

## **How to create active online communities**

Many organisations now recognise the value of social media to increase brand awareness, market share, sales referrals, customer testimonials, boost loyalty, improve response to negative issues or reduce the cost of supporting customers.

Research has shown that while just 17 per cent of people believe corporate or product advertising, 78 per cent of people trust information from their peers. Therefore organisations that have productive forums and active online communities have the opportunity to harness the referrals and recommendations of their members for the benefit of - or in defence of - their product or service.

In the US, FICO, a financial services organisation, was able to achieve a 66 per cent increase in sales by encouraging customers to join its online community. Thirteen per cent of its sales resulted from someone viewing a community page.

As well as boosting sales, FICO was able to reduce costs through social networking. Ten per cent of its customer calls are directed through the online community so its own customers provide assistance which has reduced their average customer service call costs.

But while many organisations have responded to such success stories and quickly promoted online forums, quite a few have failed to truly understand the dynamics of how these communities really work. As a result a large proportion of online communities designed for business purposes have failed to grow to a point where the benefits can be realised.

Why do some communities falter? Although the technical platforms and tools required function well, the organisations creating these communities, ironically, don't consider what drives the real success behind a strong community – the people. Because of this, social media platforms neglect to provide the psychological incentives and rewards that encourage users to revisit, contribute knowledge, and thus cultivate the strength and relevance of the online community.

To build a strong online community around a brand, companies first need to understand what attracts people to social networking sites and motivates them to become active participants.

Based on a psychological understanding of online participation, Craig Errey, an online user expert from the Australian Psychological Society's College of Organisational Psychologists, has created a model of participant engagement to help organisations understand the dynamics of online community membership. He has identified seven user types – observer, regular observer, occasional participating member, regular participating member and leader/super user.

### **Creating an engaging community**

The process an individual follows when moving from a non-member to an actively participating member in an online community is summarised in the following diagram:



### *Non-member*

To attract the 'non-member' who is interested in becoming part of a community, it's best to make sure the information within your community is easy to search and find. Organisations should ensure that:

- The community is easy to find through search engine optimisation (SEO)
- Key terms used in the website SEO clearly reflect the strategic intent of the organisation
- The homepage features key words that reflect the strategic intent and nature of the community
- Community subject-matter information and member information is freely available on the website

These features increase the chance that the community will be found, and the information on the community easily identified by potential members so they can determine if this is the community they're looking for.

### *Observer*

To meet the needs of the 'observer', it's important to help them learn that other members in the community can be trusted, can provide help and can benefit from information the 'observer' holds. To meet the needs of people in this stage, organisations can structure the community so that:

- Information and subjects discussed are well organised and easily accessible from the homepage
- Hot / popular posts and most active threads are promoted on the homepage, to show the kind of activity taking place and its frequency
- Members can develop detailed, individualised profiles, which are accessible to non-members, preferably with photos
- Key members are featured on the website homepage, such as 'member of the week' or author of the 'most helpful comment', helping prospective members identify with others

Exposing this information will make it easier for the potential member to both decide if the intent of the community is right for them, and if they like the members of the community. They can quickly answer questions such as 'is this community like me?', 'do members share my values?' and 'will I be accepted?'

### *Regular observer*

Individuals at the "regular observer" stage are likely to begin developing a sense of belonging to the community, as they visit more frequently and access valuable information provided by members. Drawing these users across the observer/participant barrier to a more established stage in the process involves encouraging users to reinforce their feelings of belonging to the community by identifying themselves actively as a member. At this stage, it is also important to emphasise the uniqueness of the information the regular observers have to contribute, by supporting the individual's need for both acknowledgement and self-verification. The following features will promote this process:

- Expose the existence of 'member only' sections or features of the community, such as an ability to rate the usefulness of member feedback
- Show threads and topics that have not yet been answered, or answered well, to encourage members who haven't responded to do so
- Feature members who have made significant and unique contributions to the community on the website homepage, for example;
  - Member of the week or most significant response of the week
  - Most active members
  - Members with the most votes for making a strong contribution (e.g., with the most 'like' votes)
  - Nominated 'Guru' members, with expertise on specific topics
  - Profile 'super-users or leaders' and their contribution and area of speciality

These features will encourage users at this stage to become a member and to begin contributing knowledge to the community, thereby emphasising social recognition and reward for contributing knowledge.

### *Occasional participating member*

Once individuals have registered as a member, they move from observing to occasionally contributing to the community crossing the 'observer/participant Barrier'. Organisations can encourage the frequency of these contributions by:

- Supporting a facility for members to acknowledge the value of each other's contributions by rating member contributions on 'usefulness', such as a rating out of five
- Customisable member profiles emphasising speciality or expertise
- Inviting members with a specific expertise to contribute, especially to topics or threads with minimal or no responses
- Member 'status' levels dependent upon frequency and (member-rated) quality of contributions, where achieving a higher 'status' is tied to more features, recognition, trust and responsibility within the community
- Feedback about a member's individual contribution within the community compared with other members (i.e., quality and frequency of comments compared with similar members)

Applying these features will help in addressing user needs for identity and acknowledgement within the community, while maintaining and promoting a sense of reward and recognition for the contributions they make.

### **Nurturing your community into the future**

To cultivate a strong community, it is important, when maintaining members and promoting users to higher member 'levels' towards the 'leader or super-user', that other needs such as the sense of attachment, belonging and identity are still met. Continuing to reward all members within the community for their contributions (rather than focusing on one member 'level') will ensure their connection to the community is maintained. This recognition and reward, in turn, will likely ensure the development of a strong and enduring social community. Organisations should:

- Recognise users at all member levels to foster a drive for continuous improvement in contribution
- Review member-level benefits regularly to ensure what is provided meets user needs
- Monitor member feedback to ensure status ratings (dependent upon community feedback) are fair and equitable
- Moderate community posts to ensure members interact with each other in an appropriate and civil manner
- Review customisable profile features regularly to ensure available profile information reflects information members in the community would have an interest in knowing
- Reward super users by requesting their advice on any proposed changes to the community

### **Does your organisation need assistance?**

Consider getting help from an organisational psychologist to help your business create an effective online presence. Organisational psychologists have a specialist focus on analysing organisations and their people, and devising strategies to recruit, motivate, develop and change. They base their practice on science, drawing on psychological research and tested strategies to influence how people act, think and feel at work. This scientific approach provides confidence that methods produce measurable, replicable and potentially more cost-effective results.

**To locate an organisational psychologist, use the APS Find a Psychologist service by phone (1800 333 497) or internet ([www.findapsychologist.org.au](http://www.findapsychologist.org.au)).**