An Introduction to Online Communities

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I have been involved in online communities since 1994, first as a member, then community producer, and am now Community Manager of Knowledgeboard.com, the portal for the EC's Knowledge Management Forum. I have made many great friends over the years through online communities and even 'met' my husband online.

I think that the increasing success of online communities stems from the fact that they harness the way that people naturally use the Internet. It is the innate human nature to communicate and build relationships that has driven the development of the Internet as we see it today. Ever since the network was opened up to the academic establishment in the 1970s, 'online' or 'virtual' communities have formed.

In real life most communities are formed through geographical proximity, but online communities are mostly formed around a shared interest or need, and are a powerful tool for building trust and relationships, word of mouth marketing, and knowledge acquisition and exchange.

This **'Introduction to Online Communities'** has been written to give an overview of the different types of online community, what makes an online community, and the various community tools. Every community is unique and it is difficult to give a guaranteed recipe for success, but I will cover common factors found in every good online community.

It is also worth remembering that as in real life communities take time to grow, and will continually evolve. This is the challenge of online Community Management.

What are Online Communities?

Amy Jo Kim, author of 'Community Building on the Web' defines an online community as:

'a group of people with a common purpose, interest, or activity, who get to know each other better over time.'

Howard Rheingold, community guru states that:

'a virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks'

On line communities are generally regarded as online 'spaces' which individuals 'feel part of' and where they can go to interact on a common topic or interest. Early communities mostly formed through the use of emailing lists, or bulletin boards but their modern incarnations are more likely to have a web-based interface.

The most commonly used analogy for building an online community is that it is like building a new town:

The Community Manager is like the Mayor who works with the Technical Developers or 'Town Planners' to provide houses, public buildings, traffic systems and recreational areas. By-laws are created to maintain a social balance and there is a policing system in place in case of troublesome behaviour.

A new town will grow over time, sometimes in ways that could not be planned for, but the more planning and infrastructure is put in place at the beginning the more likely it is that it will be a pleasant place to live.

Types of Online Community

The different types of online community can be broken down by the purpose, and shared characteristics of their members.

Communities of Practice (also known as CoPs) - where individuals share the same profession such as AccountingWEB, an online community for accountants.

Communities of Circumstance - where individuals share a personal situation such as Square Canary, a community for people who work in and around Canary Wharf in the City of London.

Communities of Purpose - where individuals share a common objective or purpose such as KnowledgeBoard, a community to define Knowledge Management Made in Europe

Communities of Interest - where individuals share an interest such as UK-Dance a community for people interested in dance music in the UK.

Sometime a community may fall into more than one definition, and over time a community may develop sub-communities formed around special interest groups.

There are also a new generation of corporate communities emerging, as companies are recognising the power of community to strengthen internal and external relationships.

Corporate Communities

The traditional business environment is changing rapidly. Many companies now have employees who work off-site, from home, or even from other countries. There has also been a rise in the use of out-sourced suppliers creating the need to communicate and maintain relationships with individuals and teams who are no longer in the same geographical location.

Companies are starting to build corporate communities to strengthen the social fabric of an organisation. There are various types of corporate community:

Business to Business Communities (B2B) - to build relationships with suppliers and partners

Business to Consumer Communities (B2C) - to build relationships with new and existing customers

Business to Employee Communities (B2E) - to build relationships with employees

This third type of community is especially interesting not just because it a relatively new and growing area, but also because of the emerging convergence between online communities and Knowledge Management systems.

Both require the ability for users to generate content, search directories and communicate with other members. The Knowledge Management industry in Europe is still in its infancy so it will be interesting to see how 'KM and Community develops over the next few years.

What Makes an Online Community?

An online community is not just a group of people who are communicating online, a community must have:

1. A clearly defined purpose

2. A membership process

3. Terms of Use and Community Rules

4. Member generated content

4. People

Purpose

When you are planning an online community you need to ask what sort of community is it? Who is it for? How will you measure its success?

Consider the three C's:

Content: Where will you obtain your content?

Community: Which community tools will you offer?

Commerce: How will your community generate revenue?

Once you have clearly defined your community, you must communicate it to potential members. Your homepage should clearly state the purpose and objectives of the community, to let first time visitors know what the community is about, and if they want to become a member.

e.g. KnowledgeBoard - the portal for the European Knowledge Management Community. To define Knowledge Management 'Made in Europe'.

"Communities who have clearly stated goals appear to attract people with similar goals and who are often like each other; this creates a stable community in which there is less hostility"
(Jenny Preece)

Membership

A community should have a membership process to differentiate between members and non-members. This gives members a sense of community identity and allows a community manager to know more about who they are.

The community identity can be a member's real name or in some cases a unique username. This unique identity should be displayed next to any content that a member creates, such as messages posted in discussion boards or comments on articles, and is part of the 'getting to know each other better over time'.

Some sites offer a quick online tour but require visitors to become a member before they can enter the site. Others allow non-members limited access such as the ability to view content, but require membership for full access to the site.

First time visitors should immediately be told the benefits they will gain by becoming a member, and the membership form should be kept as short as possible. Too many questions and people will not bother to fill it out.

A follow up 'welcome email' outlining features and benefits and signed by the Community Manager, will help reinforce the sense of 'belonging'. Over time you can encourage members to offer more information about themselves through public profiles such as by providing a 'Who's Who' directory.

Terms of Use and Community Rules

There are two types of documents that every community should have defining the legal and social boundaries that members will be expected to abide by:

1. A Terms of Use document

This document should cover legal issues such as privacy, copyright, intellectual property. It is worth looking at Terms of Use Documents from other community sites to get a feel for the types of clauses that it should cover.

Always make sure that a link to this document is clearly displayed on the site at all times. Some sites place a link to the Terms of Use document on their registration form, and make users tick a box that states that they have read and understand the terms before issuing membership.

2. A Community Rules document

To help prevent abuse of the community and to deal with it if it arises, it is best to publish a clearly defined set of rules and steps that will be taken if members break these rules. The most common areas for trouble are on discussion boards where posts can be deemed offensive or in some cases libellous.

It is better to leverage peer pressure than use heavy duty 'policing' of a community as this can be seen as censorship which will ultimately stifle dialogue, but always reserve the right to remove offensive material as a last resort.

Rather than completely removing a posting it is better to replace it with an Editor's posting along the lines of:

 "Some personal comments have been made in this thread recently, which transgress our Site Rules. As a result we have removed 2 postings. This thread is intended for serious debate on a professional issue. If you are unsure of our Site Rules, please [read here]".

A shared sense of values is important in creating a sense of community and it is important that members can contribute to developing these rules over time.

Member Generated Content

In a focussed community it is the member-generated content that adds stickiness to a site encouraging people to stay, participate and revisit. Member generated content comes from articles submitted by members, posts made on discussion boards, transcripts from online events, and directory entries.

As mentioned earlier it is important for the community to be able to see 'who wrote what' though in some cases there is an argument for allowing anonymous postings. These however are rare and it is worth asking the question why does someone wish to remain anonymous?

There are two types of community interaction - asynchronous and synchronous.

Asynchronous discussion

This kind of discussion takes place over a period of time, and is usually in the form of discussion groups. Messages can be 'posted' in a discussion group and replies can be made over the following days or weeks.

It is impossible to predict what your members will want to discuss at the launch of a community. It is better to start off with a few highly focussed discussion groups. You can encourage their use by posting questions to the community and clearly 'sign-posting' their existence on the homepage. You can let your members request the creation of special interest groups and add them over time.

Discussion groups need stimulating, especially in the early days so you can't just create them and hope people will join in. On KnowledgeBoard I have discussion group 'hosts' whose role it is to welcome new users, post up items of interest and generally keep the content flowing and on topic.

I also quote from the discussion groups in the fortnightly newswire I send to encourage more people to join in. Eventually you should reach a 'critical mass' of people that will allow you to take a step back and just oversee the discussions.

Synchronous discussion

This kind of discussion is usually in the form of a chat 'room' where members can type comments and replies in real time. The quality of content in ordinary chat rooms can be rather poor so it is important to give them a focus. The most effective way of using this type of discussion is by running scheduled online events with guest 'speakers' and then publishing an edited transcript as a follow up. I have noticed on KnowledgeBoard that a higher than usual number of people read the transcripts, showing their value to the community.

People

It doesn't matter how well town is built if it doesn't have any people. People are the lifeblood of any community and without them you cannot have a community. The questions a Community Manager needs to ask at the launch of a new community are:

How do we attract visitors to the community and make them become members?

Initially there will need to be a period of on and off-line activity targeted at your potential audience, and you may decide to use incentives such as giving away vouchers to encourage people to become members. It is not a good idea to rely on incentives too much, as people may register to get the giveaway and then never return. Word of mouth marketing is the most potent way to attract visitors to your site so you should encourage your members to tell their friends and colleagues and can run various 'member get member' schemes.

How do we get them to return?

Hopefully the quality of your content and the focus of your community will encourage people to revisit on a regular basis. However, with the millions of sites there are now online it is worth keeping in regular contact with your members to remind them to revisit. A regular email newsletter is a great way to keep in contact with your members and if it contains links back to the site will increase your traffic.

How do we get them to participate?

This is the $60,000 question and will vary from community to community. All communities are made up different types of people. Some prefer to remain passive merely reading and watching the proceedings, others like to actively participate in the discussion and it is these people that you want to encourage.

A focus group I ran on why people do not contribute to communities found that:

> They did not feel they understood the community
> They did not have enough time
> They did not feel they could add anything to the discussion
> They merely wished to seek information
> They were concerned about privacy and safety
> They felt a lack of confidence online

All the issues can be addressed with good community management and it is worth being aware of them. Over time and as a community evolves other questions will arise.

Community Tools

Content Management Systems

A community must be scaleable from the very first day. These days most community sites are dynamically generated, where pages of content are served from a database rather than being hard coded. Hard coding is time consuming and required special technical knowledge, whereas a good Content Management System will provide a simple to use web interface for editorial staff to add content. Once an article is added to the database and categorised it will automatically appear on the site. The other benefit of a good content management system is that can allow you to automatically add content from a third party news feed or share content between sites.

Discussion boards

I have already mentioned the use of discussion boards for asynchronous discussion. There are plenty of third party discussion board packages available for community use.

Scheduled Events

I have already mentioned the use of chat software for synchronous discussions. Chat software is fine if you do not have too many people attending your online events. If however you find that they are becoming popular then you may want to use 'Auditorium' software.

'Auditorium' software splits the discussion into two chat spaces. The first is a 'stage' area containing the guest speaker and a 'host'. The second is the 'auditorium' area, which contains the event attendees and usually a member of staff to greet and help with any problems.

Attendees can submit questions to the host which are then relayed to the guest speaker. It is a more structured way of managing large numbers and prevents you having to edit the transcript before publishing afterwards. However it removes the direct contact with guest speakers you get through using ordinary chat.

Newswires

Regular email newsletters or newswires are an excellent way to keep in regular contact with your members and to encourage regular visits to the site. They should contain a message from the Community Manager or Editor on any site developments and a few featured articles with links back to the full article on the site. On KnowledgeBoard traffic always rises dramatically after I send a fortnightly newswire.

Polls and Surveys

Polls and surveys are a great way you get feedback from the community. Polls are generally made up of a single question with a Yes/No Answer and are used for gauging opinion. Surveys are usually made up of a number of questions and can be used to find out information about users. Polls can be used frequently, but it is best to carry out surveys less often and in a focussed way. As with membership forms it is best to keep a survey as brief as possible, and explain the benefits of filling it out.

Directories

Another type of Member generated content that can be of high value are directories, or searchable lists of public member profiles (who's who), lists of professional products or services (suppliers' directories). Members need to be able to create and keep their entry up to date and over time this can become a valuable community resource.

Community Management

Communities constantly evolve and must be managed to keep them fresh and alive. Every community has a lifecycle of *infancy, maturity and death*. It is possible however with good community management to prevent the death of a community by constantly evolving it with the changing needs of its members, and introducing new functionality, topics or subgroups.

A manager's role will also change over time as the community grows. In its infancy a community manager will be concerned with developing content, functionality, and creating the social boundaries of the community. They will be focussed on building a membership base and getting people to re-visit, and actively participate.

As a community matures they will check that behaviour is kept within the community boundaries, and be aware of and adapt to the changing needs of members. It is vital to have feedback from members on what they what from the community and want they think.

This information can be gleaned from studying behaviour patterns through metrics, the use of surveys, focus groups and feedback requests and should be done regularly so that a manager can act on the wishes of members.

Maturity may also bring the opportunity of making money from your community and the golden rule is - the more you know about your members, the more likely you are to be able to make money. Advertisers want to know *who* will be seeing their adverts, not jut how many.

Potential revenue streams may be from banner adverts, sponsorship in newswires, payment for publishing press releases, creating 'storefronts' within your site, or charging to access certain types of content.

The Future of Online Communities

Online communities are starting to fill the gap left by the fragmentation of offline social groups, brought about by changing living and working patterns, and this need is growing rapidly.

The rise in corporate communities is a strong indication of the fact that communities work. The use of tried and tested technology, an understanding of online psychology, and the experience built up over the past five years is a powerful combination.

The main challenge now is how to make money from community, and there are successful revenue streams already being created from some communities of practice.

Considering the fact that communities are thriving even in the current climate of .com caution, the future looks very bright.