

The Online Community Development Process



A complete process you can use to grow, develop, and manage your online community

One of the hardest things we ever had to do was put all the things we knew to be true about online communities into a clear, step by step, process.

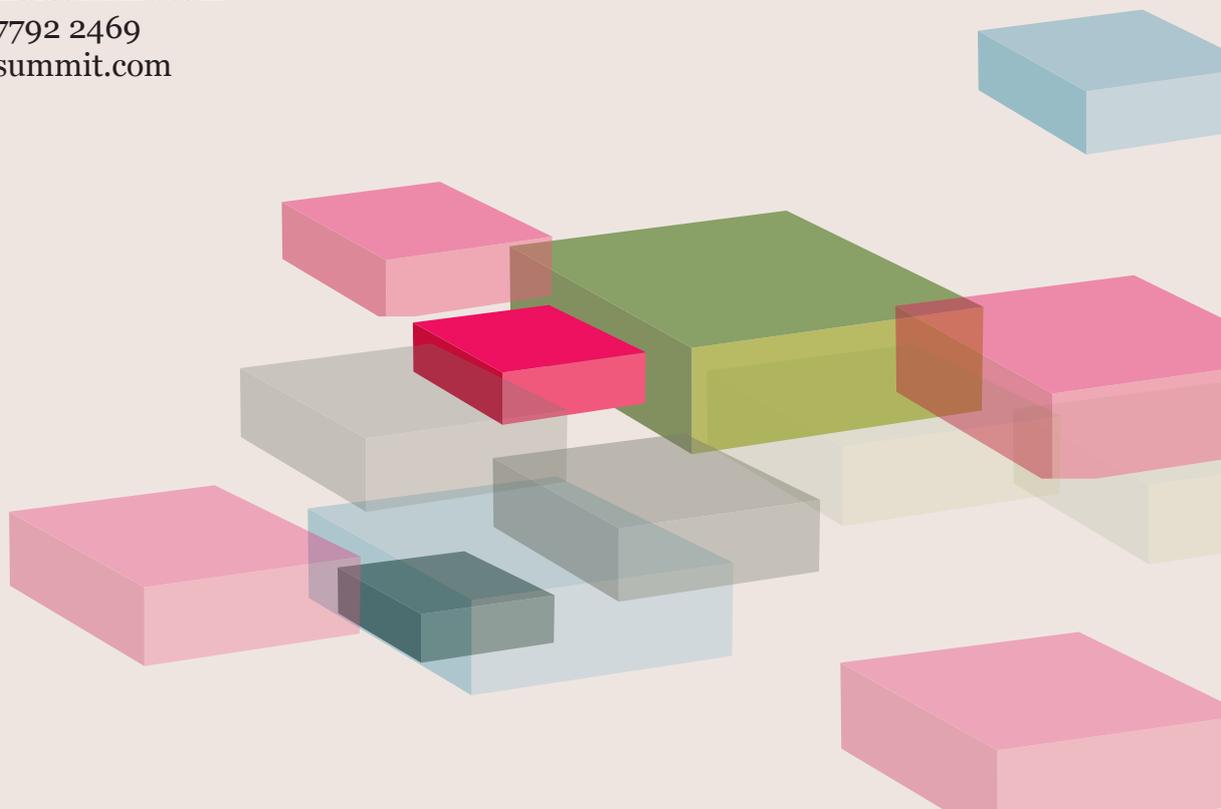
Over the years we simplified the process as much as possible. We reviewed what did and didn't work for most organizations. We spoke to dozens of other community managers about what worked for them.

Over time we developed a process that we could use to develop an online community for almost any organization.

If you have ever wanted a step-by-step process you can use to guide your community development efforts and track progress, this should help.

If you have any questions, please contact:

richard@pillarsummit.com
+44 (0)20 7792 2469
www.pillarsummit.com



Step 1

Set realistic objectives



At this stage it's vital to ensure the organization has objectives which:

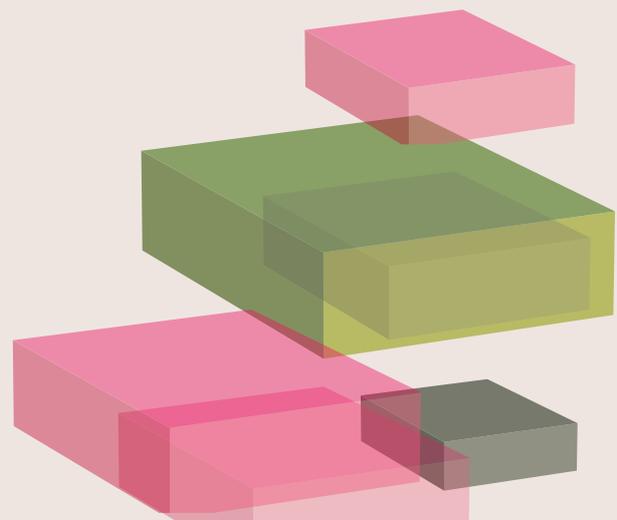
- a) Are connected to the ROI (increased revenue, reduced costs)
- b) Are something a community approach can achieve
- c) Are understood by all stakeholders

Don't take any steps until all these three have been achieved. This is MUCH harder than it looks.

Step a) involves connecting the organization's overall problems to the community effort in a way that increases sales (e.g. increased repeat purchases).

Step b) requires explaining what a community can/can't achieve. A community isn't the best approach to reach new audiences, for example.

Step c) involves training sessions/information packages. You have to work within the organization to establish these and ensure a clear understanding of objectives.



Step 2

Resources & Expectations



At this stage you prepare the organization for the community. Specifically, you need to get:

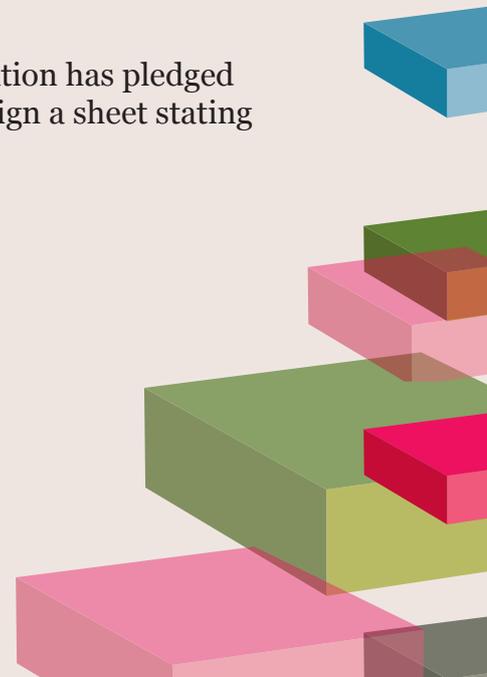
- a) Knowledge
- b) Skills
- c) Resources

Knowledge includes internal understanding about how communities develop, how to run and manage a community, time frames, and measurement. You don't want your boss thinking you can develop this within three months. Establish the processes for how the organization responds to the community too.

Skills include the ability to interact with the target audience, create great content, organize and manage online/offline events, persuade volunteers to help, market/promote/grow the community, develop the platform, and influence the community en-masse.

Resources include a reasonable budget (usually five to six figures), manpower (and support throughout the organization), and use of existing assets such as existing audience/customer lists.

Go through each of these in turn; make sure the organization has pledged to support you on every one. I sometimes make a client sign a sheet stating we have access to these resources.



Step 3

Audience & Sector Analysis



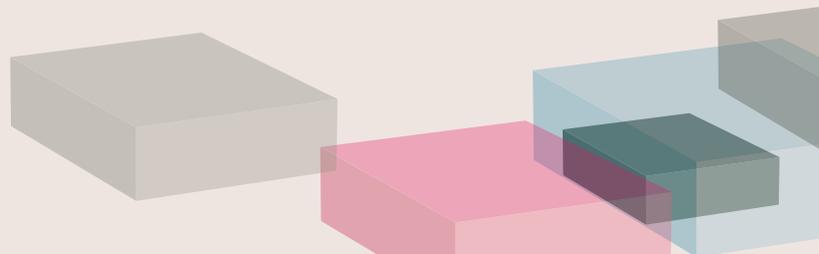
Now we can get started looking at the audience. You need to identify what your audience really cares about. Not just the topic, but the specific interest within that topic.

If your audience is teachers, then you will have groups that have just begun teaching, want to change teaching, are subject-specific teachers, want to learn how to deal with troublesome students, are close to retirement, are based in specific locations, or have new ideas they want to try. You want to pinpoint the strong common interest.

There are four steps to this

- 1) Sector analysis. Identify who and what is important in the sector (existing communities, major issues, important people, PEST trends).
- 2) Demographic analysis. Research the demographics of your target audience. Look for clusters around age, location, gender, income.
- 3) Habit analysis. Research habits of your audience. What do they do within the topic. What tools/platforms do they use? When do they use the internet?
- 4) Psychographic analysis. Interview 50 to 150 members of the target audience. Learn their biggest problems, most common interests, and biggest hopes/aspirations for the future.

By the end of this you should be able to identify specifically who you will approach, what topics are interesting (and you can initiate discussions around), who/what is influential within the sector, what trends to prepare for and what platform to use.



Step 4

Conceptualization



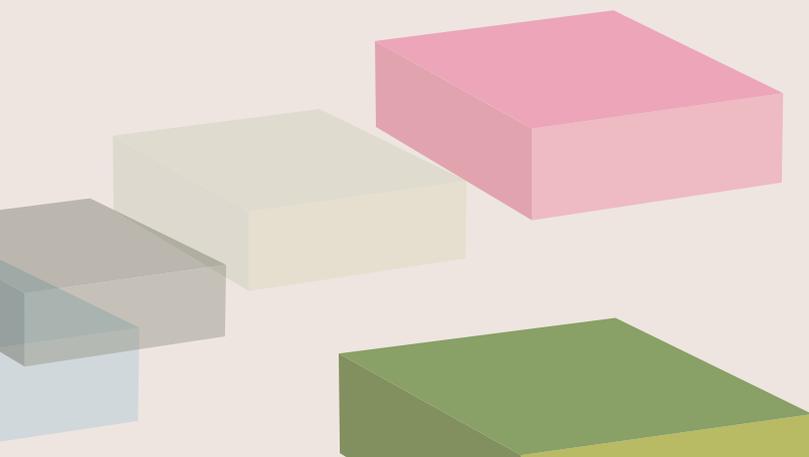
Based upon the audience analysis, determine what type of community it will be. It will be either a community of action, circumstance, interest, place, or practice.

The type of community affects everything else you do in the community, so pick carefully. Don't default to a community of practice/interest. Don't compete directly with existing communities. If there are several existing communities of interest in your sector, develop a community of action instead.

- 1) Decide type of community
- 2) Identify the benefits members receive from participating.
- 3) Plan what will happen in the community

Next you need to identify the tangible benefit from participating in the community. We're not talking about joining here, but actually participating. Benefits like learning, solving problems, befriending experts work better than connecting and sharing.

Now identify what will happen in the community. What will members talk about? What events and activities will take place? What type of content will be created? This is all based from what your research told you earlier. Plan out the first 3 months of actions for those that join the community.



Step 5

Platform Development

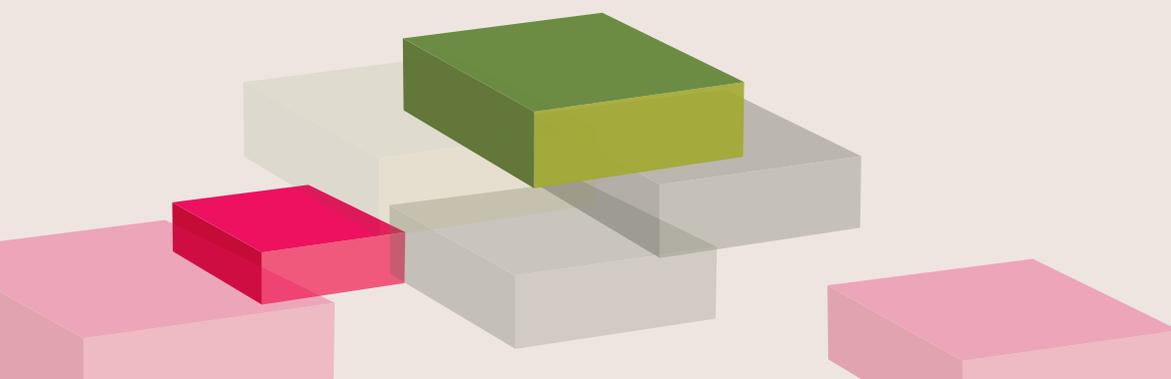


Stages 5 and 6 are concurrent. You begin using a simple platform (usually a mailing list, LinkedIn/Facebook/Google group) to facilitate early interactions. Meanwhile you develop the platform using the information you have gathered about your audience and your own needs and resources.

This consists of several stages

- 1) Identify highly used features in similar communities.
- 2) Develop a functional specification (only include the essential features in the beginning (e.g. discussion boards)).
- 3) Wireframe the platform (make sure the latest activity is above the fold on the landing page of the community).
- 4) Decide between free, white label, open-source, or enterprise platform. This depends upon your audience needs (e.g. picture sharing), in-house resources (e.g. developer/designer), budget and urgency to get the community going.
- 5) Select a vendor (use previous examples of active communities they have developed with plenty of referrals and develop the platform).

In the order above, we would usually recommend a simple mailing list or LinkedIn group as a free platform, Ning as a white-label platform, Drupal (or Drupal Commons) for open-source, and Lithium as the enterprise solution.



Step 6

Inception



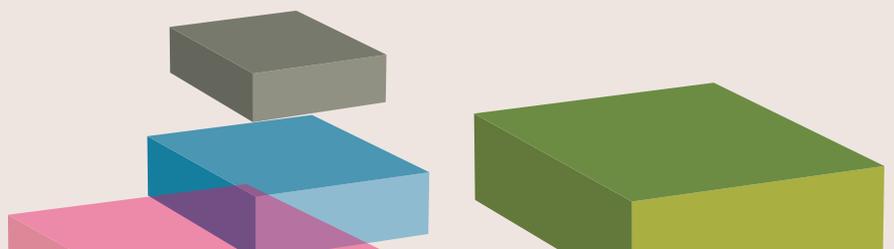
Remember those 50 to 150 people you interviewed earlier? They're the founding members of your new online community.

At the end of the interview, ask if they would be interested in being involved in the community. Invite 10 of this group per day to the mailing list/free group you have established. Initiate discussions on topics of interest.

- 1) Invite 5 – 10 members to join the community (this is for momentum).
- 2) Initiate discussions on topics highlighted in the audience analysis.
- 3) Individually prompt members (active and inactive) to participate in the community.
- 4) Individually interact and build relationship with the early members.
- 5) Move the community to the new platform.

Over time, you gradually build momentum and test what does/doesn't work. You also identify the key early members of the community.

Aim to achieve 50% of growth and activity being initiated by members as opposed to being initiated by the community manager (critical mass). For simplicity, assume all these steps below include rigorous data collection and analysis.



Step 7

Establishment

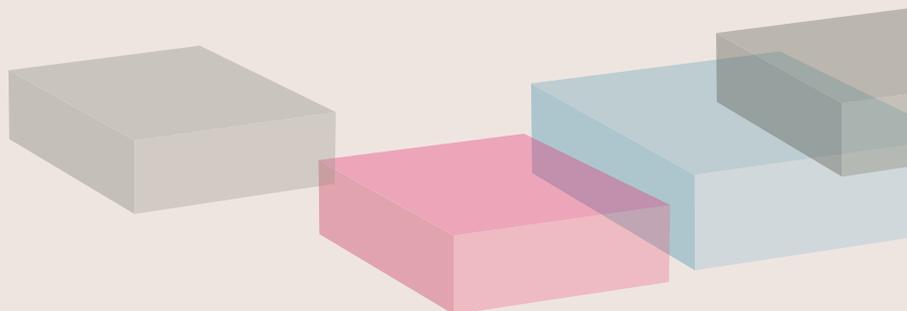


As the community grows, you shift from direct interactions to macro-level activities. You need to sustain growth and momentum while creating systems to effectively manage the community at a large-scale.

Gradually shift from micro to activities that affect more people (not quite not macro).

- 1) Write content about the community
- 2) Organize regular events and activities
- 3) Recruit your first volunteer
- 4) Initiate referral techniques
- 5) Implement sense of community tactics.
- 6) Integrate community activities with the organization

Your aim is to achieve 90% of growth and activity being initiated by members (maturity phase) and develop a sense of community.



Step 8

Maturity

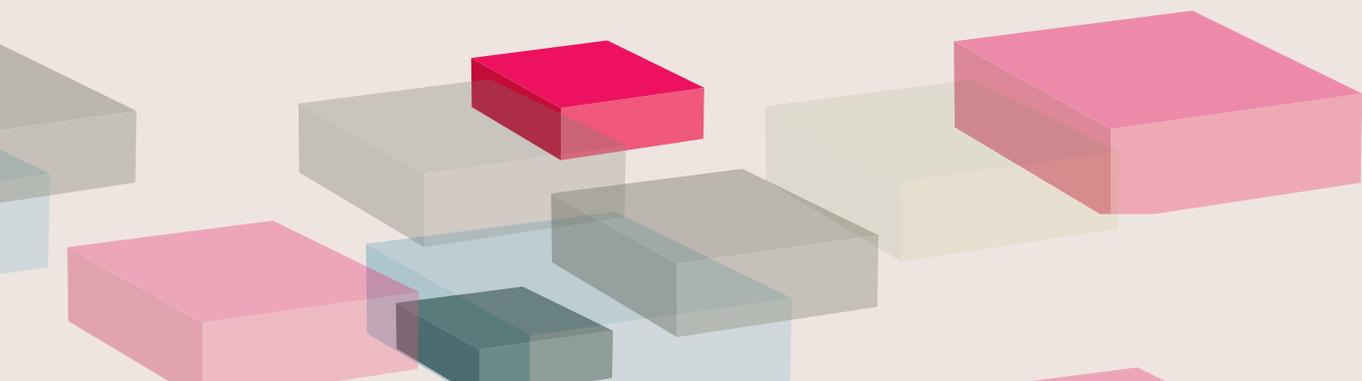


In the maturity phase, you shift to optimize tasks. These tasks include.

- 1) Optimize social density of the platform
- 2) Steer the direction of the community in desirable areas
- 3) Ensure the community is influential within its sector
- 4) Grow and manage the volunteer team
- 5) Optimize the newcomer to regular conversion ratio
- 6) Optimize the community platform
- 7) Establish clear goals and vision for the community.

The goal of this phase is to ensure the community becomes as self-sustaining as possible and try to reach the 99% of growth/activity generated by the community, and a strong sense of community.

You also need to worry about the return on investment here. This means closely aligning the organization with the activities of the organization with the activities of the community.



Step 9

Mitosis

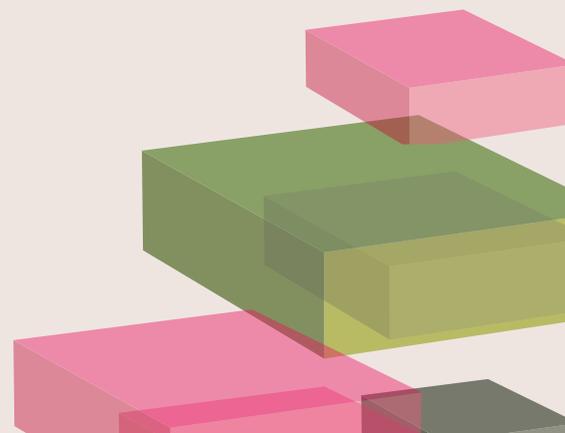


Beyond a certain level (it varies), the sense of community typically begins to dip followed by corresponding dips in the number of participating members and, eventually, the level of overall activity in the community.

As the community grows, it's more difficult for members to recognise other members, have a shared history, and feel they can influence the community. You therefore need to facilitate smaller sub-groups within the community, while sustaining the existing community.

- 1) Identify common sub-niches within the community by demographic, habits, psychographic or experience elements.
- 2) Create places for people that share these elements to interact with each other.
- 3) Find people to grow and manage each specific group.
- 4) Promote each place to this audience and ensure each group has developed to establishment before beginning the process again.
- 5) Repeat to ensure high levels of activity.

Only facilitate one or two sub-groups at a time. Ensure each has reached critical mass before moving on to the next. This is a repeat process that continues indefinitely.



The Process

Communities Can Last Forever



There is no natural life span on communities. Communities die either through mismanagement or the collapse of interest in their topic. For example, communities based around TV shows gradually fade when the TV show end.

Most communities, with effective community management, can survive forever.

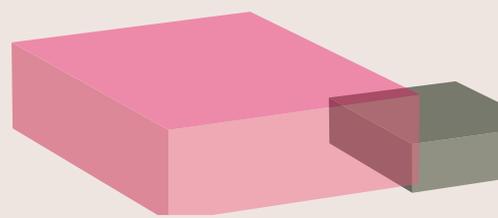
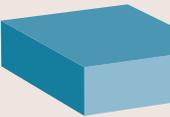
The WELL is coming up to its 30th birthday. Older communities are already two decades old. They have members that have seen each other through dozens of evolutions in their sector, have seen members grow up together, raise families, change jobs, go through hardships, and provide support in innumerable ways.

You don't need to rush the process above. You don't need 3000 members in three months. Take your time, follow the traditional community-builder way and get it right.

You're building an asset that can support you and your organization for decades.

This is the most cost-effective thing you've ever done. If you do this right, you can build future generations of fans (Harley Davidson). If you do this wrong, you will build a failed short-term marketing campaign (GenerationBenz).

Thank you for reading. If you like this free document please do one thing for us, share the URL with your followers on Twitter.



The Pillar Summit

Learn how to grow, build, and scale thriving online communities



How would you like to guide your organization through the entire process of developing any number online communities? How would you like to learn the skills to become a world-class community manager?

If you want to become a world-class community manager, sign up for The Pillar Summit's Professional Community Management course. This is an online-course, based upon proven social sciences, that will teach you how to grow, manage and scale a thriving online community for your organization.

The course features:

- 100,000+ words of written material covering every step of the community development process.
- A library of case studies
- Live weekly lessons (which are recorded so you won't miss one)
- Unlimited access to FeverBee's personal coaching to support your community
- Incredible guest speakers
- Access to key academic journals
- Template scripts/strategies and other documents we use for our own clients
- Problem-orientated live discussions.
- End of term assignments covering the course material focused specifically on your organization's community efforts.

Click here to sign up: www.pillarsummit.com

Registration closes Sept 24.

