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The
Secrets

OF SUCCESSFUL

**online
communities**

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

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INTRODUCTION — WHAT IS AN ONLINE COMMUNITY?

Social networks are booming — and not just Facebook! Thousands of niche communities have been created over the past few years, filling up 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.

Affordable social networking applications like JomSocial (JomSocial.com and PeepSo.com), allow users to create that niche social network easily, and thousands of people are doing it right now.

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 []/^ 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 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 start by talking you through the process of launching a community.

This can feel like the worst time for a new social site. 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 forming a group identity and show you how you 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.

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.

1. BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS: YOUR FIRST MEMBERS

Google+ is probably the most sophisticated of all the community platforms on the Web. When Google designed it, the company got everything right. The “circles” are the perfect solution to the problem of posting content that you want some people to see but you want to hide from others. By building different circles for colleagues, clients, customers, friends and family, users are able to post all the content they want on one attractive platform and do it easily.

It's got everything a social site should have... except for one thing.

It doesn't have users.

Or at least it probably doesn't have many users because we don't really know how many people are on the service. At the end of 2013, 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 Facebook's billion-plus active members, it's a drop in the ocean.

The reason that even Google has 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+, waiting for enough people to leave Facebook... and not move to Snapchat or WhatsApp.

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?

1.1 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'll 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 *V@Ái;[ç^} ÁJæ@* 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 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 a numbers game. Your community won't begin with lots of people and it won'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.

1.2 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 who are vegetarians (<http://veggiefishing.com> beat you to it), video games (www.avalonplay.com, a site for gamers, is a beautiful example of how to create an enticing community) or even for sperm donors (yep, www.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. The community section of Udi's Gluten-Free Breads (www.udisglutenfree.com/community/), for example, puts the camaraderie of the forum last in its website copy, after its appeal to new members:

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Members of the community who are already gluten-free get to feel that they're helping others take their first step and bring new people into the community. It adds a powerful extra boost to the attractiveness of the community, 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.

1.3 SEEDING YOUR COMMUNITY

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 other potential first members, **blogs** are the best place to begin.

Avoid the top bloggers in your field. They 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 blog 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:

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- **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.

1.4 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. 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.

2. 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—has to be strong enough to hold the people who join and to attract people who want to join.

2.1 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 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 (<http://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 "debut." 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 playoffs.

But Dribbble has another feature that's even more unusual—and even more powerful.

Click the sign up link at the top of the page and you'll be taken to a standard registration form. It's very simple: just name, username, email and password, or registration through Twitter.

But that registration form won't get you into the community.

It will only allow you to "find, follow and hire" the community's members.

Join the Dribbble Community

Sign Up

Dribbble is a show and tell community for designers

Sign up to find, follow and hire members of our small but vibrant community of designers, icon artists, illustrators, interface designers, typographers, and other creative folks.

The sign up form is for businesses looking for designers. Designers can sign up using that form but they can't show their work—they can't play, to use Dribbble's terms—until they're invited (or "drafted") by another member.

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

It ensures that members take responsibility for the people they invite. Invitations are limited so members who have invitations use them carefully. They check portfolios of prospects, look for people whose work and style they like and once they've joined, they encourage them to upload their best shots.

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

It also allows the site to grow at a rate that's manageable and that doesn't overwhelm the support services.

But the invitation does something else as well.

For new members, it makes membership valuable.

Because the site isn't open to everyone, acceptance is an award to be prized. It only happens after their work has been reviewed by a peer, and

with so many “prospects” pitching for invitations, new members can feel that they’re joining an exclusive club.

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

They’re no longer a rookie on the site. They’re now a senior player with someone to mentor and encourage. They’re invested in the community and their status as someone worthy of respect on the platform depends mostly on the quality of their own work but also in part on the work uploaded by the people they’ve invited. They have 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 have had exactly that effect. They might have restricted its growth (the company concedes 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.

It’s not a strategy that would work for every community but both the platform’s unique identity and limited access have helped to ensure that its members are high quality, highly motivated and highly engaged.

And many successful communities 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 feeling tightening, 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.

2.2 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 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 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.

Help / The Help Forum in English (change)

The Help Forum is a great place to start if you need help with Flickr (just like our [extensive FAQ](#)). Our community is full of helpful, clever people who know more about Flickr than we do!

Search the Help Forum

Or, check on [topics you've posted in](#).

 Thanks for giving our new photo page a try. If you have feedback, [we'd like to hear from you](#).

Hot topics

Title	Author	Replies	Latest Post
NEW [acknowledged] White spaces again	 Kaometet	58	85 minutes ago
NEW [Acknowledged, in progress] views on photos (BUG)	 47604	366	6 days ago
[Official Thread] All Sizes and EXIF Copyright Information	 Xerxes2K	34	7 days ago

While a sense of attachment may well 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.

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.

2.3 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.

1. 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.

2. 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 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 ~~, a/~~ 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 effective 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, swearsy 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 are 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.

3. 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.

3. 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 has been investing heavily in community-building since 2011, says that:

"Our main goal is to use social media to "get closer to our customers". But at the same time we realize 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."

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.

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 ~~@]~~ ^ to face.

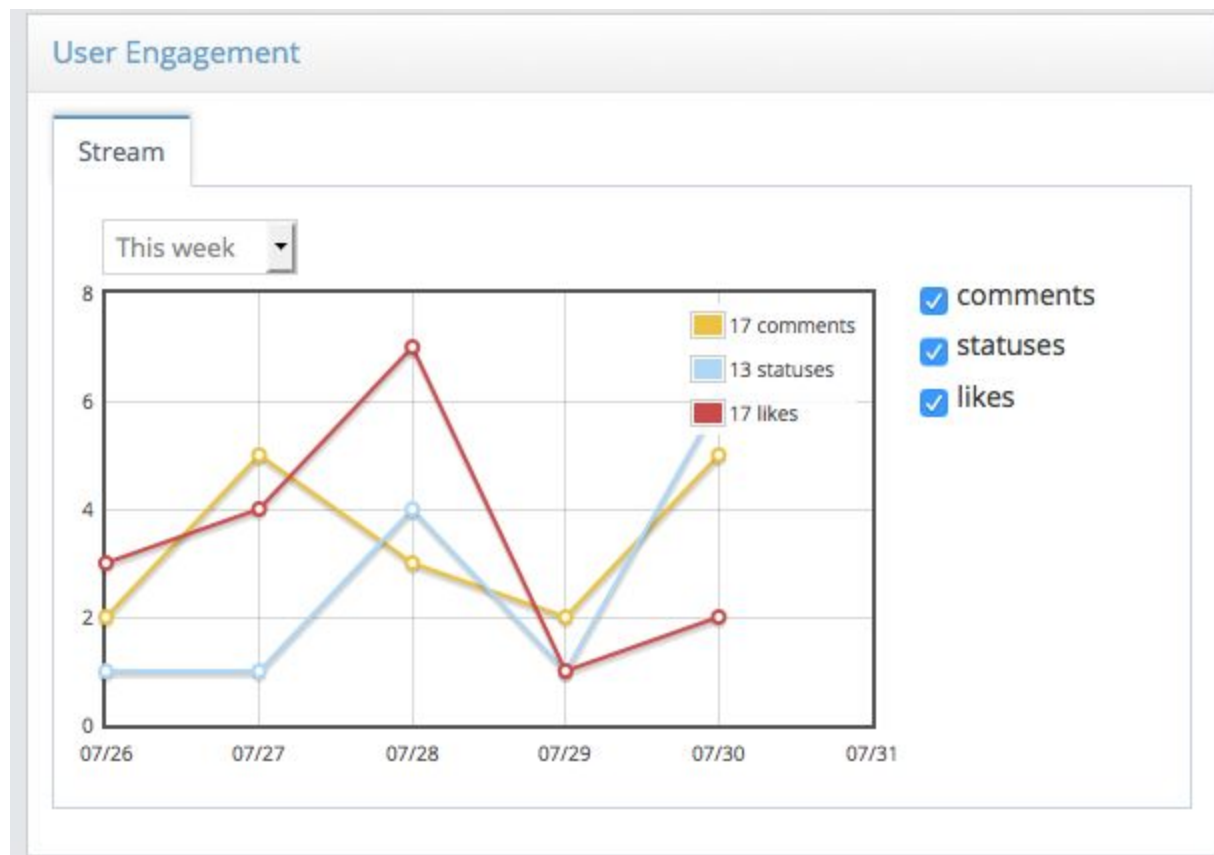
A community throws out a great deal of data and plenty of figures. If you know how to access them and how to read them, you'll be able to better steer your community towards stronger growth and you'll also be ready to answer questions about the bottom line with hard numbers.

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

3.1 MEASURING GROWTH

Some of your community data is easily accessible and easy to understand. PeepSo's admin page, for example, offers user engagement as its first graph — right below boxes that show the total number of members, posts and visual content the community has produced.

Community managers can 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 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.

3.2 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 the 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 origami 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 did you spend at [business name] 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 *more* 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 a tool like iJoomla Surveys to put the surveys 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.

3.3 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 \$37 and allows members to post their own special offers, create their own blogs and groups, and send as many private messages as they wish.

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 (www.mumsnet.com), for example, has an Offers 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 forum posts.

4. Sell Courses

Not all the people who join a community will know everything that can be learned about the community's topic. 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.

Managers who have built their communities using [JomSocial](#), a powerful community program for Joomla, can plug an entire online college into their communities using [Guru](#), an education extension from the same developer. It's very easy, very flexible and can be very profitable.

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.

But 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 ebook, we looked at some of the most important aspects of building an online community.

We started with 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.

But it doesn't mean your work is done. In fact, it's just beginning.

Without a strong sense of community and loyalty, even the most dedicated members will eventually drift away so it's vital for the community manager to build group identity, to raise participation. We talked about some of the ways of doing that, from giving your community an unusual design and structure to making membership exclusive and hard to obtain.

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 to 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.

