Space Planning for Online Community

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Abstract

Several years of consulting with online community hosts and managers have highlighted a variety of issues that recur across many online community development efforts. We summarize those issues in eight points that have functioned as useful guidelines to working with online communities, particularly within a corporate context. These recommendations focus on the location and purpose of the community, the monitoring of social activity within the space, the provision of feedback to participants and the organization and maintenance of the space. While this collection is particularly focused on issues relevant to community organizers closely involved in starting, maintaining or growing online communities, its principles are generally applicable for analyzing and understanding the dynamics within a variety of communities.

Introduction

Online communities can be difficult to handle: there are real challenges to keeping users involved and happy, while developing the community in directions that are mutually beneficial for the hosts and participants. During the last few years, we have worn several hats within our corporation: in addition to our academic research, we have been frequently engaged as internal consultants on the topic of online community. We have met with organizers of online communities that were intended to generate a range of results. These organizers asked us about building, sustaining, and retiring the communities for which they had oversight. These communities often have tens of thousands of participants from around the world, populated by customers, partners and other users of the company's products or services. Many of these community managers have responsibility for monitoring and cultivating dozens or hundreds of these social spaces.

This paper examines social issues in running and organizing online communities from the perspective of a corporate or institutional host. Many companies now sponsor public discussion spaces for a variety of reasons. Two of the most common are support spaces where users discuss the company's products, and general discussion spaces, where the company seeks to generate awareness of features and page-views (and thus advertisement revenue). While we do not attempt to define community here, we note that the ideas we discuss will be most helpful for communities that fit Preece (2000)'s working definition0. She defines an online community as consisting of:

- *"***People** *who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs…,*
- *"A shared* **purpose***, such as interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community,*
- "**Policies** *… that guide people's interactions, and*
- "**Computer systems***, to support and mediate social interactions…" (pg 10, emphasis added)*

The communities that we consulted on—and have the most experience with—are open public discussion spaces, and thus allow pseudonymous or fully anonymous access. Spaces like MediaMoo (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995), in which all users use real names, and must be invited, have noticeably different patterns of interaction and incentives.

In this paper we synthesize key recommendations from the existing literature with observations drawn from our experience. Several books (Kim 2000; Preece 2000; Powazek 2002a, Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002) have suggested rules to handle, develop, and moderate online communities. However, we have found that corporate and institutional hosts have distinct needs from the organizers of private or social communities. Among other needs, corporate sponsors often require communities to demonstrate a return on investment. In addition, investment in online communities gives product groups insight into problems other customers may encounter. Companies with global visibility face a heightened risk that activity in the communities associated with their products or services will reflect poorly on their company.

In this paper we offer a guide, relating suggestions to relevant literature, and illustrating points with case examples from community teams with which we have consulted. These are guidelines, not rules, and may serve as focal points for debates about best practices for community management.

We also intend this paper to be of interest to the academic community. While some of the general topics

that we raise are well-known within the academic literature, we have not found all of them articulated as we have here. We hope this collection of guidelines may be useful for researchers both evaluating the success and failure of other systems, and may be useful directions for academics who are building research systems (Beenen *et al.* 2004; Bruckman & Resnick 1995; Hudson & Bruckman 2002).

These observations gain relevance in the context of the explosive growth of social media systems which extend the range of digital objects, access controls, and notification mechanisms available for online communities. As blogs, wikis, and ever-more-exotic forms of social media become available, many aspects of community remain constant: there will always be users interacting in the context of various incentives to participate, in some cases yielding productive cooperation.

Research Setting

Our company is a large one, and maintains a greater-than-average number of communities. Not only are there spaces to discuss most of its broad product line, but there are additional communities related to interoperability between products, ways to leverage the products, and ways to use the several programming languages that the company distributes. There is no single center for community at the company; rather, individual groups take on the role of community maintainer for their communities.

As researchers investigating online community, we became an informal "go-to" point for discussions of how various communities within the company were, should or could be doing. We worked closely with product support teams and community maintainers, watching their methods of engagement with communities for several years. The questions they asked informed the technologies we developed (e.g. (Turner *et al.* 2005)). Even groups that neither used our technology nor were our research subjects would check in with us occasionally to discuss systems that they had built, or that they expected to construct. Our partners asked for advice on technical newsgroups, forums on lifestyles, politics, and gaming, and wikis on a variety of topics. We addressed questions during all aspects of the life-cycle for communities: we were involved as communities created, sustained, and eventually retired.

The online community managers we consulted with had a variety of intended goals and their communities demonstrated different levels of interaction and made use of a variety of technologies. Most of our experience was around threaded discussion environments like web fora, discussion groups, email lists and Usenet newsgroups.
We also conducted two specialized "focus" group meetings (Krathwol, 1998), comprising 15 community leaders who were non-employee high-value content contributors. We wanted to understand how these key informants experienced online communities with a focus on how information is exchanged, the types of people they interact with and their motivation for participating in our company's online communities. Their insights are included where appropriate in our recommendations.

With this paper, we hope to make two main contributions. First, we provide a mapping between existing research into online social spaces to the leading issues we have found in a large scale corporate online community environment. Second, these points are illustrated with brief examples that represent interactions with managers of online communities and other business partners. The quotations are characteristic of scenarios that have been presented to us. While not word-for-word, these quotations allow us to present the terms and issues in practitioner's language and vernacular.

After a brief review of relevant literature, our points are organized into four categories in the following sections:

1) Location and purpose
2) Social activity within the space
3) Providing feedback to participants
4) Organizing and maintaining the space.

We summarize these points in Table 1.

Location and purpose
1. Know the space's purpose
2. Build on existing community and brand
Monitor Social Activity
3. Know what the space is doing
4. Embrace leaders, respect lurkers
Provide Feedback
5. Reward users individually
6. Use positive reputation
Organize and Maintain the Space
7. Encourage critical mass
8. Exert gentle control

Table 1: Outline of the points on community

Literature Review

For public-facing organizations, fostering online communities is a vital way to create and sustain a strong customer base (Butler *et al.* 2008); deliver support and services in ways that can alleviate barriers of time, distance and cost; obtain customer feedback for product improvements and new product design; save personnel cost by having customers provide help to each other via support groups; keep in close touch with customers; and promote the company and brand loyalty. We have addressed the several practitioner-oriented books (Kim 2000; Preece 2000; Powazek 2002a) oriented toward online community. In this section, we discuss other research on sustaining or maintaining online community that have addressed some of these issues.

Broadening research on online communities has begun to solidify, linking our findings in practice to projects online. Constant, Sproull and Kiesler (1997), found that strangers were willing to share information in online discussions that

was useful in constructing technical solutions although they did not know the person they were helping—and that information seekers thought the advice they received was useful.

Normative research has begun to suggest ways to design and orient communities. A series of papers (Beenen *et al.* 2004; Rashid, Ling, *et al.* 2006) have explored ways of motivating users to increase their participation in online communities. In those studies, an existing online social space was partitioned; subsets of the users were then encouraged to participate in different ways: users tended to respond in the most positive way when they felt that they uniquely contributed to the space. Other work from the same lab examined Usenet Newsgroups, looking at factors that predicted whether a message would receive a response (Arguello *et al.* 2006). In addition, a workshop in 2005 collected a variety of different approaches to incentive systems to help sustain online communities (Ellis, Halverson, & Erickson 2005).

These incentives are often designed into the community fabric itself. Specific design decisions, such as choosing who can participate, can affect the ways that communities develop and self-identify (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler 2007). Similarly, moderation strategies affect group direction. One project compared three different oversight techniques within member-driven communities (Cosley *et al*. 2005), and found that community-based oversight led to most improved contribution quality.

It is less common within the research community to discuss experiences with maintaining systems (outside, perhaps, the context of conference keynotes.) One exception is Erickson's (2003) discussion of his experience designing and evolving Babble to relay some basic principles of social visualization. We hope to build on this, as we believe that the research community can benefit from both testing these experiences and—in building research systems—can make sure to give themselves every advantage in attracting research subjects to their systems.

Location and Purpose

We first address the fundamentals of the space: where it is logically to be 'found', and what it is for.

1. Know the Space's Purpose

> "We wanted to create a perfect thought leader community," the designer said. "We'd have all the people who are experts in this tool talking to each other. We weren't sure what they'd talk about—but get that many good people in one place and great stuff would inevitably happen. It's been six months now, and no one has shown up!"

A community without a reason to exist will not come together. While this is a common observation in the literature, it seems to be often lost in the excitement around online community. Too many organizations seem to embrace the notion of a community without deciding what the community is meant to accomplish. Powazek (2002a) asks "Who is your audience" (pg 8), and Preece (2000) suggests that having a purpose is likely to make a more "stable" (pg 80) environment. Knowing what your users should expect to gain from the community can help guide design decisions, and can aid in understanding how much effort they might expect to put in. Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002) similarly suggest that considering the participants' goals and interests will help get a community started.

With the "thought leader community" that the designer wanted to create, for instance, there would be no purpose other than socialization. The busy experts did not necessarily see a benefit for themselves to participate: they were already well-acknowledged, and already had places where they could share their ideas; they were not looking for credit or additional fame.

We see this as an extension of the so-called "Grudin paradox" (Grudin 1998) which predicts failure for groupware if the effort that people put in does not match with the benefit they get out. There will be some set of first users who will have to put effort into this empty space: without a purpose or direction, those users will not know their potential audience. Should they ask a question into the void, or raise a discussion point? Guidance, clear descriptions, and especially early posts that model good behavior can help accelerate this process.

The majority of visitors to open discussion spaces are one time visitors. Their information behavior is similar to other new users in that they typically do not know where to find information to answer their questions, are new to the technology or product, and may even be new to the concept of asking questions in an online environment. Often, they expect an answer to their question to happen as if it were a commercial service encounter. Having a clear goal for the community and clear group norms can help calibrate their expectations while meeting many of their needs.

Online community spaces can take many forms and structures depending on their purpose. Companies often sponsor question-and-answer spaces for users of a product to share information and resolve problems. In those communities, structured as discussion boards, so-called "answer people" (Turner *et al* 2005) respond to technical questions and share their expertise with less experienced users. It is not uncommon to support community for the purpose of discussion between members, sometimes in the hopes of building long-term loyalty. Other communities form around annotating or expanding a data source. In these spaces, discussion is kept close to the annotation source, as in Wikipedia's "talk" pages (Riehle 2006). Knowing and understanding the purpose of your space is important in identifying, measuring and reporting the success of the community.

2. Build on Existing Community and Brand

> One community organizer came to us for advice in deciding how to create a new online community. She explained, "This should be a place where people who

are using the Management Console can talk with each other."

"What do they do now when they need to talk to each other?"

"Most of them are System Administrators who already use the Installation Console message boards."

In this example, there was already an established community within the company that the organizer could re-use. Creating a new space would only have complicated matters: users would need to choose where to look, and would have encountered all the same people. Instead, she simply extended the existing space by adding a special-topic forum to cultivate discussion on the Management Console issues. Participants flowed into it naturally, and the moderation already in place continued. Participants were not confused about which place to read or post to; organizers did not need to coax users into their new space.

The organizer had not originally thought to use the existing boards because those boards were run by a different organizational structure within the company. Different product groups and different organizational structures are important divisions from within an organization, but they are not as important from outside.

Structuring around internal organizational differences can be a problematic way to organize online social spaces. Outsiders will often 'roll up' an entire organizational hierarchy and view a company as a monolithic entity. A site might be seen as being run by "the university", not by the psychology department, no matter how it is labeled. Internally, the funding for a community can be sensitive to the distinctions between reporting structures, product lines, or university departments. Users, however, are unlikely to navigate organizational structure to find their community.

If it makes sense, take advantage of shared branding to find ways for users to connect across the organization. Consider whether online help or technical support can find ways to direct potential users to the information in your community with minimal effort.

Monitor Social Activity

While placing the community initially is important, it is critical to be able to follow the development and growth of the community. Knowing the distribution of users can help a community organizer make wise decisions about how to develop or change the community space.

3. Know What the Space is Doing

One maintainer asked, "What tools can I use to measure our return on investment in communities? How can we gauge reach and impact to current and potential customers? Is this community going to survive? Is it worth what we pay to maintain it?"

Marketers want to know how many customers they "touch" through community and what the impact of the interaction is. Business managers want to know whether communities are driving loyalty or adoption, or whether customer support costs are being reduced. Community organizers want to know if their community is thriving.

We have found only limited research addressing the financial effects of online community (Cothrel & Johnston 2007), and none from academia. Counting members of a community with any precision can be a challenging task; estimating how much they are worth is even more complex.

Our own approach has been to assess the opposite, by estimating the effect of discontinuing (or never building) the community. For example, how would call center volume change if there was no source online for answering questions? Knowing what the space is doing entails on-going monitoring of whether the community is broadly fulfilling the purpose for which it was designed; and keeping track of immediate issues that may be time sensitive and require targeted intervention.

Preece (2000) notes that it is possible to assess a community through interview, observational, and log- and database- quantitative methods. Interviews and observational methods can be valuable tools for understanding the basic feeling of the community and spot-checking what activity is occurring. A community organizer who doesn't read their messages cannot be completely aware of what is going on.

But only log- and database-backed quantitative methods can scale well: in our organization, some community managers track dozens or hundreds of discussion spaces at once. Databases that store community records can be a critical tool, as an organizer can find out basic statistics with a small handful of tools. Community analysis tools are now becoming available to measure what users do within the space. Sophisticated metadata viewers and processors, such as Netscan (Turner *et al.* 2007), can provide detailed information on users and their participation. Even if databases are not available, community monitoring can be done with web log analysis, reporting the number of page views and the number of distinct users, and supplemented with observation. (The number of page views for submission and commenting pages may be a useful proxy for comments posted.)

Figure 1 illustrates the results of one analysis that helps community maintainers understand their community. Using a visualization based on "Newsgroup Crowds" (Turner *et al.* 2007; Viégas & Smith 2004), we examined six different Usenet newsgroups. The Newsgroup Crowd visualization requires several basic statistics to be collected about each participant in a newsgroup: how many different threads they have participated in; how many times they have posted; how many distinct days they have posted on. Each bubble represents a single user: the x-axis then shows (in log scale) the number of messages per thread; the y-axis shows the number of days. In Figure 1, we show these averages for six different groups.

The different behaviors for these groups—all originally intended as "question and answer" groups—gives us useful insight into how their user population differs. In the bottom

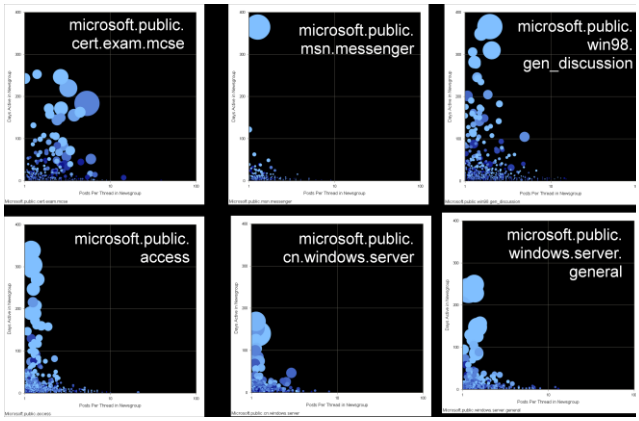

Figure 1: Newsgroup crowds for six Usenet groups. Each bubble represents a single user. On the x-axis, a log scale stretches from one post per thread to 100; on the y-axis, a linear scale stretches from one day of posting to 365 distinct days of posting in a given year. Large bubbles represent large message volumes. Note that "win98.gen_discussion" has a population of people who post very few messages per thread, but has posted nearly every day of the year.

left, we see a newsgroup dedicated to discussing a database product. The most active users have shown up virtually every day of the year, and have posted very few messages per thread: they are "answer people," joining a question-and-answer, and answering promptly. The "MSN Messenger" group (top center) seems to only have one person answering questions.

Last, in the "MCSE exam" newsgroup, the most active users are also involved in the longest threads: these groups are clearly debating contentious issues. Understanding this dynamic can help the community organizer decide whether this is desirable behavior.

To date, there is little research available on the 'health' of communities that offer useful predictions of their likelihood to survive. Community organizers may still wish to try to compare their month-to-month populations and patterns of participation to understand how the community is changing. Whether or not there are formal tools for measuring behavior and interaction in the community, it is important to collect some level of basic statistics to establish baseline trends and patterns.

4. Embrace Leaders; Respect Lurkers

> The support specialist was worried. "We're getting thousands of page views a day from thousands of IPs, but only a few dozen posts! What do we do about the free riders?"

Participation in most online groups will be heavily skewed: some members will contribute a great deal, while many others will contribute only occasionally. Indeed, participation in many groups can be described with a long-tailed power law. This pattern recurs in nearly all spaces we have studied.

Rather than attempt to change this behavior, or chase off the infrequent contributors, it is worth thinking about this curve in terms of the different roles played by members with different participation levels. Lurkers fall at one extreme: they are the "read-only" members who consume content without contributing any themselves. Nonnecke (2003) has argued that a healthy population of lurkers is a natural part of the ecosystem—that passive readership keeps ideas flowing between communities, and that a lurker on one system is likely to be an active contributing member on another.

Lurkers' use of the system can also be harvested as a passive labeling of page popularity or interest. Increasingly, systems leverage lurkers by making their use visible, showing how many times an article has been read or a video watched as a form of "read wear" (Hill 1992). Some e-commerce sites, such as Amazon.com, have been unusually innovative about utilizing lurker behavior: there are a number of different levels of involvement that the site mines, ranging from the very active (lists, reviews) all the way out to the highly passive (books that users have purchased together, or merely surfed between).

Frequent posters can be valuable members of a community. Not only do they provide the majority of the material and help set the direction for the community's conversations, but they can nurture new members as well. Arguello *et al* (2006) show that new members are far more likely to stay if they are greeted upon entering a community. Kim (2000) suggests that new users be directed to a welcoming or visitor's center populated by experienced users (pg 129).

One way to acknowledge their status is to give them a separate place to work. We ran a series of focus groups with frequent posters who were not employed by our company in order to understand how they coordinated their efforts. They had been given private discussion spaces for them to ask questions or bring visibility to hard questions that have not been answered in public discussion, and found that space very helpful. They were able to form a subculture of community around their status of being high-value members of a larger community. Finding ways for these key members to communicate behind the scenes helps those members feel supported.

Provide Feedback

This next section addresses the sticky questions of providing feedback systems for users. An over-generous reward system can incent poor behavior, but a system that does not allow users to show off their contributions will be impoverished.

5. Reward Users Individually

> We were working with a user-annotated reference set in beta. A user could edit an annotation, or create a new one. "We'd like to reward creators," the creators told us, "so we've put up a top ten list of contributors. The more you add, the better your rank."

> We checked the top ten list. The top three had each repeatedly gone to existing annotations and added a new one: "The above annotation is incorrect." Did they misunderstand the "edit this annotation" button? Perhaps. But there would have been little recognition for editing the existing annotation—while adding a new one would gain recognition with minimal effort.

Not everything that can be counted, counts. A ranked "top-ten" list of participants can be a tempting target for gaming or cheating the system, and virtually any ranking system invites manipulation. In an online game, displaying a list of the top ten players makes sense because game scores map neatly to skill; in contrast, being in the "top ten" posters usually equates to contributing the highest number of posts—but does not guarantee that those high numbers of posts will be of high quality. Users that devote themselves to manipulating ranking systems for the sake of being on a high score list or having a high rank seem to be pervasive in almost every public site (Powazek 2002b). Indeed, the best of intentions and most carefully designed systems often become complex and byzantine (Adler & Alfaro 2007; Lampe & Resnick 2004) in an attempt to find 'fair' ratings. Informants in the focus groups referred to those who try to become visible through gaming the system or who try to make money from being visible as "wannabes", "greedy", "spammers", and "assholes". The general feeling was that those people were not part of the community to help others but rather to seek monetary gain – to get a free subscription to the company's developer network or exploit business opportunities (i.e. sell a solution or book, or gain consulting prospects). Participants cautioned organizations who host communities not to support this type of behavior by viewing the quality of top responders' posts and not just the quantity of responses to messages.

In systems where people are compared directly to each other—"top ten lists", for example—the desire to increase a ranking may be particularly strong. It may be better to avoid lists that explicitly compare users to each other; instead provide information about individuals on their distinct profile pages.

An interesting case study comes from Slashdot (as discussed by Powazek 2002b). Slashdot has a notion of reviewing articles, and giving them points (Lampe & Resnick 2004; Lampe, Johnston, & Resnick 2007); these points give credit to the poster of the comment. This system was 'gamed' by users intent on having highly-reviewed articles; they would find friends to review their articles well. Slashdot responded by adding a meta-review system; meta-reviewing earns "karma" points. This multiply-tiered system was intended to reduce gaming. Of course, this created a new game: trying to accumulate as many karma points as possible. The extrinsic goal of obtaining karma points was not necessarily aligned with the goals of high-quality conversation or high-quality reviewing. Over time, Slashdot has adjusted their system; new forms of games have arisen in a continuing arms race.

Ratings that reflect users' behavior can help them recognize their role in the community and reinforce their commitment to maintain it. Public recognition can also be an incentive to help encourage posters to contribute more or better posts, whether it is represented in statistical form or textual form (such as ebay's "star" levels). Even a basic search function on user names can provide a basic form of essential information about history and reputation; more sophisticated portals can provide user reports that combine a user's self-description along with their logged behavior history. Users appreciate the ability to prove their value to their employers, and to prove their status to other members of the community.

While we do not have a complete answer, we can note some positive examples: Powazek (2002b) suggests that explicit rankings are more prone to gaming than implicit ones: it may be better to label a user a "frequent poster" than to report that their precise message count. Rashid *et al* (Rashid *et al* 2006) suggest that displaying a non-numerical value of a contribution to other users—finding ways to highlight the users' unique added-value —may also be a positive motivator.

6. Use Positive Reputation

> For each post they place, we'll let other people rate it. If they get a negative reputation, we'll put that by their name so everyone knows to ignore them. That way, the bad people won't sully our boards. Unless they register under another name, I guess.

It is tempting to build a reputation system to control misbehaving users: users who behave badly will be punished by the community and receive a negative reputation. If they want to get back in the communal good graces, they need to repent, behave better, and ultimately return to a state of grace.

In practice, these sorts of systems can easily backfire. Resnick *et al* (2006) have shown the relative cost of a 'negative reputation' is roughly equivalent to the cost of re-entering the site with a new identity: that is, no punishment can be worth more than the cost of re-entering the site from scratch.

An intentional disrupter is unlikely to be dissuaded by a negative reputation: instead, they will simply drop out and create a new account under a new name. A financial scammer on a site like eBay can build reputation cheaply (by selling something cheap in quantity), and then profitably use-up that reputation (by executing a scam to sell a costly item).

In contrast, a sincere user who misunderstood the posting rules or context may be scared away by the stigma now attached to their name. Neither of these outcomes really attains the positive result of getting improved behavior from a mis-behaving member.

Frequent posters to our company's online communities discussed the ways to handle posters who break the unwritten rules of the newsgroup, such as using profanity, knowingly deceiving others, or personally attacking someone else. Although some offenders were publicly corrected, these active community members preferred to chastise misbehaving members privately, allowing the

community to self-police, rather than having a corporate entity discipline action.

In the spaces we examined, frequent and long-time community members had a voice of authority. In other spaces, semi-official moderators, selected from the community's ranks and given some editing power, are often a successful voice of authority.

There is a surprising counter-example to our discussion of negative reputation. The discussion site Slashdot provides negative reputation: messages that are judged by the community to be "negative" simply fall below the radar of most readers; a user needs to set a particular setting to see those (Lampe, Johnston, & Resnick 2003). Those negatively labeled users take particular pride in being the dark underbelly to Slashdot, and so continue to post using their same user name and reputation, providing a back-channel to the main conversation.

Positively incenting good behavior can be useful, as it encourages and models those users who have done well. Consider ways to incent the good while applying sanctions in a graduated manner that matches the scale of the infraction. This recommendation echoes those made by political scientist Elinor Ostrom's study of self-organizing resource cultivation and management groups (1991).

Organize and maintain

As an online community is developing, some design choices can help the community gain and keep members; others will cause the group to shrink. Tables of contents can help users figure out where to look for a useful reception and decide where to post. In this section, we discuss the importance of helping groups maintain an appropriate size.

7. Encourage Critical Mass

> "We were ready," the manager told us. "We'd built one message board for each make and model of car on our boards. A few thousand people stopped in, but they never posted! Even when our front page would promote one discussion board, that board would get attention—but no one would do anything on the others! Several of our boards have three messages on them:
>
> Hello, is anyone there?
> Buy Cialias Cheap!
> 'I'm here. Is anyone else?"

Potential contributors who show up at a message board and find it abandoned are unlikely to contribute. Optimally, they would join a group that is bustling, but not so crowded that their voices would not be heard. Finding a way to keep groups full, but not crowded, is an important balance for moderators.

Moderators who try to initiate too many online spaces at once will dilute community involvement—questions will be answered too late, if ever; discussions will move at such a leisurely pace that participants will not check back to see if they have gotten a response. This is what happened with the discussion forum example above: a user would show up, check on one or two car groups, and see that none of them were particularly active, and wander away. Without clear cues as to which boards have active participation and which don't, users will find themselves lost.

Consider ways to help concentrate community, at least in the early stages, in order to help users find a group with active participants. Communities are often quite vocal about wanting to split when they have more topic diversity than they desire: the BMW owners will let you know if it is important to separate out one particular model. A far greater real risk is not allowing critical mass to form before splitting a group.

This can be partially alleviated if the community has access to cues suggesting where to look for content: for example, it is not uncommon for many forums to label which discussions are most active. This sort of presentation of metadata to the reader can give them meaningful information on where to look for content.

8. Exert Gentle Control

> A team had decided to consolidate several groups together in order to help make sure they kept critical mass. "We'll put the fitness discussion groups—male and female—together, to help make sure they have lots to talk about."
>
> They posted notes to the forums, saying that the forum would be merged in two months. The women's fitness group sent a petition: they wanted to talk about diets and post-pregnancy issues, and didn't think the men could contribute. The men's fitness group simply moved their conversation to a different provider, one who was purely dedicated to men's fitness issues.

It is tempting to think of the participants in an online community as "your own". The organizer has provided the space where they communicate and put a great deal of effort into sustaining it. However, most users participate out of their own free will, and may have strong opinions about their host's product or service.

Discussion forums, then, resemble a casual party: the host can change the music, but guests might leave. The host can suggest they do something else—but others may go to a different party entirely. As such, too heavy a hand in control—trying to censor content or direct conversation—can alienate users.

Hosts who develop a reputation for throwing good parties may have more influence over their guest's behavior. Even with unpopular rules, users may continue to participate if community is valuable enough. A TiVo community, for example, was able to sustain their user-base even though the popular topic of stealing service was repeatedly deleted by the TiVo-employed organizers. (Powazek 2002a, pg 228)

When a forum really does need to be discontinued, it is worthwhile to consider ways that the membership can

maintain connections, especially if the managers intend to host communities on similar topics. Leave a marker of where the forum used to be, and if at all possible, leave archives available (Powazek 2002a, pg 250). If these optimal suggestions cannot be followed, try to give participants enough notice that they can create their own archives. Participants who are not left with this assurance may not trust this hosting in the future, and may be more withdrawn about posting to other fora.

Conclusions

A growing number of online communities are being deployed with the hopes that their investment will be returned with improved customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, better communication, and a sense of membership or association with a company's products or services. Benefits to the customers from being able to communicate with one another are enormous.

Despite these potential benefits, many investments in community can underperform. We hope that this collection of observations about online community cultivation and management offers useful guidance to practitioners that can improve the benefits of community while avoiding common pitfalls.

We encourage researchers and community organizers to test our suggestions, and publish their own experiences in order to build a growing knowledge base about how online communities interact in practice.

We close with the enthusiastic words from one participant, discussing the social benefits of being an expert member of a newsgroup:

> "[T]hat group of people that goes out there to newsgroups and sends questions and answers every day, after awhile are more than simply technical guys trying to find answers to their questions. They're some kind of group of friends. You can see from the text messages that it goes more to the friendship area, it's not only trying to solve the question, it's also trying to help people – trying to help friends that are passing through the same path you passed before. And after that it's great to meet those people anywhere else because you feel like you have friends out there. … Where your only contact is your keyboard and your screen. It is something that far more than just typical contact. At least, that's what I feel."

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