award is another form of reinforcement but engagement metrics don’t have to be the only way of awarding that status. Depending on the community, members could stand out by being “professionals” rather than “enthusiasts,” or by the amount of time they’ve been involved in the community.

The intention is always to show members that not everyone in the community is equal. Some people are more experienced and knowledgeable than others. The community has competence, and members who lack that high level of competence can see the benefit that their membership can bring them. Members have **status**.

And the third aspect reinforcement is **shared values**. “When people who share values come together,” McMillan and Chavis write, “they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek.”

Unlike competence and status, those values aren’t easy for a community owner to display. They’re shown in the content that’s added to the community and in the way that members treat each other. A community owner shouldn’t need to strictly police the content but they can set the rules that govern behavior. A willingness to allow personal insults, for example, says much about the values shared in the community and about the culture that the community creates. That’s work that needs more than a status tag on a profile picture. Start by understanding how you’re going to show off members’ competence, but also understand how you’re going to define the rules that show the community’s shared values in action.

Shared Emotional Connection

A group of people is not the same as a community. Everyone in a shopping mall on a particular day at a particular time has something in common, but they are not members of a community and they don’t see themselves that way. They lack a shared emotional connection. McMillan and Chavis argue that that shared emotional connection is based, “in part,” on a shared history. But members do not need to have participated in that history. They only need to identify with it. Members of a nation, for example, feel a sense of shared national

history and the emotional connection that creates is strong enough for them to be willing to pay taxes and even fight for each other.

Emotional connection is also made up of a number of other features, including interaction, the importance of events, and the investments people make in their membership. The more members of a group interact, the more meaningful that interaction, and the more they put into the group, the stronger the emotional bond between the members. So the emotional bond is strong between members who are able to meet frequently or participate in discussions. It's also strong among people who have undergone a crisis together. And it's stronger among homeowners in a neighborhood than among renters in the same area.

For people trying to build communities, that means that it's possible to build the bonds that bring those members together. But it will take effort. It might take the organizing of events at which many people participate simultaneously: a concert or a fundraiser, for example, or a live online video or webinar. And it will also require encouraging members to make investments in the community. That doesn't have to be financial in the same way that a sense of membership in a community derives from the purchase of property in that area. It could also include an investment of time or a donation of resources.

Putting the Elements of Community Identity Together

After explaining how the different elements of community interact, McMillan and Chavis provide a number of examples of community feeling, in a neighborhood, in a youth gang, and in an Israeli kibbutz. But the most interesting example comes in a university:

> *Someone puts an announcement on the dormitory bulletin board about the formation of an intramural*

dormitory basketball team. People attend the organizational meeting as strangers out of their individual needs (integration and fulfillment of needs). The team is bound by place of residence (membership boundaries are set) and spends time together in practice (the contact hypothesis). They play a game and win (successful shared valent event). While playing, members exert energy on behalf of the team (personal investment in the group). As the team continues to win, team members become recognized and congratulated (gaining honor and status for being members). Someone suggests that they all buy matching shirts and shoes (common symbols) and they do so (influence).

It's easy to see how that model quickly comes to build a sense of shared community identity, and it's easy too to imagine these kinds of communities being born again and again. Each year at colleges, new groups and clubs form to bring together people who have a need to socialize, whether that's through sports, volunteering, campaigning, or any other activity. The more activities members participate in as members of those groups, and the more important those activities, the stronger the bonds between them will be.

One of the most famous college groups, for example, is the Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic Club, the theater group for students at Cambridge University. The club was formed in 1883 but really came into its own in the 1960s, when members included Clive James, Peter Cook, and Dudley Moore. In the 1980s, when its members included Emma Thompson, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Fry, and Rowan Atkinson, the group won the first Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Subsequent members, who have included Olivia Colman and John Oliver, are aware of the group's history. They understand that membership of the club matters: both to themselves and to other members. If each member contributes, the

result can be a successful career in entertainment. Membership fills an emotional need, and the frequent rehearsals, preparation of material, and competitions such as the Edinburgh Fringe create a series of meaningful experiences that bind the group together.

Building Community Identity Online

Universities make for an easy sense of community identity because they have clear boundaries (they're only available to students of the university with a particular shared interest); and they also provide plenty of opportunity for members to meet and interact (all of those rehearsals, training sessions, and demonstrations—and the meetings in the bar afterwards).

That isn't the case online.

In this guide we'll explore some of the specific ways in which an online community can grow and thrive, and create the kind of community feeling that binds members of a group together. But what would that group look like? How would it grow?

Imagine a watch enthusiast who wanted to set up a group for people who love timepieces. He'd set up an online platform and begin inviting other enthusiasts. The boundaries of the group would be people who love clockwork wristwatches. So enthusiasts of digital watches or smartwatches would be outside the group. But enthusiasts of any make of analogue watch would be welcome. In time, as membership grows, the community might create sub-communities for people who like antique watches or Swiss watches, Rolex watches, or Patek Philippe watches.

The community leader could identify professionals within the group and sub-groups who could help to deepen the knowledge of the members. Owners of watch stores for example, could be encouraged

to give advice to people wondering about the value of their watches. Watchmakers could talk about how movements are designed and offer advice about maintenance and common problems. That participation would begin to allow members to receive and provide influence. They would also find that their needs are being fulfilled, all of which helps to build a solid foundation for the group.

But what would really cement membership, deepen the bonds between members, and begin building a history that members can take pride in, would be the creation of events. Online tools can go some way towards filling the space taken in offline groups by rehearsals, training, or planning meetings but they need to be participatory. Webinars and live video tend to involve one person speaking to many people. Rehearsals in theater groups and training for sports teams bring everyone together on equal terms. They may have a leader—a director or a coach—but they also require all other members to participate and co-operate.

That's the kinds of experience that online communities both need and struggle to emulate. One option is to break the community into regional groups. Once the community has grown to a sufficient size, it can begin setting up local chapters who can meet in person. Until then though it can also run regular teleconferences under the direction of a sub-community leader. It could also sponsor events such as annual watch shows, or provide membership cards that give members discounts at participating watch repair shops. The intention will always be to fulfil members' needs while providing them with shared, valued experiences.

But the first move is to start bringing in the members. We'll talk about that in the next chapter.

Building The Foundations: Your First Members

Google Plus was probably the most sophisticated of all the community platforms on the Web. When Google designed it, the company got everything right. The “circles” were the perfect solution to the problem of posting content that you want some people to see but you want to hide from others. It tackled one aspect of social media’s privacy problem head-on. By building different circles for colleagues, clients, customers, friends and family, users were able to post all the content they want on one attractive platform and do it easily.

It had everything a social site needed… except for one thing.

It didn’t have users.

Or at least it didn’t have enough users. At the end of 2013, two-and-a-half years after launch, Google was boasting of 300 million active “in the stream” visits each month. But when it became clear that figure included anyone who so much as clicked the notifications bell in their Gmail account, it also became clear that the number of real users was much, much lower.

Compared to the billion-plus active members on Facebook at the time, that was a drop in the ocean.

The reason that Google struggled to build a community site, even with a great product, is that new communities suffer a Catch 22.

No one wants to join a community unless all their friends are there too. But their friends aren't going to join unless their friends have already joined before them. So the site stays empty, waiting for enough people to make the first move to reach a tipping point.

Or in the case of Google Plus, waiting for enough people to leave Facebook. It didn't happen. Google closed its personal version of Google+ in April 2019. The platform just didn't take off.

That's the problem your community will face when you're ready to launch.

Your pages will be ready. You'll have tinkered with the design. You'll be looking forward to seeing groups form, events booked, and interesting posts generating comments and discussions on a wide range of different topics.

But how do you persuade people to join when they know that few people will read their posts and any discussions they hold will be with… you, mostly?

Launch Slow, Grow Hard

The answer lies in the launch.

Ask a marketing executive how you can grow your community quickly, and you'll probably get a detailed launch plan. They might suggest writing press releases, buying ads, and trying to gain as much attention as possible so that lots of potential community members stop by to find out what all the fuss is about.

Not all of those people will hang around, of course, but enough will stay to give your community a foundation.

It sounds like good advice.

And it's **completely wrong**.

In his book *The Proven Path*[2], Richard Millington, a community consultant who has worked for the United Nations, Novartis, Oracle and BAE Systems among others, describes receiving a call from the European marketing manager of a multinational consumer products company.

Millington flew out to Europe. He met the company's marketing manager. And he heard how the company had already burned through half of a $4 million budget set aside to create an online community.

The company had pulled out all the stops. It had done everything it could to create the biggest, loudest, splashiest launch it could put together.

The community platform itself had cost close to a million dollars to build. Two journalists were hired to create content which was then translated into 40 different languages. A PR agency was brought on board. A team of community managers was put together. A social strategy firm was commissioned to develop a plan. One of the world's top legal firms was even asked to create the site's terms and conditions, and a major contest was run to attract people to sign up.

After laying out $2 million, the company managed to attract 10,000 members as soon as it launched. That looked like a good start.

But the numbers soon fell. Even as the community manager posted content twice a week and tried to engage those members, the early joiners quickly faded away. By the time the company called Richard

[2] Richard Millington, *The Proven Path: The Most Successful and Reliable Approach in the History of Building Online Communities*, ebook, https://course.feverbee.com/the-proven-path/theprovenpath.pdf

Millington for help just 50 people had been active in the previous week.

After three months, the size of the community was down to… two. Just two people remained active on the site. Two people for whom the company had paid $2 million.

The problem is that growing a community from scratch is not a numbers game. Your community won't begin with lots of people and it shouldn't begin with lots of people. It will start with a handful of people, people who really care about the community and about its topic. People who want to see the community succeed, want to bring their friends to join them and are as excited about seeing the community grow as you are.

That means that the community will grow relatively slowly. You won't attract 10,000 people in the week that you launch. You might have just ten people in the week that you launch, but those ten people will stay and they'll invite their friends so that by the end of the month, you might have sixty people in the community.

And those people won't just be members. They'll be active users, people who create content, write posts, upload images and lead discussions.

As you launch your community, that quiet start followed by steady growth should be your goal. It's much more effective than a loud bang followed by quiet, and it's also a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable to prepare.

Preparing For Your Launch

So your launch won't be a big splash. There won't be balloons or contests or press releases sent out to every media publication in your field when you start taking in your first member. Instead, your launch will consist of emails, phone calls and comments inviting people who you know will find the community interesting to sign up and contribute content.

Before you can contact those people though, you first have to know which people you want to approach.

And before you can do that, you have to know what kind of community you want to build.

Online communities are usually divided into five categories:

- **Action** communities campaign for social change.
- **Local** communities focus on a small area, providing a way for neighbors to exchange news and information.
- **Professional** communities let people doing similar work share advice and experience.
- Communities based on **circumstance** gather together people who share a particular situation, such as motherhood or drug addiction.
- And **interest** communities are focused on a particular passion or hobby.

Most communities built by brands and businesses focus on interest. They provide a place for people who like a particular kind of product to discuss that product.

In fact, those kinds of communities may well be the hardest to build. Yours is unlikely to be the first community platform for people who like coffee, video games or even for sperm donors (yep, KnownDonorRegistry.com has even that one covered) so you'll have plenty of competition online.

A better solution is to give an interest community a direction. That can come naturally. People who love a particular product often want to proselytize and bring members together. The website of Udi's Gluten-Free Breads (udisglutenfree.com), for example, ends with a call to "Join us on social," and includes links to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest.

Members who join that community and are already gluten-free get to feel that they're helping others take their first step. It adds a powerful extra boost to the attractiveness of the brand, and of course when other gluten-free eaters are helping new customers, that's great for the business.

Having decided what kind of community you want to build, you'll need to start looking for your first members. That shouldn't happen by casting a wide net and trying to drag in as many people as possible. It should happen through spear-fishing: by choosing exactly the right members to land.

Seeding Your Community With Its First Members

This stage of your community is critical. You're about to address your first members. If all goes well, by the end of the month, possibly even by the end of the week, you'll have a solid base of about a dozen people who share your enthusiasm for your community. Even before

they've written their first post or created their profile, they're already imagining what the community is going to do—just as you are.

Get it wrong, though, and you'll have pushed away some of the most important members your community could have, and the constant rejections could well make you so despondent you want to give up on the project altogether.

You need to get this right.

Draw up a list of about a dozen people you think would want to take part in the community. You can go for a few more if you want, but don't go over twenty. You're going to be discussing the community with them over email and even by phone so the more people you choose at this stage, the more work you'll find yourself doing.

You can look for early members in a wide range of different places. Some of them you may know already. If you know them personally, call them up or meet them for coffee and try to get them involved. A community project shouldn't rely on one person. If you can get good help at this stage, you'll make your life much easier and you'll also be able to bring in new ideas about the topics the community should focus on and the benefits it can offer members.

For potential first members you don't personally know, **blogs** are still a good place to begin. Blogs might not have the cachet they used to have but as long as people are putting up their ideas on places like Medium, you know that there are people with thoughts that they really want to share. Those are people who will be willing to join your community early.

Avoid the top bloggers in your field. They may already have their own communities and they'll be too busy with their own blogs to contribute to your platform. Instead, look for between three and five medium-sized bloggers who write about the topic of your community.

Choose people who write consistently and have been doing it knowledgeably and for some time.

These are blogs you should already be familiar with, and ideally you should be leaving regular comments on them too. The blogger will probably have noticed so when you make your first contact, they'll know who you are.

You can also target **commenters** on those blogs. Choose the people who leave the most helpful and intelligent comments on more than one blog in your field but bear in mind that if they're not bloggers themselves, they'll be more likely to be commenting on other people's posts than writing their own. That has a value too, though.

Next, look for **book reviewers**. Head to Amazon, pull up the latest books in your field and look for the people who have contributed the most helpful reviews to at least two of the books. This might take you a little while, especially to find the contact details of the reviewer, but you can also try leaving a notice in the review discussion boards.

Again, if you can find two or three people who have read some books on the field and are thoughtful enough to want to write reviews about those books, you'll have attracted some valuable members into your community.

Finally, search on **social media platforms**. Again, don't go for the owners of the biggest Facebook pages or the Twitter users with 50,000 followers. Look for Facebook pages with just a few hundred likes and fewer than a thousand followers. They'll be keen to have a larger audience and they won't feel that being among the first contributors to a new platform is a step down.

There are plenty of other places you can look, too. People you met at **conferences** are likely to be good contributors. You can **put up an ad** on your own website for people who want to contribute to a new

community. Review the people who apply and choose those who seem to you to have the most to contribute.

And, of course, you can **ask the people you invite** if they know other people who they think would be interested.

Avoid asking your current customers at this stage, though.

You want to have lots of helpful content and a warm, friendly atmosphere before you start bringing your customers through the door.

Drawing up that initial list will take some time. Expect to spend several days browsing blogs and cross-checking book reviews on Amazon. But it's time well-spent.

And you can't make up that time by skimping on the contact itself. That also has to be nurtured over time. Send out a formulaic email based on a template to everyone on your list, and you'll just make it easy to be ignored and make sure that your time spent researching people was wasted.

For those people you've met in the flesh and whose phone number you possess, pick up the phone and call them. You'll show that you're serious and you'll make it harder for them to say no.

For others, send a personal email. Explain why you're writing. Describe what you're hoping to build and state why you think they can contribute. Ask them what they think. Let them feel that you're looking for their opinion, not a commitment.

So if you were writing to someone who had left some really helpful reviews on books about gluten-free living on Amazon, you might write something like this:

Dear Barbara,

My name is John Smith, and I'm writing to you because I noticed that you left some great reviews on Amazon under the books by Jane Harris and Phil Neal about gluten-free living. I'm the owner of a gluten-free bakery in Oakland, and I'm putting together an online community about the topic. I really want to encourage people to talk about their experiences of being diagnosed, taking their first steps at cutting gluten out of their diet—and of course to swap recipes and meal ideas.

I spoke to Phil Neal while he was writing his book. He's already agreed to join the community and contribute some posts.

Your reviews were really helpful so I was wondering what you think and whether you'd like to take part once the community launches. I'm sure everyone would really appreciate your input and we'd certainly like to know more about the books you've read on gluten-free living. If you have time to talk on the phone, I'd be happy to give you a call this week to tell you more about the community and learn your opinion.

And if you know of anyone else who you think would want to join the community, that would be great too!

Do let me know what you think!

John Smith,
Owner, John's Gluten-Free Living.

That email isn't a template but it does tick off a number of important points:

- **It's personalized.** Each email should say exactly why you're writing to that person.
- **It's specific.** The email states exactly what the contact can contribute to the community.
- **It name-drops.** You won't always be able to do this but if you can mention someone the contact knows, you'll have made your request even more powerful.
- **It asks questions.** The email doesn't push the contact into a corner. It asks for an opinion and for an opportunity to share their ideas.
- **It asks for referrals.** Not every contact will drop you a referral but each one that does gives you an easy replacement for someone who doesn't answer.
- **And it explains who you are.** The message places you in the community and explains why you should be of interest to the contact.

Most important of all, the email starts a conversation. It's not a request; it's the opening of a new discussion. You'll still have to do plenty of work on the phone and through email before that contact will be completing her profile and writing her first posts.

If your message doesn't pick up a reply, though, stop. Cross the name off the list and move on to the next one. Pester people and they won't come back. Ask them once and when the community takes off, they might well join later.

Moving Into Second Gear

You'll want to begin the process of contacting potential early members at least a month before you're ready for your community to launch. It should be part of the workflow of choosing the design, testing, and preparing your platform. When everything is finally ready, you should be able to invite the twenty or so people you've contacted to create their profiles, look around and begin contributing content. You'll hit the ground if not running, then at least trotting.

Then the real work begins.

Once those people have signed up and are contributing, push harder for their referrals. Don't ask them to mention the community on their website or blogs yet. You want to build up a bit more momentum before you try to bring lots of people on board, but do ask if they know of other people who can contribute to the site. You can even suggest that you'll do the contact work for them.

By the time you've managed to bring in about 30 or 40 members, you'll really have the core of a good community and it will still be at a size you can just about handle.

Focus on building connections between those members. Use your own page as well as email to draw attention to posts written by other members. If someone has written a post that you know another member will have a strong opinion about, make sure they know and contribute, tag them in comments to get their attention. If someone hasn't posted for a while, get in touch and ask them why. You can give them a topic that you want them to write about.

When your community is still this small, you really do have the ability to cajole people together, make introductions and build conversations. Your role here will be as much party host as community manager.

Once you can see that people are talking freely and that discussions are starting to flow, you can open up, suggest that people mention the community on their blogs and accept people who haven't been referred or invited.

You still want to steer clear of paid advertising or press releases. You still want slow, steady growth not a flood that swamps your current community. But you should find that there's a reliable uptick in the number of contributors towards three figures and that those members are active and engaged. They add to the community and participate in it rather than lurking and leaving.

Now, as your community is growing naturally, you can start to deepen your members' loyalty and make them feel strongly attached to the club.

Building On The Foundations: Bringing Your Club To Life

Once your community has moved beyond its seed members, it will start to enjoy some organic growth. Your members will tell their friends, their site visitors and their followers. You'll see fewer names you recognize, more comments written to other members, and the community will begin to develop a life of its own.

At this point, it starts to move beyond your control.

If individuals drift away, you won't notice so you won't be able to contact them and try to bring them back. If comments and posts start to fall off across the site, keeping a few members active won't be enough to keep the site alive.

The community and its spirit, the identity we discussed earlier, has to be strong enough to hold the people who join and to attract people who want to join.

Building And Maintaining Group Identity

The most powerful way to ensure that your members remain active in the community is to give them a sense of pride at being members of that community, to make their identity as programmers, game fans or curry lovers dependent at least in part on their activities on your platform.

That's not as difficult to do as it sounds.

It is something that happens when the community feels special and different, when membership of that community feels exclusive and when participation in the community's activities deepens each member's sense of identity.

One way to do that is to give the community its own unique brand. Dribbble (Dribbble.com), for example, is a community platform for graphic designers. It's a place where designers can show their work in progress and receive feedback from their peers.

The first thing you'll notice about the platform is that it has a strange name. Rich Thornett, one of the platform's co-founders, had hoped to play pro basketball but found that software development and

product design won him more points. His love of basketball, however, is threaded through the site.

Potential members are “prospects.” They’re “drafted” as “players” at which point they make their “debuts.” Uploads are “shots.” Follow-ups to those shots are called “rebounds” when they come from the same designer, and “playoffs” when they come from other designers.

It’s all very quirky and unusual but it works and the platform’s odd identity makes it easy to remember. Anyone who joins the site understands that they’re buying into the concept and that acceptance already gives them something in common.

Members of Dribbble aren’t just graphic designers; they’re designers who bounce ideas around in the playoffs.

When Dribbble started, it had another feature that was even more unusual—and even more powerful.

When new members clicked the sign up link they were taken to a standard registration form. It was very simple: just name, username, email and password, or registration through Twitter. That form remains, although registration is now possible through Google.

But that registration form wouldn’t get you into the community.

It would only allow you to “find, follow and hire” the community’s members.

The sign up form was for businesses looking for designers. Designers could sign up using that form but they couldn’t show their work—they couldn’t play, to use Dribbble’s terms—until they were invited (or “drafted”) by another member.

According to Dribbble, the restriction delivered a couple of important benefits.

It ensured that members took responsibility for the people they invited. Invitations were limited so members who had invitations used them carefully. They checked portfolios of prospects, looked for people whose work and style they liked and once they'd joined, they encouraged them to upload their best shots.

In effect, by only accepting people who have been invited by members, Dribbble turned those members into mentors. Each member who issued an invitation felt the need to help the new members they'd chosen to integrate into the community.

It also allowed the site to grow at a rate that was manageable and didn't overwhelm the support services.

But the invitation did something else as well.

For new members, it made membership valuable.

Because the site wasn't open to everyone, acceptance was an award to be prized. It only happened after their work had been reviewed by a peer, and with so many "prospects" pitching for invitations, new members could feel that they were joining an exclusive club.

And for established members, issuing an invitation was a rite of passage.

They were no longer a rookie on the site. They became senior players with someone to mentor and encourage. They were invested in the community and their status as someone worthy of respect on the platform depended mostly on the quality of their own work but also in part on the work uploaded by the people they'd invited. They

had a solid reason to comment on and support their friends' work—a reason to keep returning to and using the site.

Dribbble's strategy might not have been planned with the idea of forging a strong community identity, but its quirky structure and its limited invitations had exactly that effect. They might have restricted its growth (the company conceded that "we know there are many fantastic designers still undrafted") but it has made membership valuable and so reinforced the members' sense of community attachment.

The result was that the community grew quickly enough without losing quality to become a conventional, high-level jobs site for the creative industry.

Many successful communities will find themselves facing a version of Dribbble's decision to restrict access.

As your community grows, it will pull in new members with a looser attachment to the community's core interest. You may find that those new members unbalance the community and in the process, push away those initial members. Instead of community identity deepening, it unravels. The first members leave and the new members, uncertain what the site is for, also drift away.

That was the danger faced by Cars and Coffee in Irvine, California. The group started as a real-life meet up for people who love exotic automobiles. They could bring their cars to a car park and anyone could come and admire them.

As those gatherings grew though, they also attracted people who wanted to show their standard BMWs or their new Mustangs. Soon the owners of rare automobiles found they were being squeezed out and visitors found that they were looking at the same sorts of cars they could find in their local showrooms.

Organizers responded by restricting access. Adjudicators would decide which cars could enter the show area and which would be directed to the visitors' parking lot. Not surprisingly, there were plenty of disputes, but the decision probably saved the meetings.

Online, the solutions are easier—and they cause less confrontation. If you're finding that new members are pulling the community away from its center and weakening the sense of community identity, then spin them off.

Just as the organizers of Cars And Coffee directed drivers of standard new cars to separate parking lots, so you can set up a new community for people who like American versions of Indian food rather than authentic Indian curries or for people with an interest in street photography rather than the documentary photography that inspired you to create your community site.

There may be some complaints, but communities aren't for everyone who wants to join them. If they don't have a strong sense of identity, they'll have weak engagement—and soon they'll have few members.

You Can Raise Participation!

Boredom is every community builder's biggest fear.

Even when you have plenty of users, you will be afraid that your members will become bored and stop contributing. Once the site has been built and the main features added, you'll spend much of your time wondering what you can do to encourage people to comment, like and add events.

You might even feel that there's little that you can do to persuade people to act.

And you'd be wrong.

According to Peter Kollock, a researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, and an expert in online co-operation, members participate in communities for any of the following reasons.

1. **Anticipated reciprocity.**
   When a member comments on someone else's post, they expect that member to comment on their post in return.
2. **Self Esteem.**
   Members post and comment as a way to make themselves more visible on the platform and to appear more important to other members.
3. **Influence.**
   By writing posts, organizing events and being active members of the community, members can feel that they're influencing the direction of the community as a whole.
4. **Attachment.**
   Members of communities post as a result of the association and loyalty they feel towards their communities.
5. **Need.**
   And members will also post in order to acquire information that they need.

Not all of those motivators are equal but many of them can be manipulated. Competitions, for example, can be a powerful source of the need for reciprocity and they can be as subtle as the regular highlighting of user content. On Flickr, Yahoo's photography

community, the images that appear on the Explore page are chosen by an algorithm that rates favorites, views and comments. As a result, users of the site engage with other users' photos in the hope of receiving similar engagement in return. They also make a point of posting their images to the site's groups in order to increase their visibility.

The more they comment, fave and share, the greater the chances that they'll see their own pictures win the respect of being featured on the Explore page.

While it's easy to implement, the strategy of highlighting the most popular user content carries a cost. The comments under pictures on Flickr are often filled with posts that say nothing more useful than "Great shot!" Favorite folders can become so filled with images that they become impossible to use as a way of navigating truly great content. Flickr actually penalizes photos that are posted to too many groups, although it doesn't say how many is "too many."

Despite the risk of spamming, however, contests based on engagement can be very effective even when the rewards are nothing more valuable than extra exposure and the kudos of winning.

Increasing the attractiveness of influence is much easier. Whenever someone posts a suggestion to improve the community, the community organizer can thank them, and explain why that suggestion may or may not be implemented. Even if it's not implemented, by opening up the suggestion for discussion, you can help members of your community to feel that they have the ability to shape the community.

And, of course, you get to see some good ideas that may just improve the site.

On Flickr, the page that has always had the most activity is probably the Help Forum, a place where members can discuss the functioning of the site. Employees of Flickr take an active part in those discussions, ensuring that members feel that they're being listened to.

While a sense of attachment may be a result of high engagement as much as an instigator of it, need can be reinforced by making the community a welcoming place to ask questions which are quickly answered.

As we've seen, one of the biggest strengths of an active community is that experienced members are available to offer help and advice to newcomers. If you can use your community platform to bring together people with plenty of knowledge with people who need that knowledge, you'll give both sides a reason to participate.

One popular option, that's also used on blogs, is to ask the leaders of your community to take questions at a certain time about a certain topic. Members can hashtag their questions to make them easy to find or they can just be placed in the comments on their page. The expert can then weigh in with their own suggestions.

Not only will you have helped to make your community into a valuable resource, you'll also have shown members that there is a reward available for regular contributions: produce good content and show that you know the topic, and you may be invited to feature as an expert.

All of those motivations highlighted by Peter Kollock are powerful and by engaging directly with members of the community you can use them as strings to pull your members back to the page.

But there is one more motivation that may well be the most powerful of all: the fear of missing out.

When your community is working, when you're getting plenty of good content, members should feel worried that if they're not logging in every day, they're missing important updates. And when they've managed to build connections with other members, they should feel excited when they see an alert at the top of the page—and sad when they miss them.

Those, though, are the products of a good community. Build that community and you'll find that the fear of missing out strengthens it.

The Role Of The Community Manager

Online communities are often built in the hope that, to a large extent, they'll be both self-sustaining and self-policing. The community will add the content, bring in new members, help them to find their feet and flag up people who cause trouble and need to be removed.

It never really works that way.

All successful communities have community managers, people who care about the community, its members and its goals. Those community managers have a number of different roles.

Build The Community

The first role is always going to be to build the community, to draw up a list of those first members, invite them to participate and encourage them to keep participating. That may take several months, depending on how many people the community manager knows as he or she is building the site.

An established business, for example, will have a mailing list of customers and suppliers, and contacts with other people in the industry. The process of contacting them, informing them about the new community and encouraging them to join may take no more than a few weeks.
Newer businesses hoping to use a community as a way of growing from scratch will need their community managers to start earlier and put in more groundwork. They may have to spend several months participating in online groups, building connections in social media and on blogs, as well as attending real-life events, in order to create the connections necessary to encourage other people in the industry to join the community.

That's long, hard work that should begin long before the community is ready to launch.

Police The Community

Policing the community is easier and more straightforward. Every community should have a clear set of rules and guidelines. Those rules should be strict but fair, and they should be written in a way that emphasizes that their goal is to make the community better for everyone.

Most of those rules will be fairly obvious. You'll probably want to state that pornography and obscenity won't be allowed. You'll certainly want to warn spammers to steer clear, and you'll want to encourage people to be polite in their comments.

And you'll also want to warn that the punishments will be severe: the rules should state that people who spam, abuse or post obscenities will be banned.

You don't have to enforce that punishment if you don't want to but stating that you have that option will make it clear to other community members that someone is there and looking out for their interests.

It will also ensure that you do have that option available if you want it. And the chances are that you will want it.

Once an open community has grown to a certain level, it's almost inevitable that you'll start to bring in some people whose comments are more troll than expert. Instead of adding to the discussion they detract from it and they'll put off other users.

Derogatory comments aren't just unpleasant. They can have a real negative effect on your community. They can discourage people from adding new content, put off other commenters with solid information to add, and they can bring down the reputation of the community as a whole. If a new member sees pages filled with angry, sweary comments placed under posts, there's a better chance that he or she won't come back.

So you'll ban trolls, they'll write back and beg to be allowed back in. Because you're nice and want to welcome everyone, you'll give them a second chance… and then they'll do it again.

That's the experience of many community managers, and the process is perhaps inevitable. When you've worked hard to build a community and bring in members, you'll be loth to kick anyone out—until you find that the people you let back in end up causing the same problems again and again.

Make sure that your rules are clear, and you'll give yourself the freedom to be both liberal towards trolls at the beginning and strict when your patience wears thin.

Manage The Community

Most of the community manager's work though will be managing the community, raising participation and ensuring that members post and keep posting.

In general, you'll need new members to continue contributing over a period of at least three months in order to help them build the connections necessary to keep them coming back.

That's easiest to do when your community is small but even as it grows, if people disappear for a couple of weeks, you can still send email reminders to bring them back. Those reminders won't bring all of them back but you can expect a certain percentage to return and add content.

Other emails might provide weekly digests or inform members about posts that their friends have made or which relate to content that they've liked. You can even actively build connections by introducing members with similar interests to each other.

In short, community managers need to be more than traffic experts and police officers. They also need to be email marketers and social hosts who help shy community members to build bridges and form connections.

Content in the Community

How are connections formed inside communities? We saw in the first chapter that interactions between community members create the emotional bonds that bind members together. Those shared experiences—whether they take place on a sports field, in rehearsals, or on marches—give the community members a common history.

For online communities, the bonds have to be tied in a different way. Members of online communities rarely get to meet in life. Their interactions take place in a virtual space while they themselves sit in their homes, their offices, or some other third space. That weakens that sense of shared experience. Someone who contributes to a discussion as they sit in their park watching their child play on the swings is undergoing a very different experience to a fellow contributor who is sitting on their sofa watching a sports game.

In a real life encounter, every part of the experience would be shared. Car enthusiasts who attend a vintage car show together will all see the same cars, hear the same sounds, enjoy the same spectacle as they discuss transmissions and gears. Online interaction only brings some of that experience together.

But what online community experience loses in intensity it makes up for with frequency. It's much easier to send a tweet or upload a photo than it is to organize a theatrical show or turn up to a sports practice. Of course, that ease also reduces the investment made in the community, another factor that contributes towards the sense of community identity.

Online, content is the only way in which member interaction is created so it's vital that that content serves a purpose. It has to have value and it has to have an effect. In this chapter, we'll look at the different kinds of content that a community can create, and we'll

explore ways to encourage and create that content in order keep members contributing and active.

The Four Types of Online Community Content

For all the growth in social media platforms over the last couple of decades, and for all the increased sophistication of the tools used to create content and interact with others, the kinds of content posted to online communities still comes in four forms.

Textual Content

Written content tops the list. Even in 2020, a quarter of all websites on the Internet[3] are estimated to be blogs. Even pictures posted on Facebook comes\ with text, and while Twitter provides ways for users to upload videos, photos and gifs (features that weren't available at the product's launch), it's still largely a text-based platform. Members argue and inform in 280 characters, and emphasize what they write with images.

Facebook, too, might have told media companies that video wins engagement but most posts in a timeline will consist of a combination of image and text. The image captures the eye and the text communicates the message… and the message is often to click through to a blog post somewhere else on the Internet.

So text still matters—and it may well matter more than any other form of content.

[3] https://99firms.com/blog/blogging-statistics/#gref

The use of textual content requires a complex content strategy for community building, both for the content created by community managers and for the encouragement of content created by community members.

The most informative content will be long blog posts that contain new information. Dan North, for example, is one of the leading thinkers in the Agile community. He doesn't write blog posts very often on his website DanNorth.net, but when he does, other members of the community know that they're going to be seeing insights that they wouldn't have learned any other way. The posts are long, detailed, and sometimes technical. They move forward ideas that are currently in discussion in the Agile and DevOps communities.

Not every member of your community will be able to create that kind of content, nor should they. Dan North himself only creates this kind of content a few times a year. But some of them should, and a community manager should encourage members with special knowledge to produce that kind of content by highlighting it, promoting it, and raising the issues it poses for discussion.

The owner of a community about yachting, for example, might suggest that a prominent member write a long blog post about the biggest issues on long solo voyages. When the post goes up, the community leader could urge others to read it, ask people what they think, and even interview the author so that one piece of content leads to the creation of more pieces of content. That one large, detailed post would spark an ongoing conversation made up of multiple pieces of content that together deliver value to the community and its members.

It allows long form and short form content to work together.

Imagery

Now that every mobile phone has a sophisticated camera, the creation of imagery is simpler than ever. It's also more popular than ever. While Twitter has about 330 million members who largely read and write small snippets of text, Instagram, with its emphasis on visual imagery, has more than a billion. Looking at a picture requires far less effort than reading a post, even a small one on Twitter, let alone a much larger one in a blog post.

That's because images catch the eye. They pull attention with a promise of instant communication—and instant satisfaction.

But they don't hold onto that attention, and they're weak at communicating. One of the reasons that the stock photo industry has been so successful is that the same image can be used to communicate a wide range of messages. Social media sites have recognized the conflict between ease of creation and difficulty of communication, and added ways to write messages on imagery.

Sometimes, that can be very effective. Memes might help brands spread their viral messages but they mostly help communities talk to each other in their own special language. Supernatural, for example, is a fantasy television show that started on the WB network before moving to CW. Over fifteen seasons, it's built an avid fan base with a network of communities—and generated an unending amount of memes.

Fans create the memes, share them, comment on them, build Pinterest boards for them, and in the process, they communicate with each other. They keep the community active and talking about the show. Fans have created so many animated Supernatural gifs that the two main actors, Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, have

joked that they can text using nothing but gifs of themselves expressing emotions.

That kind of intra-community interaction is entirely driven by members of the community. The television channel that makes the show takes no part in those activities, and it's not something that can take place offline. It's an entirely community-driven, online phenomenon.

When you're building a community, you should find that the generation of visual content happens spontaneously. Fans of a television show will start producing memes and gifs. People interested in motorbikes will start creating memes about life on two wheels. If that doesn't happen, you can nudge.
You could create a post, for example, explaining how to create memes and gifs and use community themes as examples. If members still don't get the hint, create your own, start feeding them into your own content, and see if people pick them up and share them. Memes and gifs have a habit of escaping from their communities, creating an opportunity to bring in new members.

But this isn't something you can force. Some communities just might not be suitable for communicating in this way. In general, you can expect younger communities to be more drawn towards gifs and memes while older members stick to more traditional ways of communicating. Television shows popular with teenagers generate plenty of image-based content; Mumsnet, a forum for parents, relies on textual content in the form of traditional forum posts.

Video

In 2016, Facebook admitted that it had overestimated how much video people had watched on its platform. The measurement it used to calculate the average amount of time people watched a video had excluded anyone who watched for less than three minutes. That

significantly increased the average viewing time, with at least one advertiser accusing Facebook of inflating viewing stats by as much as 80 percent. The news followed earlier criticism of Facebook for counting a video as viewed if a user watched for just three seconds.

That overreporting of viewing figures might well have led not just community sites but the Internet as a whole to pivot too heavily towards video in 2017. Some of that pivot has now been reversed as publishers found that it just wasn't generating the engagement or the page views that they had anticipated. But it would be a mistake to dismiss video entirely, especially when you're building a community. Video content can come in four different forms, each of which delivers a unique kind of value.

The simplest is the spontaneous recording of something that happens to catch your eye. Ideally, that should be related to the themes of the community. A community for people who follow fashion, for example, could shoot a video of a catwalk at local college and upload it to the community site. But a member of the community could also just share something interesting that they've seen. If a storm is blowing into your neighborhood, for example, you could upload a quick video of the trees arcing in the wind.

You have to be careful doing this, though. Off-topic videos can help to bring members of a community together. They let members see sides of each other that extend beyond the topic of the community. Even the most avid fan of romance novels or vegan cheese will also have a life outside the book or the kitchen. Those short videos make them more interesting. But too many of them can quickly become uninteresting; they're not going to draw everyone in the group. And you don't want off-topic videos to dominate the content stream. An occasional, exceptional video though can go a long way.

Viral videos are the dream of every community builder. Shoot a single video and watch it sail around the Internet, and you can find

that you suddenly have masses of new followers and the community balloons.

But it's not something you should aim for. First, creating viral videos is both difficult and unpredictable. Professional marketing agencies spend fortunes shooting viral videos, seeding them to influencers, and sending them out into the wild in the hope of seeing them go viral, only to watch them fizzle and die. There is no formula and no easy way to go viral. Either it will happen or it won't.

And even if it does happen, the value of the followers who join after seeing a viral video is often low. Users follow to see whether there is any more viral content but they don't engage. Their interest is shallow. As we've seen, it's better to start with a small, dedicated core and scale gradually. The kind of burst that a viral video brings rarely brings long-lasting benefits to the community as a whole.

More valuable are instructional videos. These do deliver something of real value to members, a genuine reward for their membership and engagement. They don't have to be long—and short is good—but they should enable members to feel that they have learned something, even if they never put that new skill to use.

Fans of the BBC science fiction show Doctor Who, for example, can follow the series on a dedicated Facebook page. About five million people do. Because the page is run by the BBC (and because Facebook places a great deal of power in the hands of admins and community creators) the content of the page is entirely top-down: followers can comment, creating new conversations, but they can't initiate new content.

But because the BBC has access to plenty of good content, including behind-the-scenes videos and interviews with stars of the show, it also has plenty of opportunity to keep followers engaged. Included in

that content are occasional instructional videos, such as how to create a costume for a cosplay festival.

It is important to note that in this community, this kind of video is rare. Quizzes, previews, and interviews are much more common—and generate much more engagement. The decision about which kind of video to include will depend on the nature of the community and what its members hope to gain from membership. For fan communities, especially those run by the creators of the show, that will mostly be access to content that no one else can give them. For other communities, such as those interested in cooking or home repair, instructional videos will play a much bigger role.

A search for origami videos, for example, shows that most are instructional rather than videos of shows or exhibitions—and those videos come from the top down, from the creators of the page, not from the members themselves.

That's a waste. Members of the community will have a rich vein of knowledge that can be mined and shared but because they don't have access to the community stream any uploads will be lost in the comment stream.

That puts the onus on the admins to commission—or at least borrow—instructional videos from other members. When the BBC published its cosplay instructional video, for example, the advice came not from the BBC itself, but from make-up artist and vlogger Mark Zapanta. Part of managing a community will involve identifying people who have knowledge that they can share in video form and using your position to highlight that information and present it to the rest of the community.

Community members get valuable content. You get better engagement. And the creator of the video gets higher visibility and more followers themselves. Good places to look for this kind of video

are businesses and other professionals who are also members of the group. Non-members may well want payment that goes beyond the value of exposure to your members.
The last form of video content is relatively new. Facebook launched a live video service in 2016. The feature lets users broadcast videos in real time. Other social media platforms, including both Twitter and Instagram, have rolled out functions, and they bring two powerful benefits.

The first is urgency. Viewers never know what's going to happen during a live video, and that video will only be live once. Community members have to tune in at that moment to watch the broadcast. (Although live videos are usually kept and can be edited and re-watched in the future.)

And the second is interaction. Live videos usually allow viewers to make comments while they're watching, and those comments can be seen by the broadcaster. That turns a live broadcast into a live Q&A. Instead of an instructional video that only shows how to cook a lasagna or fold a paper frog, a live video enables viewers to ask the broadcaster about ingredient substitutions or what to do when they get stuck. Third party providers like Belive.tv extend the functions available on live video platforms to include chyrons, such as viewer questions, and split-screen views ideal for interviews.

While the most common form of live video is a talking head—a presenter talking directly to camera—which is also the easiest kind of live video to shoot, they have proven to be very effective for product demonstrations and for special events. To maximize audience size, it helps to trail the broadcast. Time the broadcast for an hour when you know much of your audience will be online. Tell people in advance when the broadcast will go out. Remind them that it's coming up and encourage them to prepare questions that they can ask during the show. You'll be able to see people as they join the audience in the same way that you can see people joining a video chat, so welcome

them by name. And leave time at the beginning for the audience to fill, and for viewers to tell friends to come and watch too.

Live video is an underused asset for online communities. One of the biggest disadvantages for online communities is that members can rarely come together in real time and in the same place. A live video might take some planning, and the audiences may only be small, especially in the early days of a community, but it does represent a rare opportunity to create a shared experience.

Audio

Live video has been on a slow burn since 2016 but the popularity of podcasting has rocketed. According to one study[4], half of the US population aged 12 and older who have listened to a podcast has now passed 50 percent and nearly a third of Americans listen to a podcast every month. In 2019, Spotify paid $200 million for podcast company Gimlet media, and ad revenue on podcasts is expected to pass $1 billion in 2021[5].

Many of those podcasts, such as the multiple options available to Harry Potter fans, deliver a particular kind of content to a community that already exists. Other types function as standalone content that can create its own community.

The problem with podcasts though is that they're a unidirectional form of content. Audiences listen alone and have no way to interact with other members of the community. That means that the community activity and the podcast have be delivered separately. People might listen to audio content as they work out, sit on the bus,

[4] Edison Research, "the infinite dial 2019", EdisonResearch.com, March 6 2019, https://www.edisonresearch.com/infinite-dial-2019

[5] PwC, *IAB FY 2018 Podcast Ad Revenue Study*, iab.com, June 2019, https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Full-Year-2018-IAB-Podcast-Ad-Rev-Study_6.03.19_vFinal.pdf

or drive to work. They'll only talk about what they've heard when they've finished.

So the community platform will discuss issues related to the podcast. But the podcast itself will be distributed across all of the usual podcast platforms—Spotify, iTunes, Pandora, etc.—and the two will have to work together. The podcast would need to tell people where to go to talk about what they've heard. The community platform would need to provide links to enable people to listen to the broadcasts, and community organizers would need to prepare for a buzz of activity after each podcast is released.

Management Content and Community Content

What using podcasts shows is that while content can have a range of different formats, allowing plenty of space for creativity and preference, there are two kinds of community content.

There is content created by community leaders; and there is content created by community members.

Communities should be self-sustaining. They shouldn't depend on prompts from the founder to keep producing engagement and interaction. The members should want to spend time in the community and should be able to find subjects to discuss and ways to discuss it themselves. They should be able to set the agenda and determine for themselves the direction of the conversation.

That kind of activity keeps the community growing and active. J.K. Rowling, for example, plays no role in any of the fan communities that have cropped up over the years to talk about her wizarding world. It's fans who have created them, and it's the fans who decide what the communities will discuss.

But Rowling does have a role in Pottermore, the platform created to release more content related to her books and which provides plenty of information for fans to discuss.

That shows that the relationship between the community creator and its members is complex. Managers want to give members as much freedom as possible. But they also want to retain control over the community and have at least some ability to influence its direction.

That's particularly true when the community has been created to serve a purpose. Without the Wikipedia community of editors and contributors, for example, the site would lack information and any information it did have would be filled with errors. But without the leadership of Jimmy Wales, the community wouldn't exist or know how to organize itself.

Duolingo might look like a standard, education app with content created by the company but it's actually dependent on its community of language enthusiasts to build its courses. In an interview with CMXHub.com, Kristine Michelsen-Correa, Duolingo's Head of Community explained how the application used community to fuel its growth[6].

The company quickly realized that its internal team that was too small for the application to scale quickly into new languages, Michelsen-Correa explained. But it did have a community that wanted to support the application, some of whom were bilingual. So Duolingo created a platform called the Incubator. Bilingual community members could apply to join the Incubator, and work together to create new courses themselves.

[6]Carrie Melissa Jones, "Here is Duolingo's Playbook for Creating Community-Generated Content for over 50 Million Learners", cmxhub.com, last accessed February 12, 2020, https://cmxhub.com/duolingo-ugc-challenges

The process was complicated. Duolingo first screened applicants to find leaders, then let those leaders choose contributors for the courses they were managing. The structure of the Incubator was based on experiments that Duolingo had run with forums. “We learned a lot about setting up ground rules from the forum program,” Kristine Michelsen-Correa told CMXHub.com. “Always make sure everyone understands why they’re contributing and what the goals are.”

The Incubator enabled the application’s in-house language experts to transition towards community manager roles, responsible for mentoring the Incubator’s volunteers and ensuring that the contribution of community volunteers remained at a high standard.

The creation of a course comes in three stages. The first is content creation: community members translate sentences again and again. The process takes about three months to prepare a course for beta. Members will spend an average of about five hours a week interacting with the community, creating the translations. The in-house team manages the technical aspects of the course creation, allowing the volunteers to focus on translations and keeping the engagement as simple as possible. The courses then open to beta learners who provide feedback that the community members can then incorporate. That process of feedback and community incorporation continues after launch and once the course is live.

Like many large communities Duolingo breaks its communities into sub-communities. A general forum provides a place for everyone to share language-learning insights, while individual language forums bring together people who have knowledge of individual languages.

Kristine Michelsen-Correa also described some of the measures that Duolingo uses to encourage participation. Teams of volunteers co-operate within languages but they compete with other teams working on different languages. Duolingo also tries to understand

what community members want and aims to help by offering recommendations for college, graduate school or jobs; by delivering a feeling of personal growth; and by recognizing people's efforts by naming contributors on the course pages.

Kristine Michelsen-Correa recommends that other businesses looking to emulate Duolingo's community-driven content provide multiple ways for people to contribute so that everyone can participate at their own level without ever feeling that they're being asked to do too much. Rewards should incentivize the group, rather than individuals, and activities should build teams and co-operation.

It helps too that the activity has a fixed purpose—the launch of a new language course—and a sense of meaningful accomplishment.

Duolingo's community architecture provides guidance, structure, and leadership from the top while relying on members to create the product through their community action. Sometimes, though, management will need to apply a stronger hand.

How OurCrowd Used Content to Create a Community… and a Community to Build Trust

In another interview with CMXHub.com, Zack Miller, the Head of Community at OurCrowd, an investment group, explained what the organization does to create community, and why it does it[7].

OurCrowd is a particularly unique kind of community, and one whose member activities stretch beyond answering questions on forums or uploading memes. As a platform for crowdfunding startups, its

[7] Carrie Melissa Jones, "This is the Content and Community Strategy OurCrowd Used to Get 7,000 People to Invest over $100 Million", cmxhub.com, last accessed February 12, 2020, https://cmxhub.com/ourcrowd-content-community/

members are expected to put their hands in their pockets and invest in companies. The activity is to take risks, and the members will take those risks together. “Our investors talk about the ‘investment experience’ around startups,” Miller tells CMXHub’s Carrie Melissa Jones. “We had always thought of it as a dispassionate process, but there is a feeling of joint experience in investing in the same company.”

To take those risks together, OurCrowd encourages members to feel that they’re not just investors but members of a community. The platform wants them to trust each other and trust OurCrowd to help them find good places to put their money.

It builds that community through content—and through a range of different kinds of content.

The first community event that OurCrowd produced was a real-life meetup. That’s continued. In 2019, more than 18,000 people from 189 different countries registered to attend a summit that OurCrowd held in Jerusalem, the site of its headquarters. The Summit lasts typically lasts a week, with two days dedicated to invite-only events.

Few communities have the means to draw thousands of people from all over the world, but they don’t need to. Miller stresses best practices for local events that include running small, satellite events in between the large community events, and creating a shared experience or a common goal for the group as a whole.

OurCrowd has also run two kinds of webinars. One focuses on a specific investment opportunity; the other, a bi-weekly teaching webinar open beyond members. Those “Teach In Tuesdays” have provided a useful way to share knowledge about both OurCrowd and about startup investment.

Other forms of content include a “Knowledge Center” filled with blog posts about different industry sectors and their opportunities; ebooks; and even a YouTube channel on which OurCrowd live streams its events.

What that content is trying to do, explains Miller, is to identify and fill a gap in the knowledge. It’s trying to level up the community so that members feel empowered, united in a common cause, and aware of their own role in creating that shared goal.

It’s a top-down form of community management. OurCrowd is creating the spaces for the community. It’s pushing content into those spaces, and using the content rather than the interaction between members to build community spirit and a sense of membership. The most important action isn’t the sharing of ideas between members as it is in most communities. It’s the shared investment in a business idea. The content serves to create the knowledge and the bonds that allow that community action to take place.

When the community content flows from the top of the community to the members, instead of swirling around inside the community, stirred occasionally by community leaders, the strategy also needs to be dynamic.

As community members become more knowledgeable, they have less use for content intended to level them up through teaching. OurCrowd’s webinars have become less frequent over the years, even as its live events have become much larger and more important.

Communities change, and whether the content is coming from the members themselves or from the community leaders, that content has to change with it.

One variable affecting that change is the technology of the platforms on which that content is being shared. That's what we'll explore in the next chapter.

Building a Community Across Platforms

Imagine that you want to build a community in your neighborhood, a club for people who like selling on Ebay. You head down to your local community center, and you book a room. Every Monday evening at 7.30, anyone in your neighborhood who's trying to make money on Ebay can come together and swap advice. They can talk about packaging and marketing, how to handle complaints, and the best time to take the boxes to the post office.

Everything is going great until a new café opens at the end of the road. The café is much more comfortable than the community center. The coffee is better and it has nice, soft armchairs. People still come to your weekly meetings but the numbers are falling and you know that members are also getting together during the week in the café—and you're fine with that. You want the members to meet and continue to swap ideas, and you don't really mind where they do it. You just want to be sure that everyone is getting the same information and that everyone is learning from each other. That's a problem when some people are coming to your weekly meetings and some people are chatting in the café.

Your community of Ebay sellers starts to grow. Soon the post office recognizes that many of its customers are using its services to ship packages to their Ebay buyers. The postmaster has an idea. He creates some booklets about Ebay selling and makes them available for his customers to take away. It's just good for business. The post office clerks too, take a few minutes to chat with the community members and share what they hear. As the sellers stand in line, they also talk, sharing their information and asking each other questions.

Not all of the goods that the Ebay sellers offer comes from their own homes. Some of the sellers are buying goods across the country then shipping them on. They've rented mailboxes to receive their purchases. There too, the community members stand and chat as they collect their packages.

What started as a single site for sharing advice among community members has developed across different sites, each sharing information in its own way.

The community as a whole is getting smarter. But it's also becoming more disparate. Information shared in the post office doesn't always reach the people who meet in the café. The content of the talks that you sometimes organize in the weekly meetings is not received by everyone who could benefit from it. And the income you used to make selling packing material, as well as website building, photography services, and consulting work, at the meetings has fallen too.

You don't want to stop people from meeting and talking in the café and the post office and around the lockers—and you couldn't even if you wanted to—but you do want to make sure that you have a presence in each of those areas.

The same dilemma takes place in online communities. You might choose to build a community on your own platform. You might design that community with a keen knowledge of its members' needs. You might attract important members, create content that's valuable, and organize events that foster a sense of belonging. But no matter well-built your community, its members will still meet elsewhere. They'll visit other platforms. They'll get together on Facebook. They'll hold local, real-life meetings, follow each other on Twitter, and exchange messages on WhatsApp.

All of that is good and valuable. But it also means that you need to be on those other platforms too so that your content and your services can be reached wherever your members might be. You can't force members to only participate in your community. But you can make sure that you're present on the platforms they use—or at least on the main platforms they use.

Spreading Your Content Across Platforms

The easiest way to meet your members where they are is simply to open a version of your community on those platforms. If you've created a community on your own platform, you can also open versions of that same community on Facebook, on Reddit, and on Twitter. Users of those platforms will be able to take part in those discussions, and while they'll still follow other groups, you'll be able to push your content towards them.

Or at least you can try to offer them your content because the competition for attention on those other platforms will be much tougher. Facebook has about 10 million groups vying for the attention of its 2.4 billion members—and it works hard to prevent those members from seeing that group content without paying. The organic reach of content created on Facebook groups can vary but your members will not see every post. In fact, it's not unusual for a group with 150 members to reach just four or five members with each post. According to a report by Hootsuite and We Are Social, the average reach for a Facebook post in 2019 was just 5.5 percent.[8]

Engagement is just 3.6 percent, and the number of likes grows at just 0.13 percent.

[8] Hootsuite, Simon Kemp, and We Are Social, The State of Digital in Q3 2019, 2019 https://hootsuite.com/resources/the-state-of-digital-in-q3-2019

You can build a community for a cause or a hobby or a brand on Facebook but it's slow going. You won't get complete engagement, or anything like it, and you'll be competing with other groups for your members' attention. At the same time, the growth of the platform itself is slowing. Little more than half of US teenagers use Facebook and the biggest growing demographic on the platform are people aged 65 and over.

On the other hand, that low level of organic reach and engagement does mean that you won't have to worry too much about rivals taking the attention of your members, and Facebook does have such a broad range of different content types that's it easy enough to take content created on one platform and re-use it on Facebook. Whether you're shooting video, writing blog posts, organizing meet-ups or demonstrations, or putting on webinars, you'll be able to create that content, place it on your main community platform, and also send copies to Facebook.

Once you've set up your own group, set up a Facebook group. Add some content, then tell your members what you've done and share the link so that they follow you on that other platform. The least you can do now is take the content that you create on your own platform and also publish it on Facebook. That will help you to reach community members who use Facebook but who visit your own platform less frequently.

But doing that minimum would be to leave behind one of the biggest advantages of cross-platform community building.

In practice, you're not going to be renting a room in the community center to organize your community, then watching members drifting away to other forums. You're going to be renting that room as discussions in other venues already take place. The members of your community will already be gathering, at least informally. You want to bring them all together under one roof. That means you need

to reach those other venues not just to keep your members engaged but to draw them towards your community.

One of the biggest advantages of additional community platforms is that they give you a way to grow your community. They contain large numbers of people who could become your members. So it's not enough to send content in one direction only. It's not enough to simply recycle content created on one platform and place it on a second platform like Facebook. You also have to use your content to pull people to your main community hub.

That could be through something as simple as including a line in your content to urge people to visit your platform. Just asking for shares can help to expand your reach, especially when those shares come from influencers with large numbers of followers. Instead of using those platforms beyond your own to ensure that your content reaches all the members of your community, you can use them to build your community and bring new members to your own platform.

Spreading Community Content Across Platforms

Pushing the content you create on your community platform to other communities—to people on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or anywhere else—will broaden your reach and help to build your community. But it depends on top-down content creation. The content you're spreading will be your own. It's content that you've created and for which you have copyright. You can republish that content in as many places as you want.

That's harder for user-generated content.

We've seen that not all communities depend on user-generated content. OurCrowd uses its own content to build the knowledge

necessary for members to take part in the community activities that OurCrowd values most: shared investing. But for many community sites, the interaction is everything. The manager of a fan site doesn't want to create every meme, post, or picture themselves. They want the members of the community to create and share that content so that they can focus on community growth. If you're only producing a small amount of original content, you'll have little to share across platforms.

That might sound strange. The very nature of social media is that sharing is assumed. A meme is designed to spread across the Web. A viral video has no power if it's not reposted and uploaded to multiple platforms. Marketing agencies put a great deal of effort into ensuring that their videos are seen across as many platforms as possible.

But the creator of any piece of content owns the right to that content. They don't need to register it or do anything to stake a claim to it. If you've created a photograph, a drawing, a blog post, or anything else, you own it—and only you can choose where it's published. If someone takes a photo that you've created and places it on another platform, they're breaching your copyright.

In practice, most people won't complain if you do that, especially if you provide credit. But as your community grows and becomes prominent, it's also inevitable that some people will complain. They won't want you to re-use their content and spread it on other platforms without permission, and sometimes without payment.

There are two solutions to this problem.

The first is to ask for permission. If you're the manager of a fan site, and someone has taken a candid shot of a celebrity at a con, then you can ask their permission to post the picture on a different platform with a link leading back to your community. Twitter, for

example, is filled with news outlets asking people for permission to use members' images in their outlets in return for credit.

That will allow you to take the entire content and re-use it as bait to bring people to your community—where they can meet the people who made that content. So you could ask to use someone's selfie with the star of some cult show, place it in your Facebook community group and invite others to share their own images on your own community platform.
But asking for permission can be fiddly. It takes time; you have to wait for a reply before you can act. And they might say 'no' or ask for payment, which can be awkward.

The second solution is easier. You can just link to that content. There are no copyright issues, and no one is going to complain about a link. But it's weaker. Even if the platform automatically takes an image from the hyperlinked page and includes it as a thumbnail—as Facebook does—it's still going to be less powerful than being able to spread user-generated content across different platforms and adding text or links that bring people back to your own community.

There is a better approach to take towards build a community across platforms.

Building a Cross-Platform Community Strategy

Both asking for permission to repost content and linking to other people's content is simple and straightforward. One is faster than the other. One brings more benefits than the other. But neither is particularly complex and both are used by publishing platforms, brands, and communities every day.

More complex is to consider community platforms as an ecosystem made up of unique, independent units, each with its own culture—and adapt your content to each of those worlds. It means creating a complete cross-platform strategy.

That's easier on some platforms than on others. Facebook was built with communities in mind. If you're building a community on your own platform, your content—whether it's imagery, videos or text—will translate fairly easily to Facebook.

Twitter is much harder. That platform's 280-character limit means long posts have to be split across threads while keeping people's patience to scroll down the page in mind. Images remain important but conversations that take place around a post can be clumsy and unwieldy. Twitter might have started as a place to hold discussions but posts on the platform work best as conversations between two people while others watch and occasionally throw in a comment. As the number of people participating grows, the conversation becomes harder to follow.

Twitter then, is a good place to make announcements that are of interest to the community. The Vegan Society (@TheVeganSociety), for example, uses its Twitter stream to share knowledge about veganism, make offers of vegan products, and provide advice about a healthy vegan diet.

The account's profile includes a link to the society's Facebook page, which repeats some of the content but also provides information that's more specialized. There are fewer product placements and more announcements of events that might be of interest to the community. Facebook members are told of job openings with the society, talks by the society's executives, and requests from the media looking for vegans to interview.

For the Vegan Society then, Twitter appears to focus largely on outreach. Facebook is more about community relations. Instagram, where the society also has an account, provides a combination of both, with images showing employees receiving awards, notices of job openings, quotes from the Society's founder, and product pictures that should attract new possible members.

The categorization isn't hermetic. There's plenty of cross-posting—and there should be because audiences aren't hermetic either. A community organizer can't make clear distinctions between the kinds of audiences on each platform. They can't say that Facebook is for current members, Twitter for finding new members, and Instagram for showing off the lifestyle. Each of those different kinds of audience will be on each of those platforms—but they'll be on each of those different platforms to different degrees.

What the community organizers can do though, is adjust the balance of their content on each platform to take each platform's audience in mind.

This isn't a scientific decision, at least not initially. Social media marketing is number-driven. Advertisers on Facebook and Twitter run different types of ads simultaneously, with small differences in imagery and copy. They quickly shut down lower performing ads, then ramp up the budgets of higher-performing ads based on their numbers of comments, shares, and likes.

Those kinds of stats will be less useful for a community. Shares and likes will show that content is reaching new people—they're good measures for outreach content used to bring in new members. Comments can show how much people are talking about the content, but what none of those statistics can do is measure the quality of the conversation.

You want people to share the content you're creating. That's essential for community growth. But mostly you want community members to interact, and you want that interaction to be valuable and positive.

On none of The Vegan Society's platforms, for example, do we see images of animals in slaughterhouses or in factory farms. Those kinds of pictures are likely to generate large amounts of comments—most of them angry. But they won't help to drive conversations about the vegan lifestyle. They might provoke a reaction but they won't create the kind of upbeat, inviting atmosphere that the society wants in its community.

Communities that spread their content over multiple platforms will need to use a complex strategy. They'll need to be able to recognize which of the platforms is best for holding discussions, building connections, and spreading knowledge between members. They'll need to know which of the platforms is best for outreach and for spreading messages. And they'll need know which content on each of those platforms delivers the results they want.

Usually, that will mean creating different kinds of content to build engagement and improve outreach then sharing them in different proportions across different platforms. But some platforms offer some unique benefits, unique audiences, and unique opportunities. They require unique and specialized forms of content.

Creating Special Content for Special Platforms

The goal of community content, whichever platform it's posted on, is to build engagement, to lift up the quality of the community and allow the spread of ideas. That will happen through the use of the kind of content that you can find every day on community platforms.

Announce news, ask questions, share offers, show pictures, broadcast videos, place that content on the most appropriate platforms, and you should find that you get engagement and growth. But with a little creativity, you can do much more—and one place to look for that creativity is in the way that brands use community platforms.

A community built by a brand has a particular purpose. The relationship between members is less important than the relationship between the members and the brand itself. Although interaction between the members will build a stronger community, it's enough for the community to feel a strong bond to the brand. That means that content can be more top-down than it is in other communities, with more control for the community leader over message and culture.

How community leaders use that control, though, can provide interesting ideas for other communities.

In 2014, Hellmann's, the mayonnaise-maker, teamed up with WhatsApp in Brazil to launch its WhatsCook campaign. People entered their phone numbers on a website, and were contacted on WhatsApp by a chef. The chef would ask the user to photograph the inside of their fridge and send them the picture using WhatsApp. The chef would then give them a recipe using the ingredients they already owned—and, of course, Hellmann's mayonnaise. They would even send them videos showing how to do things like cut the onions and reminders to take the dish out of the oven.

The campaign spread from Brazil to Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay, and proved hugely popular. More than five million people were "impacted." Over 13,000 signed up. Most importantly, each user spent an average of 65 minutes interacting with the brand.

That's a remarkable figure for an online community, and it's a real two-way interaction that produces a real, shared experience.

The campaign was created by Cubocc, a Brazilian advertising agency, and it would likely have cost Hellmann's, which is owned by food conglomerate Unilever, a fair amount of money to pay the chefs.

But it's also an easy model for a community to follow. Every community has experts who know more than most. Just as Hellmann's chefs made their expertise available to home cooks, so a community could ask for volunteers willing to give advice to other members. Those members could leave a phone number, and one of the volunteer experts could then use WhatsApp to talk them through a challenge: cooking a vegan meal; fixing a motorbike; folding an origami unicorn. It's the kind of interaction that can now be performed using community tools like WhatsApp—and using assets like a large advertising budget or the goodwill of a community.

One difference between Hellmann's action and the way in which a community could provide a similar service though, is that the food brand didn't start with its own community. It did however try to build a community around the results of its interaction. People who used the service shared pictures of what they had cooked with Hellmann's who then shared them with its social media followers.

A community, however, begins with people already in place—both experts and people who need help. The result of that expertise can then be used to build deeper relationships between existing members both on a one-to-one basis and across the community as a whole. All members get to see that membership of the community brings real benefits and genuine value.

This is also an example of cross-platform community building. Hellmann's used WhatsApp to communicate between the chef and

the follower; it used Facebook to share the results of that success. Each platform delivered on its own unique strengths: Facebook for community sharing; WhatsApp for individual communications.

Community Building on LinkedIn

Another platform with a special quality is LinkedIn.

The platform, now owned by Microsoft, is often regarded as a networking platform for jobseekers. Users can create a kind of permanent resumé, keep it updated, and build up their contact lists so that they can always be open to better offers. But the platform now does much more than that. It also acts as a hub for personal brands and as forums for people with particular interests.

Bill Gates, for example, has more than 25 million followers on LinkedIn, a number similar to his Facebook followers. Those 25 million LinkedIn followers aren't all hoping for a job at Microsoft. They want to hear about the work of the Gates Foundation but mostly they're looking for words of wisdom from one of the world's most successful entrepreneurs. Try to read one of the pieces of content posted on Bill Gates's LinkedIn page, and you'll first receive an invitation to join the "Gates Notes community."

It's difficult to describe 25 million people following content online as a community. They won't know each other. They'll struggle to interact with each other beyond the ability to place comments at the bottom of posts. And they'll have far more differences than characteristics in common. The only thing that will unite them is an interest in the work of one of the world's most successful entrepreneurs and philanthropists.

But this is the right place for Bill Gates to build his community, and not just because he owns the platform. LinkedIn is

business-oriented. It's B2B, not B2C, a place for professional networking and knowledge-building.

So while vegan communities on Facebook, for example, tend to focus on recipes and lifestyle content, and provide a place for members to swap advice and suggestions, on LinkedIn, the groups are largely about vegan business owners. They're places where vegan professionals and business owners can talk about the challenges of matching their morals to their business practices. A "Vegan Professionals" group has around 8,000 members; a "Vegan Leaders in Corporate Management" group has more than 4,200 members. The most popular vegan group on LinkedIn includes vegetarians but still describes itself as a "global group that is aggressively seeking all vegetarians and vegans that want to connect with like minded individuals personally & professionally." The professional element on LinkedIn is always present.

That means that for a community that spreads across multiple platforms, LinkedIn does have a special use.

First, like Bill Gates, it can be used by a community leader to build their own personal brand, especially when that brand involves professional skills. A professional photographer, for example, could create a group on one platform for photography hobbyists, providing them with a place to share their photos and swap shooting tips between themselves. They could also use communication platforms like WhatsApp or Zoom to share personal advice and build relations between experts and other members.

They could use a LinkedIn group to bring other professional photographers together, and a LinkedIn page for themselves to promote their own personal brand. Each of those platforms would need their own content strategy. The content the community shared across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram would all be aimed at members or potential members and would vary only in the balance

between participation and outreach. The content shared in the LinkedIn group would discuss professional issues that could help other photographers, while the content posted on the personal page would talk about the challenges of running a business and promote whatever hook the personal brand is offering.

That's a lot of content—and it still doesn't include the outreach opportunity available by answering questions on Quora and the new opportunities now available through young, new platforms like TikTok.

And that's the biggest challenge of cross-party community-building. The more platforms you use, the more content you have to create. You'll have small sub-communities that need managing, and comments that deserve responses. There are tools like Buffer and Hootsuite that make cross-posting on different community platforms from one central hub easier but you'll always need to be careful. The danger of growing too fast across different platforms is that you focus on feeding in new content at the expense of interacting with the community.

The goal of community content is always to promote community interaction. Content shouldn't be produced to fill space on platforms. It should be produced to provoke conversations and deepen bonds between members.

Someone starting a new group wouldn't begin by renting an entire community center. If the first meeting will hold just a few people, they might even decide to skip the community center altogether and agree to meet in the corner of a local café. As the members grow, the choice of space grows with them. Once the group becomes so big that it starts to break into sup-groups with their own sub-interests, it can start to hold multiple meetings at the same time—like a conference.

The same approach can be taken with online communities. Begin on a single platform, using other similar platforms for outreach. As the group grows, expand your content across different platforms, adjusting the content to appeal to specific audiences.

Measuring And Monetizing Your Community

Ask a social media expert to explain how much their efforts contribute to the bottom line and you'll probably hear something closer to a shuffling of feet and a muttering about engagement being vital for growth.

Too often, community building is justified on the grounds of "branding" and "loyalty-building" instead of hard figures.

Maersk, a B2B shipping company that began investing heavily in community-building in 2011, described the main goal of its social media use as getting "closer to our customers". At the same time, though, it added, the company recognized that there's much more to gain from it, "such as better press coverage, higher employee engagement, more brand awareness and even bringing in high-level insights and intelligence from shipping experts around the world."[9]

Those are all valuable benefits but it shouldn't come as a surprise to managers if more skeptical shareholders start asking what all of that closeness, engagement and brand awareness is actually doing for profits.

[9] Claire BeDell, "How Maersk Line Container Shipping Turned B2B Social Media on Its Head" Business2Community.com, March 25, 2013
https://www.business2community.com/social-media/how-maersk-line-container-shipping-turned-b2b-social-media-on-its-head-0444840

That's a question that community builders should be ready to face, especially those building communities for businesses. In fact, it's a question they should be happy to face.

A community throws out a great deal of data and plenty of figures. If you know how to access them and how to read them, you'll be able to better steer your community towards stronger growth and you'll also be ready to answer questions about the bottom line with hard numbers.

You'll also know how to increase those numbers with real sales attributable to the community.

Measuring Growth

Some of your community data should be easily accessible and easy to understand. A community site's admin page, for example, should show user engagement as a graph, as well as the total number of members, posts and content the community has produced. Community managers should be able to see at a glance the number of likes, comments, shares and status posts users have made over the previous week or month. Raw data statistics should also show how many groups, photos, videos and events have been posted over a set time period, as well as basic demographic data about users, including age, gender distribution and location.

That's all valuable stuff. By tracking the amount of content being created and passed around the community you'll be able to measure your growth rate. If you see that the number of posts or comments is starting to fall, you'll want to step in quickly to find out whether people are pulling away because the posts have moved off-topic, whether established members are crowding out new members or whether there's some other reason for the community beginning to lose ground.

Whatever the reason, you'll be ready to take action and push the numbers back up.

Those stats let you measure the pulse of your community but alone they won't tell you everything.

Your Google Analytics data will tell you a little more. Here, you'll be able to see where your visitors are coming from, how many of them click away before joining and which are the best sources for new members.

You'll also be able to see how long people are spending on the site, a really vital piece of information.

Together, those two data sources—your community admin and Google Analytics—will give you a good picture of the health of your community, how well you're managing to grow it and how much people are enjoying it.

What they won't tell you is how much it's worth. To calculate that figure, you'll need to collect some very different data.

Measuring The Value Of Your Community With Surveys

Regardless of what Maersk's social media managers have told the company, a community created by a business only has one final goal.

All of that engagement and branding and closeness should lead to higher profits. That can happen for two reasons.

It can happen because membership of a community causes people to spend more money.

And it can happen because membership of a community reduces a business's costs, perhaps by taking some of the weight off support, public relations or marketing.

If you can prove that either of those things are true, you'll never have trouble justifying the value of your community.

You just might have a little trouble doing the calculations.

For example, imagine that you've create a community to support an online store selling floral designs. By the end of the year, you have 1,000 members. On average, those members spend $100 each year in your store, earning your company $100,000. Customers who aren't members of your community, however, only spend $50 each year.

You could argue that each member of your community is worth $50, the value of the extra spend.

But it's not quite as simple as that.

First, you'd have to be sure that those extra purchases came as a result of joining the community. The community may simply have attracted your highest-spending customers.

And second, you'd need to be able to collect that financial data in the first place.
That data collection takes effort but it will tell you how much your community is increasing your profits and whether those extra profits are being produced as a direct result of your community activity.

To collect that data, you'll probably need to conduct surveys. You'll need to survey your members, and you'll need to survey non-members so that you have a control group.

That might sound old-fashioned. You might feel that an online community activity throws up so much digital data each time someone presses "like" or posts a comment or clicks a link that you don't need to do any more than decipher your graphs.

That may be true and for some communities it will be true. But for all communities, surveying is the most revealing way of pulling valuable information out of your members — including information about sales.

You'll need to conduct a number of different surveys at a number of different times.

You should survey members who have just joined the community and the same members a year later. As a control group, you should also survey customers who aren't members of the community and the same customers a year later.

The surveys should ask questions about a host of different issues about your business. (If you've got people's attention, it's a shame to waste the opportunity to gather some valuable feedback.) But the most valuable question will be how much they spent at your company over the last twelve months.

If your community is creating value for a business you'll find that not only did the average spending of community members increase over twelve months but that it increased at a higher rate than that of non-members. You'll be able to calculate the total extra spend and arrive at a value for your community as a whole.

Usually, a survey is the easiest way to collect this data. You can use survey software to put the questions together and you can encourage people to take part by offering a discount on a product. It might cost you a little money but the data will be worth a lot more than the cost of gathering it.

It is possible, though, that you might be able to do without a survey. If you can match the email addresses of people who bought from you online in the past to the people who joined your community, you'll have an accurate account of your members' spending patterns. You'll then be able to track the growth in their spending after joining the community and compare it to the spending patterns of people who didn't join the community.

If you can collect figures in this way, they're likely to be more accurate. On the other hand, customer surveys are so useful that they're worth doing anyway.

However you choose to do it though, the result should always be enough data on spending patterns for you to be able to prove that the community is contributing to profit growth.

Monetizing Your Community

Extracting revenue from community members, however, isn't straightforward.

Users expect use of online communities to be free. They expect to be able to post status updates, hit a "like" button and add their own comments, photos and videos without paying.
They don't pay for Facebook so they won't see why they should pay for your community.

But just as Facebook makes plenty of money out of its non-paying members, so you can monetize your community too.

There are a number of ways to do that:

1. **Offer Premium Services**
   Charge for basic membership and you'll struggle to build your community. Offer limited use of the community for free but charge for the most valuable services and you may be able to earn revenue from your most dedicated members.

   The Warrior Forum (www.warriorforum.com), for example, is a community for Internet marketers. Anyone can join the forum and open threads, but membership of the War Room costs about $97 a year and allows members access to learning material.

2. **Sell Products**
   A community set up by a business will always have the aim of making more sales from its members. You can increase those sales by making exclusive special offers to community members and you can also offer other people's products to your members. If you can identify products that your community members would need or enjoy, you can cash in on the trust your members feel towards you by promoting them and earning affiliate fees.

   Mumsnet (mumsnet.com), for example, has an Deals section where it's partnered with a host of different brands to push discounted products.

3. **Sell Information**

   One particular product you can sell is information. This won't work for every kind of community or for every business, but you might be surprised at how broadly you can spread the idea. While communities for professionals can earn from coaching, even organizers of gaming communities can make money by selling guides, cheats and tips to powering up and beating levels.

   You can also sell in the opposite direction. Instead of selling information to your community, you can also review the knowledge being shared in the posts, groups and comments in your community, extract it, organize it and sell it to other people in a format that's easier to access than ploughing through posts.

4. **Sell Courses**

   Not all the people who join a community will know everything that can be learned about it. Many will want to learn more. They'll pay to take courses, whether those courses will help them to take better pictures, play better music or code better games. Sell those courses on your community and you'll be able to deepen your members' knowledge and earn passive revenue from your students.

   Expert members can give their advice for free, or they can sell detailed advice for a fee with the community taking a share of the revenue.

5. **Organize Events**

   Local communities can build closer relationships by getting together in real life — and the builders of those communities can earn revenue by organizing

those meet ups. This will take a bit of effort.

You'll need to find a location, arrange the activities, ensure that there's parking, food and other services. You'll also need to figure out the pricing so that everything is covered and there's still money left over for you. Get it right once though and you may well find that the meet up becomes regular, the community grows closer and your revenues grow larger.

6. **Add A Marketplace**
   If you're finding that many of the posts made in your community are telling people that they have items for sale, you have an opportunity. Whether they're pitching cars, baseball cards, cosplay costumes or anything else, create a marketplace and charge for listings.

   Then charge more for promoted listings.

7. **Create Merchandise**
   Communities with a strong sense of affiliation can monetize loyalty. Services like Zazzle and CafePress allow anyone to put logos and messages on everything from mugs and t-shirts to skateboards and mobile phone covers. If your members feel proud to be part of your community and want to show off their membership, create a store and fill it with products that carry the community logo.
8. **Sell Advertising**
   Advertising is often the first revenue source that community builders think of. It should be the last, the one they turn to after they've installed every other monetization method that the community can benefit

from.

Advertising is intrusive, often irritating and it's not what brings people to the community.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't do it.

If you can bring in advertisers with products that your members would like to buy, then banners and other ads should certainly be part of your monetization strategy. Just don't rely on advertising and make sure that you implement it in a way that adds to the community experience and doesn't detract from it.

However you choose to monetize your community, whether you do it through increasing sales of your own products, through partnerships with other businesses, through membership fees and exclusive access or simply through banner ads and AdSense, you should always be following one simple principle:

Bring value to the community.

Every monetization strategy should bring something extra in return for the cash you want to extract from the users.

If you want people to pay membership fees, don't cut them off from the activities they've been able to do for free until now; create new, better activities and charge for them.

If you want members to buy more of your products, create special offers that are exclusive to members or even special products that are exclusive to members and reward them for their loyalty and their membership.

If you're going to advertise, pick advertisers with a strong connection to your community members.

Make sure you bring something to your members before you take something away from them.

Measuring and monetization are vital parts of building a community. You will need to know how fast your community is growing and you'll need to know how much those members are worth.

Don't rely on "branding" and "loyalty-building" to justify the continuation of your community. Count the cash and you'll be able to count on the community to continue to receive funding in the future.

Conclusion

Building an online community is enjoyable, inspiring, challenging, thrilling and fun.

You'll get to meet some amazing people.

You'll get to talk about a topic you love with people who are as passionate about it as you are.

You'll get to watch your community grow, its members contribute more and more content, help each other with their problems and raise questions and issues that you would never have considered.

And you'll get to see that community contribute to your bottom line.

Your business will grow and it will grow in a way that's more enjoyable than just about any other method.

In this guide, we looked at some of the most important aspects of building an online community.

We started with identity, the thing that binds a community together. We then discussed the launch, and we explained why it's better to grow slowly, to bring in small numbers of chosen, dedicated members a little at a time, rather than to launch big and fill the sites with people who look, click and leave.

We explained how to find those people and what you can do to pull them in.

We then discussed how to step things up and what you can expect to happen when your community begins to take on a life of its own. It's fascinating to see and watching your members place comments on each other's posts, ask for more content and spark conversations is always fantastic. We also talked about the sort of content you and your members should be creating both on your own community platform and on other platforms.

Finally, we talked figures, perhaps the most overlooked aspect of online community building.

Although online communities aren't as easy to track as other forms of Internet marketing, their admin pages report plenty of figures, and Google Analytics provide more. There's no reason for community organizers not to know exactly how quickly their community is growing and how deeply its members feel engaged.

No less importantly, there's also no reason for community organizers not to know how much its members are worth and the amount of dollars they're contributing to the business. They're more likely to be able to do that when they know what they can bring to the community that will encourage members to pay. We talked monetization too.

The biggest incentive to create a community is always going to be — and should be — the desire to meet your customers if not in person then at least online. Building that community takes planning and takes time. Get it right, though, and you won't just have a business. You'll have a business that does business with friends.

Just like we do on PeepSo.com/Community. Come, see for yourself.