BUZZING COMMUNITIES

How to Build Bigger, Better, and More Active Online Communities

Richard Millington
founder of FeverBee

**Proven
Science
for
Community
Managers**

BUZZ FOR *BUZZING COMMUNITIES*

"Richard Millington has long been one of my go-tos when I need advice that is actionable, concise and—perhaps most importantly—easily explainable to stakeholders. *Buzzing Communities* is a fantastic compilation of some of the best of that knowledge. I wish I'd had this reference when I started out but even now, after almost a decade of managing communities, I found nuggets of wisdom and a strategic approach to community building that has helped me explain and implement the what, the why and the how more effectively and with fewer hiccups. If you want a road map for building a strong and successful community, this is it."

—Justin Isaf, Director of Communities, Huffington Post

"Richard Millington's book is a rocket up the backside of any community manager, however experienced. As you read it, it dawns on you that community management is an evolving field and, for that reason, there's constantly more you could do to enhance your community. Whether it's optimising your registration process, tweaking the tone of your emails or illustrating the return on investment of your work, Millington has it covered.

Unlike other community management books, he's not all theory and no trousers; there are practical tips for everything from checking the source code to see what platform a community uses to how to conduct a psychographic interview. All in all, Millington has written a comprehensive and time-saving step-by-step handbook which feels like he's telling you something very valuable while leaving you some room to formulate your own ideas."

—Ben Whitelaw, Communities Editor, The Times

"All I needed to know about building a community powered with passion and making it bubble with activity. A must read."

—Vanessa Von Vanessar, GreenPeace

Yes, you can "manage" an online community without losing the human touch. This book provides practical ideas to help you understand the health and development of your online community, based on Millington's repeated experience, not merely anecdotes. It includes guidance on which metrics to track (and which ones *not* to track), as well as on balancing your management activities, depending on the life cycle stage of the community. Both new and experienced community managers will find helpful advice, whether they're starting a new community, or taking responsibility for an existing one.

—Janet Swisher, Developer, Mozilla

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How To Build Bigger, Better, and More
Active Online Communities

BY RICHARD MILLINGTON

FeverBee

Acknowledgments

I never thought I would write a book. That I did is a testament to all the people who have helped me throughout the years.

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Introduction

How is your community doing?

This is a simple question.

Your answer will probably be quite short: My community is fine.

You might well be right, so let's ask something a little more specific.

Is your community doing better than last month? Is your community healthier? Are members more engaged? Are members happier? Has the Return On Investment (ROI) of your community increased? Has your community grown? Do members feel a stronger sense of community?

How many of these questions can you answer?

Or, more to the point, how many of your answers could you support with *data*? Can you *prove* that your answers are right?

Now, let's make this a little tougher: how are *you* doing as a community manager?

Can you prove you have increased the ROI of the community since you joined? Can you prove that you've grown membership, gotten members more engaged, boosted the sense of community? Can you prove you're a valuable asset instead of a wasteful expense?

These basic questions about you and your community will influence what you should work on next, whether your actions the previous month succeeded, whether you should be paid more (or less), and whether you should even have the job.

If you can't answer these questions with supporting data, you need to read this book.

Two amazing things about data

The first amazing thing about data is how much data there is right now. You can collect data on everything from a member's thoughts and feelings to how changing the color, font or copy on the platform can improve the registration process.

The second amazing thing is how little data we currently use. In 2009, my company, FeverBee, ran a survey among new clients asking them how they used data. Just fewer than 20% had a clear process for regularly collecting data, only 10% bothered to analyze data, and only one organization had a process for using the results of that analysis to influence future actions.

That's insane!

Data is the single best asset you have to develop a thriving community. You can use data to optimize every facet of the community management role. You can use data to become far more effective community managers than you are today.

But you need to use it correctly. You need to know what data to collect, how to collect it, how to analyze it, and how to use that data to identify future actions you should take.

Why we need our data

I was fired from my first ever community management job. I was 15 years old and delighted to be doing my dream job: running an online community about video gaming. I worked from home, in my own hours, earning close to a full-time salary. For a 15-year-old, that's not a bad gig.

I followed my job description to the letter. I did everything I had been told to do. I wrote content, responded to members, organized events/activities, resolved conflicts, and even learned how to optimize elements of the platform.

The problem was I had no idea if what I was doing benefited the organization I worked for. It was no big deal; I left

the money side to the money men. That was their problem. So long as I followed my job description to the letter, I was fine.

You already know how this ends…

One morning I received a courtesy call that my position was being cut. It wasn't that I wasn't doing the job I had been hired for, I just couldn't prove that I had done a good job—nor that doing a good job profited the organization. I hadn't bothered to benchmark the community when I joined. I hadn't bothered to ascertain the metrics of growth, engagement, sense of community, nor ROI.

I didn't realize that my job description was simply a collection of all the things I *could* be doing. Not all the things I *should* be doing. As a result, I had been entirely reactive. I *reacted* to what happened in the community. Nothing I had done had improved the community in the long term.

Had growth increased? Were members more engaged? Was the community generating an increased ROI since I joined?

Who knew?

I tell you this story because the way I worked back then is the way many community managers are today. They're certainly not as naïve as I was back then, but they are still too reactive, too ad hoc, and too lacking in long-term strategy. They still fail to use their data!

Online community management is a role that's moving from the amateur wilderness into the professional mainstream. We need to get professional about it. Not a single community manager I've spoken with who has lost a job recently can tell me what his own ROI was. They can't tell me if they improved their community—or not.

We urgently need to change this lack of accountability. Many community managers are working for peanuts yet delivering incredible value. Some, like The Huffington Post's Justin Isaf,

put metrics behind every action they take to show a quantified ROI and savings.

But the goal of this book isn't about pay rises or job security (though data can help you with both). The goal is to transform your approach to community management and to convert good community managers into professionals. The goal is to introduce science into what we do. Professionals know the science. They know how to use data and proven theory.

We need to embrace data as the foundation for community management activities for several reasons. But how do you learn to do that?

In this guide I explain why you need to master your data, how to master your data, the proven social science theories that underpin your work and the simple steps to becoming a much better community manager.

I'm not going to lie—I am quite technical in places. I discuss stratified sampling, thematic analysis, applied statistics, and other slightly scary sounding terms. There is no way to avoid this. You need to know the techniques of collecting and analyzing the right data.

Unlike trying to grasp the Lithium Community Health Index formula (below), however, you will be able to understand, step by step, what you need to do to collect, analyze and apply data to your community development efforts.

$$\chi = C_s \cdot \left\{ \text{signlog}\left(\left[\left\langle \frac{e^{-|t_o-t|/50}}{50} |dH_o(t)/dt - \langle dH_o(t)/dt\rangle_t| \right\rangle_t \right]^{-1/2} \right. \right.$$
$$\left. \left. \cdot \int_{-\infty}^{t_o} \frac{dH(t)}{dt} \frac{e^{-|t_o-t|/50}}{50} dt \right) + C_o \right\},$$

Lithium Community Health Index

(sorry Joe!)

The unseen

This happens a lot. A client approached us with a problem: *Members are fighting too often, help!*

This is a "seen" issue. It's highly visible. They think that it's causing a big problem within the community, and they want members to all get along.

But this assumption is entirely data-free. Members fighting with each other usually increase the amount of activity on the community platform. People keep returning to defend their point, or argue the ideas of others.

Fighting among members only becomes a problem when it spills into other categories/threads and prevents any other discussions from taking place. But, unless you're tracking your data, you will never know this. All you will see are the conflicts and be determined to take action.

Typically in this situation we begin tracking data and discover one of several things:

1. Fighting has had no impact on the visiting habits of anyone on the site.
2. Fighting has increased the amount of activity on the site.
3. There are far bigger problems to worry about.

The bigger problems are what we focus on. It's the invisible—unseen—problems that hurt the community most. The client in question had a one in 1,000 conversion ratio: for every 1,000 members who clicked the registration link to join the site, only one was still a regular member six months later.

This is what the client should be worried about. Without data this was an *unseen* problem. With data, you can spot the issue easily. With data you can use proven social science to design interventions to resolve this problem. With data you can

track changes over time. But too many community managers aren't even using the basic elements of data at the moment.

The number of unseen problems is *HUGE!* When the number of new visitors to the platform dips, that's an unseen problem. When a number of regulars vanish, that's an unseen problem. When the volunteers begin slipping away, that's an unseen problem. When the number of responses to a typical discussion drops, that's an unseen problem. When a smaller and smaller number of members are contributing to an ever-greater percentage of discussions, that's an unseen problem.

Every one of these problems can potentially kill a community. Without an intervention, the community will slip into a decline, which is very difficult to reverse.

Vocal minorities and the time they steal

If you don't collect data, you're probably reacting solely to the vocal minority in your community. Different people have different personalities. A percentage of these people will regularly voice their opinions on your community efforts. They might be critical of a decision you've taken, a change in the platform, the way you resolved a conflict, and so forth.

You can waste a lot of time catering to the whims of this vocal minority without realizing that it's just a vocal minority. It's only those who are upset that typically voice their opinion. The happy members rarely state how happy they are about the current state of their community.

Unless you're collecting data, you won't know if the comments of the vocal minority carry any weight. You won't know if it reflects the silent majority. Typically, your data will show that the decisions you've made, the tweaks you've implemented, or the way you resolved a conflict have had little to no impact upon the level of activity in the community (or that

you've improved the community). This means that the feelings of the majority haven't changed.

Therefore, you don't need to spend much time catering to the whims of the vocal minority. Yet, that's exactly what most community managers do. When the vocal minority speaks, they halt all plans and work on tasks that affect relatively few members.

A typical example: recently a community manager mentioned that she had spent half the day dealing with one community member. The member was upset that other members of the community had been subtly advertising their own products via their signature (and the community had recently allowed people to purchase advertising space on the platform).

Think about that for a moment. That's half a day on an activity that will only impact one member over the short-term. What happens when that member gets upset again—is that another half a day gone? What happens if two members get upset?

God forbid, what happens when 10 members a week get upset? That's all of your time spent trying to make chronically disgruntled members *slightly* happier. It's tempting to spend too much time making unhappy members happy instead of keeping the happy members happy.

How would a data-savvy community manager tackle this?

Data driven community managers know specifically what they have to achieve each day to further develop the community. They allocate their daily time. They make sure they tackle the long-term, high-impact tasks first. After that, they resolve member disputes and complaints. If they don't get through all the complaints/disputes within the time they set themselves, too bad—but at least they got the important work done.

What's a better use of your time, responding yet again to a disgruntled member or organizing an event members will be excited about? What is most likely to increase growth, engagement and develop a stronger sense of community? It's not even close.

Sure, responding to member complaints is important, but give it the low priority it deserves in the grand scheme of things.

In the dark

If you are a typical community manager, sometimes what you do just happens to work. Sometimes it doesn't. You simply have no way of knowing.

So you keep doing what you think *might* work—random, reactive activities—and hope that the community *feels* successful. You might keep repeating things that don't work indefinitely *and never even know it*.

Without mastering data, you're simply working in the dark. Without data, you're not a professional. Without data, you will never become better than you are right now. You can't optimize your activities. You can't proactively develop your community.

These are just a few examples that highlight the current nature of community management. If we properly use data, all of these problems are entirely fixable. So let's start shining the light of science on our community management.

PART ONE

How to Manage Your Community

Before I explain how to optimize each element of community management, you need to understand the conceptual framework.

The role of the community manager can be broken into eight distinct elements: the community management framework. It's a template you can use for managing an online community.

COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. **Strategy.** Establishing and executing the strategy for developing the community.

2. **Growth.** Increase membership of the community and convert newcomers into regulars.

3. **Content.** Create, edit, facilitate, and solicit content for the community.

4. **Moderation.** Remove obstacles to participation and encourage members to make contributions.

5. **Events and activities.** Create and facilitate events to keep members engaged.

6. **Relationship and influence.** Build relationships with key members and gain influence within the community.

7. **Business integration.** Advocate internally within the organization and integrate business processes with community efforts.

8. **User experience.** Improve the community platform and participation experience for members.

The amount of time you spend on each component will vary, of course. To use a simple example, in the early stages of the community lifecycle, more time might be spent on growth and less time on business integration. As the community matures, you might spend more time on the user experience.

Generally speaking, the more mature the community, the more time you spend on macro-level activities that affect as many members as possible.

Each of these elements has a goal that benefits the development of the community. Each of these elements can be quantified with numerical data to measure the success of the effort. You can use proven data and theory to optimize each of these elements.

Optimizing all elements of this framework is the goal of part one of this book. I'm going to explain the theory behind each element and the data to optimize what you do.

CHAPTER 1

Strategy

How will your community be better next week than it is now? When you went to work this morning, did you have a clear plan for what you were going to achieve today? Or did you react to what you saw in the community?

One of our first tasks with a new client is to ask the community manager to track his or her time. We've found that most community managers spend the majority of their time *reacting* to what happens in the community.

Most community managers don't have a strategic goal to achieve. They go to work each morning, see what happens in the community, and react to it. One community manager mentioned the workload was much easier now that her community was less active!

As a result they maintain their communities, but don't develop them. Do you have a strategy for your community right now? When you go to work, do you have a clear idea of what you're trying to achieve and how it fits in with the overall development of the community?

Strategy is, by far, the most important and most high-value work. People who strategize well combine profound understanding of community development with advanced project management skills. They're rare and invaluable.

However, though many community managers proclaim their strategic brilliance, few have a track record of successfully executing strategy. The vast majority of strategies lack two key elements: data and theory.

Most strategy efforts begin with the objective. What does the community need to achieve for the organization? They then create a plan to get there. That sounds logical but it ignores where you are now (data), what your audience wants (audience analysis), and how communities develop (theory). Many strategies are also rigid, failing to change regardless of what else happens in the community.

You get the benefits you want from the community when it succeeds. By forcing top-down objectives upon a community, you cripple its development. If early on you start demanding your community buys more of your product, gives you feedback, promotes what you sell, you hurt the development of the community. It doesn't matter how subtly or *honestly* you try to do it.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY STRATEGY

A strategy is comprised of the following five steps:

1. **Data collection.** The first step is to collect data about the audience and the current progress and health of the community. This includes both quantitative and qualitative data. Collecting this data is a time-consuming but important task. It's the single, most reliable way to make sure you're doing the right thing. Anything else is guessing.

2. **Analyze data.** Once you've collected data, you need to analyze how the community is progressing through the prisms of growth, activity, and sense of community. You need to identify the health of the community and its ROI. This doesn't take long.

3. **Establish the goals.** Based upon where the community is now, you can use theory to determine where the community needs to go next. You set goals for each of the other elements within the community management

framework and targets they can be measured against.

4. **Create an action plan.** Now you have the goals, you need to develop an action plan to get there. This should be broken down into a very specific three-month calendar (week by week), and a broad 12-month plan (month by month). Highlight what needs to be done at the beginning of each week by creating a day-by-day plan.

5. **Track progress and ensure accountability.** Finally, you need to track progress towards these goals and ensure none of the goals are missed. You might also identify any obstacles that prevent these goals from being realized.

Can you spot the trend here? You're not making up a strategy. Anyone can make up a strategy that sounds terrific but is either unrealistic, is not supported by data or theory, or is difficult to execute. It's far more difficult and more reliable, to create a strategy based upon data and theory.

So let's review the theory behind how communities develop. This forms the basis for any strategy.

THE COMMUNITY LIFECYCLE

Online communities (and offline communities too) develop along a relatively fixed path. They start small and steadily grow larger. They have different needs at different stages. The community lifecycle explains this development; it also acts as a map.

This map tells you where your community is now and where it needs to go next. The lifecycle directly dictates your actions. You respond to the unique needs of the community at each stage.

The biggest mistake made by organizations is ignoring this fixed path. Too many organizations try to jump ahead several stages along the lifecycle without realizing the negative consequences of doing so. For example, they see a mature

community such as Patient's Like Me (healthcare) or Mumsnet (parenting) and decide they need to be really big to succeed. What they ignore is the path they took to be successful. They confuse the end result with the process. The process is to start small and grow gradually. In the early stages you need to focus on very specific things.

If organizations don't acknowledge the community lifecycle, they have no way of establishing realistic expectations for their community strategy. Many online communities are killed before they have had the opportunity to be a success. If you try to take a shortcut, you will focus on the wrong metrics and not properly develop the community for the long-term.

What is the community lifecycle?

Iriberri and Leroy (2009) did not invent the community lifecycle, but they were the first to review thousands of academic articles on community development and lay out a clear set of stages and success factors.

A variety of practitioners (including my company) have refined the process to further develop communities. The lifecycle forms the basis for community development and shows what you should be working towards at any particular time.

THERE ARE FOUR STAGES TO THE COMMUNITY LIFECYCLE:
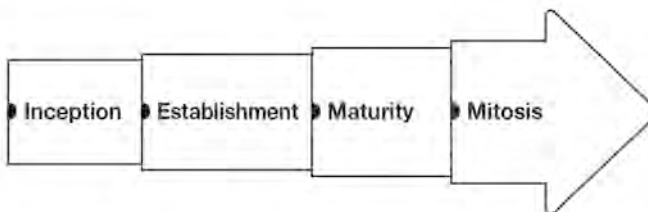
Each stage is separated from the next by growth, activity, and the sense of community.

	INCEPTION	ESTABLISHMENT	MATURITY	MITOSIS
Growth	50 - 100% direct growth via the community manager	50 – 90% referral growth	90%+ referral growth	Variable
Activity	0 – 50% of activity initiated by members	50 – 90% of activity initiated by the community	90 – 99% of activity initiated by community members	Activity dips to between 50 – 99% of activity initiated by the community
Sense of Community	N/A	0 – 24	24 - 72	72 - 96

STAGE 1: INCEPTION

The inception stage starts when you begin interacting with the target audience and ends with the community achieving a critical mass of growth and activity.

Critical mass

Critical mass is a term from nuclear physics defined as the minimum amount of fissile material to sustain a nuclear chain reaction. This term has become co-opted by social scientists as a *tipping point* used to describe the moment any social activity becomes self-sustaining.

For your purposes, critical mass is when the level of growth and activity in the community *continues to increase* without your direct involvement. This point is numerically defined as when more than 50% of growth and activity is generated by the community (as opposed to the community manager).

The sole goal of the inception stage is to achieve critical mass by cultivating a small group of highly active members in the community. This group becomes the foundation upon which to build the community. Unless a small, active, group is established it is impossible to develop a successful long-term community.

The tasks you perform in the inception stage of the community lifecycle will be significantly different from those you undertake in the maturity phase. You shouldn't be doing the same job from one year to the next. Your role evolves with the community. During this phase, you should focus upon micro-level activities designed to solicit a high level of engagement from a relatively small number of individuals. It is important to establish momentum, a sense of possibility, and a regular amount of activity from members at this stage of the lifecycle (Wenger, 2003; Iriberri and Leroy, 2009).

During inception, you need to focus on performing a relatively small number of tasks many times. These include:

Direct Growth

You should be individually inviting people you have developed relationships with to join and participate in the community. These relationships should have been developed in the conceptualization stage. Those members you interview to learn more about how to create a community should then become the first members of the community.

These invitations will usually take place by e-mail, although personal invitations at events and other channels are also acceptable. Directly inviting people you know is the most reliable source of early growth in online communities.

Stimulated Activity

You will also be stimulating activity in the community with a three-fold approach. First, you will be initiating discussions on topics that research has shown members are interested in.

Discussions can be scheduled in advance; mix those that are designed to convey information with those that affect members on a psychological level, such as bonding/status-jockeying discussions.

In addition, you should be prompting members to partici-pate in these discussions. This requires individually reaching out to members through the site or by e-mail and letting them know that their opinion on the discussion would be valued.

Your goal is to get these members into the habit of regu-larly visiting the community to see the responses to their own posts. It takes time until visiting a community becomes a habit. Until then, members need frequent reminders to participate. Automated reminders are not enough.

LITTLE HOLLYWOOD GIRL	rosiebarm	2	11 days
HERNANDO'S HIDE-AWAY by Don & Phil	J200bert	3	11 days
Poems,prayers and promises	J200bert	6	11 days
Till I kissed you	everly	15	11 days
ILLINOIS BY EVERLY BROTHERS	rosiebarm	4	11 days
Nothing Matters But You	rosiebarm	3	11 days
Phil "Don't Cha Know"	bledune	4	11 days
The Blues Don and Phil	rosiebarm	10	11 days
WHEN SNOWFLAKES FALL IN SUMMER	rosiebarm	20	13 days
TO SHOW I LOVE YOU	rosiebarm	1	13 days
The Brothers at Work	rosiebarm	5	13 days
ALWAYS ITS YOU- EVERLY BROTHERS	rosiebarm	3	13 days

During the early stage of managing online communities, the community founder initiates most of the activity.

At this stage you should also invest time in building good relationships with members. Reach out to individual members and identify ways to be of assistance or continue to learn what members are most interested in. This ensures a steady flow of activity, feedback on current activities, and opportunities to initiate activities in the future.

Signs of development

As the community begins to develop, members will invite others in their online and offline social networks to join the community. A gradually increasing number of new members will arrive without you inviting them.

In addition, members will begin initiating their own discussions in the community. This number should steadily increase. Members will also begin replying to discussions without you directly prompting them. Visiting the community starts to become a habit.

At this stage, you should continue to undertake the same activities as before (and at the same level as before). A common mistake is to begin shifting activities to more micro-level activities too soon. Until critical mass has been reached and sustained, you should have a precise focus upon the four tasks I have just highlighted:

1. Invite members to join the community.
2. Initiate discussions members will be interested in.
3. Prompt members to participate in discussions.
4. Build relationships with members.

This phase can last anywhere from one to nine months. Any longer typically indicates a development problem. It shows the community is not naturally taking off and there is either a conceptual problem or a tactical problem.

If community members do not invite others to join, or initiate activity without you directly prompting them, this is a sign that either the community concept is wrong (the community isn't about a topic members are interested in), or you're using the wrong tactics. This may be due to errors in your approach or not testing different approaches.

In the latter example, the way you interact with members, invite people to join, or initiate discussions is wrong. Approaches that are too long, for example, or discussions that are not relevant enough to members, are unlikely to generate a lot of activity. In addition, in some sectors approaches that are too formal or feel pushy also fail to solicit the desired activity.

STAGE 2: ESTABLISHMENT

The establishment phase of the online community lifecycle begins when the community has reached critical mass: the community itself generates more than 50% of growth and activity. The establishment phase ends when members are generating over 90% of growth and activity in the community.

Once the establishment phase has been reached, your role gradually shifts from the micro-level tasks that focus on individual members at a time to more macro-level activities (tasks that affect several members at a time). These activities include those that sustain growth, activity, and develop a sense of community.

Referral and promotional growth

You should now gradually shift away from direct growth and encourage referral and promotional growth (members inviting their friends and coverage in media outlets read by the target audience).

Referral growth tactics will include ownership/involvement level ideas that encourage members to invite their friends. For example, you establish an event/goal that members participate in, increase a sense of ownership and thus invite other people in their social network to join the community. Or you might focus upon sharing content/discussions within the community. You will also spend more time converting newcomers into regular members of the community.

You will also have some promotional activities during this time. This might be outreach to bloggers/magazines, issuing statements on behalf of the community, hosting events that involve interests of your target audience.

Don't leave growth to chance; you have to proactively stimulate it.

Scaling activity

Most organizations allow their communities to grow until they become unmanageable. Don't let this happen to you. Embed scaling processes early in the development lifecycle. Prepare now to have a big community later. This involves recruiting volunteers, developing the platform, and optimizing areas of the site.

The community manager will also have to spend more time on moderation: resolving disputes between members, concentrating and dissipating activity, removing spam/inappropriate material, highlighting the most popular discussions/activities.

Sense of community

At this stage of the lifecycle, the community manager must begin to introduce elements that increase the sense of community felt among members. This usually involves initiating events and activities as shared experiences, introducing a community constitution, promoting the community in other media, and documenting the community history.

The community manager needs members to feel they are part of a community together to sustain a high level of activity among members. It keeps people returning to the community to see what's new, as opposed to only visiting when notified of a reaction to their own post.

In addition, content will play an important role in further developing the community. Content can help develop a community narrative, highlight the top members in the community, create a social order within the community, and (akin to a local newspaper) increase the sense of *togetherness* felt by members.

Signs of development

During this phase of the lifecycle, you should see growing levels of growth and activity, which should be closely correlated. Growth should increasingly come from referrals/word-of-mouth activity.

In addition, the community should continue to generate an increasing amount of its own activity. The level of responses per discussion should continue to rise, and the number of discussions initiated by members should also steadily increase.

A community in the establishment phase should show continued growth and development, in addition to a sense of community. This is often reflected in a growing amount of off-topic/social chatter.
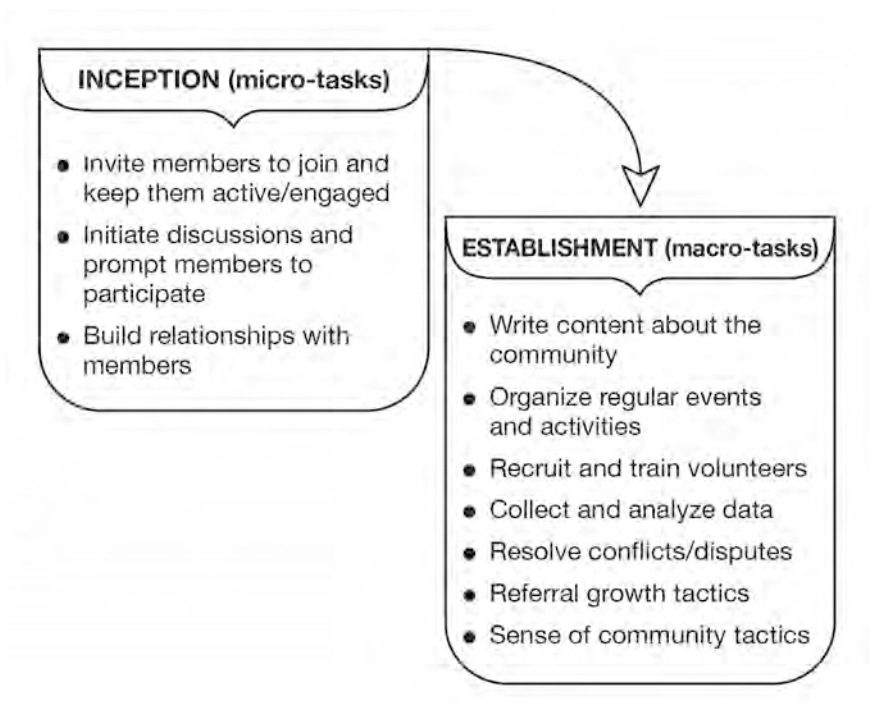
Signs that a sense of community is developing among members may include in-jokes, a continuation of discussions beyond

the immediate subject matter, an increasing amount of direct contact between members, higher levels of self-disclosure in debates and other signals of familiarity between members.

Broad lists of tasks

During this phase of the online community lifecycle, the number of tasks you focus upon will broaden and you need to shift your time accordingly. These tasks include:

INCEPTION (micro-tasks)

- Invite members to join and keep them active/engaged
- Initiate discussions and prompt members to participate
- Build relationships with members

ESTABLISHMENT (macro-tasks)

- Write content about the community
- Organize regular events and activities
- Recruit and train volunteers
- Collect and analyze data
- Resolve conflicts/disputes
- Referral growth tactics
- Sense of community tactics

The objective of this phase is to continue increasing growth and activity, develop a limited sense of community, and provide the basis for sustainable development of the community.

This final point is important. It would be difficult, for example, for anyone to handle a community membership numbering

over 100,000 active members without support. The processes that allow a community to scale must begin relatively early in the community's lifecycle.

Potential problems

A drop in growth or activity indicates a potential problem for the community. If growth increases but the activity drops, then members are becoming less active than before or a smaller number of members are accounting for an increasingly larger share of activity.

Tracking relevant data is important to spot these potential issues. If you identify an issue, you can initiate activities designed to change this trend before you lose too many members. Once you enter a dip, it's hard to avoid a death spiral (less activity begets less activity).

It is also common for community managers to switch roles too early: to go from micro- to macro-level activities too rapidly as opposed to gradually shifting roles as the measurement of growth and activity shows progress.

STAGE 3: MATURITY

The maturity phase of the online community lifecycle begins when members of the community are generating 90% or more of activity/growth, and there is a limited sense of community.

This is measured through growth, activity, and sense of community metrics. The maturity phase ends when the community has a highly developed sense of community, but the level of activity or sense of community among members has plateaued.

Most familiar online communities are in their maturity phase. They are established, highly active, and have a highly

developed sense of community. They also merit a lot of attention within their ecosystem.

This final element, external attention, is common among mature communities. They become the definitive place for those interested in that topic. Mumsnet is the definitive community for parents in the UK. Techcrunch is the definitive community for start-up companies. 4Chan has a thriving online community for online hackers/pranksters.

By this stage, you should only rarely be initiating discussions, prompting people to participate, or engaging in any micro-tasks besides those that facilitate relationships with members/volunteers. You should only do this to *fill in the gaps* (i.e. when there is a lull in activity, it makes sense for you to prompt a few discussions).

Now you should be focused solely upon macro-level activities that have the biggest long-term impact upon the majority of members in the community. This includes scaling processes, events/activities, content, optimizing of the platform, developing a strong sense of community, and increasing the profile of the community outside of the platform.

Your volunteers or additional staff should now be handling the micro-activities undertaken in the previous stages of the lifecycle (e.g. conflict resolution, removing spam, responding to member queries). You need to focus on the bigger things.

During this phase, there will usually be a plateau in growth. This is the natural consequence of the community reaching its maximum potential. There are only so many people who can be interested in the community's topic. Once this figure has been reached, further growth is not possible.

In addition, there will eventually be a plateau in activity— when members are as active as they can possibly be. This is the outcome of members who have a strong sense of commu-

nity and dedicate as much time to the topic as they possibly can. The goal at this stage is to sustain this high level of activity and increase the sense of community among members.

A plateau is not a major cause for concern. It is the natural and final evolution of a successful online community. You should only be concerned when there is a decline, especially a sustained decline. I cover this topic in the mitosis phase of the community lifecycle.

Growth

During this phase, all growth will come from referrals/word-of-mouth activity (such as sharing content/discussions, networking at events, or generally being a well-known community within the sector), and the organization's promotional efforts.

The community manager helps gain publicity in major outlets and develops a system by which all members feel a sense of ownership over areas of the community.

This will involve ensuring the community is frequently mentioned within its sector and also making the community influential within its realm. For example, by releasing regular statements related to relevant issues and working with influencers to implement desirable change within the sector. Mumsnet frequently campaigns on behalf of its members.

Mumsnet proactively runs campaigns on issues its members care deeply about. The success rate is remarkably high.

Activity

The level of activity per member will peak during the maturity phase of the community lifecycle. The community will become highly responsive, and you should focus on reviewing what areas of the site are used and optimizing the most used features.

In the maturity phase of the lifecycle, the level of activity is extremely high and the community is well known in its sector.

You also need to closely analyze the process through which a newcomer becomes a regular and take steps to enhance that process based on data, not a haphazard series of actions.

Sense of community

The activities you undertake at this stage blur the lines between growth, activity, and sense of community. Releasing statements on behalf of the community, for example, achieves all three: it promotes the community, it increases activity from members talking about the issue, and makes members feel a greater sense of community from the influence their community has upon its ecosystem.

A list of activities at this stage is below:

ESTABLISHMENT

- Write content about the community
- Organize regular events and activities
- Recruit and train volunteers
- Collect and analyze data
- Resolve conflicts/disputes
- Referral growth tactics
- Sense of community tactics

MATURITY

- Optimize the social density of the community platform
- Steer the direction of the community in desirable areas
- Ensure the community is influential within its sector
- Manage the volunteer team
- Optimize the newcomers to regular conversion ratio
- Optimize the community platform (from a technology perspective)
- Establish the overall goals and vision of the community

The objective at this stage is, counter-intuitively, to hit the plateau, the point where the community has reached its initial maximum potential. Everyone in the sector should know of you, your members are highly active, and there is a deep sense of community among members.

STAGE 4: MITOSIS
The mitosis phase of the online community lifecycle begins when the community is almost entirely self-sustaining and

ends when it begins to break up into smaller, more focused, online communities.

Not all communities progress to this phase. For example, my friend Susan runs Park Slope Parents, a community for a few thousand parents in Brooklyn, New York. Her community is highly active, but will never grow so big it needs to split into multiple sub-groups. It has a much smaller potential audience than a larger community like Mumsnet.

Mumsnet targets parents throughout the UK; Park Slope Parents is just for a relatively small area in New York. Mumsnet has a potential audience in the millions; Park Slope Parents has a potential audience of a few thousand.

Susan has seen this community through to the maturity phase of the lifecycle. She's maximized the potential of that community. Therefore, it won't enter the mitosis stage of the lifecycle.

NOTE: As of October 1, 2011, membership requires a $35 fee.
This fee gives you discounts to over 340 (and growing) local businesses and
services CHECK THE DISCOUNTS HERE

Message History

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2012	1676	1367	1677	1332	1390	1397	1237	35				
2011	1900	1710	2023	1605	1591	1769	1263	1503	1649	1590	1472	1269
2010	1554	1428	1635	1428	1527	1404	1328	1188	1268	1457	1424	1594
2009	1851	1430	1638	1869	1480	1189	965	868	1025	1129	1400	1500
2008	1712	1719	1710	1604	1778	1766	1550	1337	1586	1520	1453	1395
2007	1747	1618	2084	1539	1952	1764	1482	1271	1633	1754	1650	1249
2006	1413	1047	1511	1145	1166	1354	1109	1426	1564	1490	1367	1293
2005	938	847	1333	1477	1165	1069	924	1063	1162	1152	1273	1213
2004	966	841	1140	1130	1351	1321	1505	1609	1017	978	793	894
2003	273	197	446	526	602	577	629	556	800	893	829	863
2002							22	48	178	339	176	172

Join This Group!

*Not all communities advance to mitosis. The message history for Park Slope
Parents shows a plateau since 2007 without any significant decline.*

If you have a large potential audience (or a large existing community), once the plateau has been reached, you need to shift your role again from optimizing to facilitating multiple, smaller, online communities. The objective of this phase is to sustain and increase the level of both activity, and sense of community.

Growth

During this phase of the lifecycle, the growth to the community as a whole should remain consistent, but the growth to the smaller sub-groups should be growing as in the inception stage. This means, initially, the co-founders of the sub-group

will invite new members, usually through existing contacts made in the community.

You may also have to stimulate growth by mentioning new groups through content/discussions, and by hosting events and activities for these groups. Each of these sub-groups should endeavor to achieve a critical mass within the first three months of existence. You will need to train people to manage these groups and provide support when necessary.

Activity

The overall level of activity to the community should increase as members reform around stronger common interests (social circles, niche interests within the topic). Each group should be smaller, but more members will have the opportunity to be involved.

There may be a brief, short-term dip in activity as members gradually move from the broad topic into a niche group based around their activities.

You need to focus on identifying the potential sub-groups at this stage. Identify the topics or interests that have continually arisen within the community, and then create a group specifically for these individuals. This group might be a forum category or any other place within the community platform where people can interact.

In ScienceForums, members each have several sub-groups they participate in. The broad topic 'science' has been artfully broken into highly active sub-groups.

Alternatively, you may identify social groups that have developed within the community and build areas within the platform just for close groups of friends. These groups might be elders, newcomers, those who have attended particular events (events especially are a good place for members to bond).

You might want to look at your original audience overview to identify clusters of people who share the same demographic, habitual, or psychographic traits. These are ideal categories for developing sub-groups.

Sense of community

The sense of community at this stage will dip before rising considerably. Past a certain stage, it's impossible for all members to feel a sense of connection with everyone. Breaking the community into smaller sub-groups helps sustain these connections. Fewer people are more active in the community.

You should spend considerable time helping boost the sense of community in each of these groups. It is therefore important not to launch multiple groups at a single time, but to gradually increase the number of groups in the community.

Mitosis phase tasks

During this phase of the community lifecycle, the community manager balances the role of sustaining a healthy community in the maturity phase with developing self-sustaining groups.

Note in the tasks below, as in the previous phases, there is a gradual shift from the maturity level tasks to the mitosis level tasks. This should not be an abrupt change. It may be possible not to split the entire community into sub-groups, just elements/people within the community.

MATURITY

- Optimize the social density of the community platform
- Steer the direction of the community in desirable areas
- Ensure the community is influential within its sector
- Manage the volunteer team
- Optimize the newcomers to regular conversion ratio
- Optimize the community platform (from a technology perspective)
- Establish the overall goals and vision of the community

MITOSIS

- Identify and create popular sub groups
- Train and manage leaders of sub-groups
- Promote and support sub-groups

While the number of mitosis tasks looks light, it is a highly repetitive process. For instance, the amount of managing of sub-group leaders will steadily increase throughout the lifespan of the community (perhaps until you're managing the people who manage the sub-group leaders).

Signs of development

As the community advances into the mitosis phase of the community lifecycle, an increasing number of successful niche groups/topics should be visible within the community. These should be independently run with only small assistance from you.

Over time, these sub-groups should be organizing regular events, maintaining a regular content schedule, and become relatively self-sustaining, close-knit, entities within the community.

Potential dangers

As I mentioned earlier, it is common for community managers to let their community become too big and too active without proper structure. Past a certain number of active members in a community, it becomes impossible for a high level of familiarity to persist. Members will know fewer and fewer other participants. Therefore, the overall sense of community in the community begins to decrease. This often leads to less ownership over the community and eventually a lower number of participating members.

Similarly, once a community becomes too active, it becomes difficult for members to stay abreast of what's new and popular in the community. It becomes difficult to follow the overall narrative of the community. This is often referred to as '*information overload*' (Jones et al., 2004).

A member used to catching up on 10 missed messages feels less motivation to catch up on 50 or 500 messages. It becomes harder to find the messages that will be most relevant.

If you fail to use your data to recognize these situations, it can result in the number of members gradually declining to a small group who retain a limited sense of community with one another.

Another potential danger at this stage is top-down community planning. Instead of reacting to interests that have risen naturally within the community, those that have clearly gained a high level of participation, the community attempts a top-down approach to try and facilitate multiple groups at once. This approach is not suited to community development.

FireArmsTalk

Creating multiple groups rapidly dissipates activity within the community. This can cause a sharp, uncontrolled, drop in the level of activity. It can fail to develop any group to critical mass. Sub-groups need to be nurtured to advance past the

inception stage. It's important to develop these individually before making a huge change at this stage.

ESTABLISHING STRATEGY

Your strategy depends upon where your community is in its lifecycle. In the following section, I outline the precise formula to identify where your community is in the lifecycle.

Growth

To determine whether growth has reached critical mass, you need the following data:

1. Number of members the community manager invited to join.

2. Number of members that joined as a result of these invitations.

3. Number of members that joined as a result of other promotional activity by the community manager.

4. Total number of new registered members during this time.

When members join a community, you want to identify where they joined from, either through a question in the registration form or by tracking the individual user journeys on Google Analytics and calculating it as a percentage of total.

Critical mass of growth is achieved when the total number of newly registered members in the community is *double* the number of members that have joined through your direct invitations (both one-to-one and to your existing mailing lists/ audiences).

SPECIFICALLY, YOU WANT TO KNOW:

Total number of registered members within 30 days

- *Less* members directly invited

- *Less* members joined through activities stimulated by the community manager

You can plot this in a table and graph as shown below:

Progression Metrics	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
- Total number of new members	24	61	62	79	112	72	117	213	281	240	227	247	271
- New members invited by CMGR	21	27	33	28	33	27	21	27	38	11	11	8	21
- New members from organic channels	3	34	29	51	79	45	96	186	243	229	216	239	250
% of members by the community	12.50%	33.74%	46.77%	64.56%	70.54%	62.50%	82.05%	87.32%	86.48%	95.42%	95.15%	96.76%	92.25%

Growth Figures
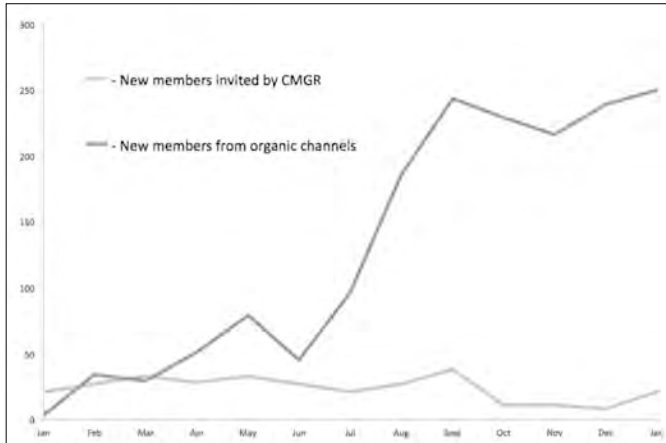
New Members Graph

*In the graph above, notice that the community didn't
achieve critical mass until early March.*

Activity

To determine activity for the context of the community life-cycle, you follow a similar approach. Review the total amount of activity within the community and subtract this by the level of activity the community manager stimulated.

For example, if the outcome surpasses the amount of activity initiated by the community manager, you have achieved a critical mass.

In larger online communities, it may be difficult to individually calculate this. Therefore, you may need to use a sample

of 20 discussions you initiated, 20 discussions selected using a systematic technique, dividing the outcome by 100 and then multiplying this by the total number of discussions for each. The more discussions you sample from here, the more accurate you will be.

YOU CALCULATE:

Total number of posts
- *Less* posts from the community manager
- *Less* responses to discussions initiated by the community manager

Plot this in a table and graph as shown below:

Activity KPIs	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
total number of posts per month	57	78	91	57	98	154	184	183	175	262	592	720
total number of new discussions	26	31	31	39	46	53	48	66	54	99	140	162
Discussions initiated by CMGR	22	27	13	27	23	25	26	25	25	25	21	22
responses to discussions initiated by CMGR	47	44	67	34	37	33	77	57	55	61	80	81

Activity KPI figures
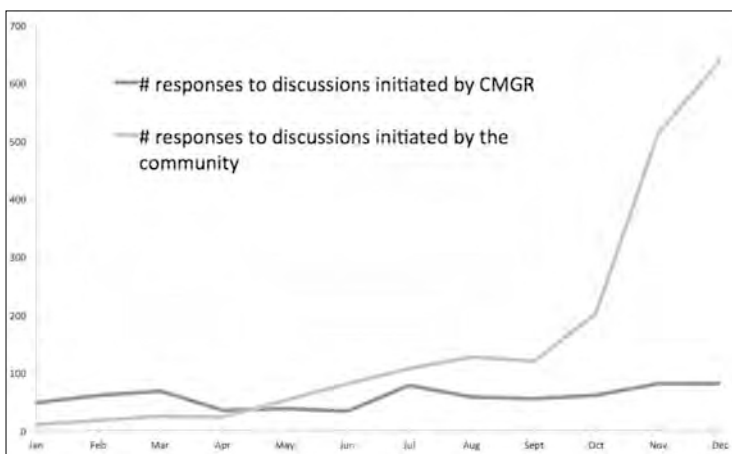
In the above graph, you can see the community reached critical mass of activity after about 4.5 months.

Sense of community

Sense of community is a concept with great history. It was first properly articulated in McMillan and Chavis's 1986 paper *Psychological Sense of Community*. McMillan and Chavis summarized a range of literature to produce four key factors inherent in developing a strong sense of community:

1. **Membership.** Do members feel a sense of identification with one another?
2. **Influence.** Do members feel influenced by the community and influential within the community?
3. **Integration and fulfillment of needs.** Are members' needs being met? Are those needs aligned with the needs of the community?
4. **Shared emotional connection.** Do members share an emotional connection with one another?

It's important to track your members' sense of community. A community can have a good level of growth and high levels of engagement but fail to develop relationships between members. This is the case for many customer-service-based communities.

The sense of community measures the relationships that have developed between members and whether members *feel* they are part of a community. It's that *feeling* that leads to increased loyalty, greater likelihood to purchase from your company, increased potential to recommend to others, give you feedback, and so forth.

Ultimately, more than any other metric, it is the sense of community that will drive the positive ROI for your organization.

How to measure sense of community

Chavis and others later produced a sense of community index, to measure the sense of a community. It is a survey, which means members need to be invited to participate.

The index asks people to rate whether they agree with the following statements on a scale of 0 for "not at all" to 3 for "completely":

1. *I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community.*
2. *Community members and I value the same things.*
3. *This community has been successful in getting the needs of its members met.*
4. *Being a member of this community makes me feel good.*
5. *When I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of this community.*
6. *People in this community have similar needs, priorities, and goals.*
7. *I can trust people in this community.*
8. *I can recognize most of the members of this community.*
9. *Most community members know me.*
10. *This community has symbols and expressions of membership such as clothes, signs, art, architecture, logos, landmarks, and flags that people can recognize.*
11. *I put a lot of time and effort into being part of this community.*
12. *Being a member of this community is a part of my identity.*
13. *Fitting into this community is important to me.*
14. *This community can influence other communities.*
15. *I care about what other community members think of me.*
16. *I have influence over what this community is like.*
17. *If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved.*
18. *This community has good leaders.*
19. *It is very important to me to be a part of this community.*

20. *I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them.*

21. *I expect to be a part of this community for a long time.*

22. *Members of this community have shared important events together, such as holidays, celebrations, or disasters.*

23. *I feel hopeful about the future of this community.*

24. *Members of this community care about each other.*

THE ANSWERS CORRESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS OF SENSE OF COMMUNITY:

- *Subscales Reinforcement of Needs = Q1 + Q2 + Q3 + Q4 + Q5 + Q6*
- *Membership = Q7 + Q8 + Q9 + Q10 + Q11 + Q12*
- *Influence = Q13 + Q14 + Q15 + Q16 + Q17 + Q18*
- *Shared Emotional Connection = Q19 + Q20 + Q21 + Q22 + Q23 + Q24*

The trouble with surveys

A problem with using surveys is the limit to how frequently they can be used. Asking members to undertake the same survey every month will cause fatigue and possibly irritate members.

Therefore, either measure a small sample of the total members each month and rotate those approached, or measure the sense of community at less frequent intervals, for example six to 12 months.

Survey collection techniques

While the later approach might be easiest, problems in the community might not emerge for some time. In addition, even these time frames can irritate members. It is best to develop several unique segments of members stratified upon their date of registration. Rotate the survey so members receive the same survey no more than once a year.

It is important to do the survey correctly. The results would be significantly biased if the survey was posted on the site and members were invited to participate. Those members who are most active and feel the strongest sense of community are most likely to participate. The members who feel the lowest sense of community are least likely to participate.

So you need a stratified sample that splits the members by the date joined and then samples those members. For example, if 5% of active members have been in the community for five years, 9% for four years, 17% for three years, 15% for two years, 21% for one year and 33% have joined within the past year, then the number of survey responses should reflect the same percentages.

This means the community must list members by the date they joined, find those which are still active, and then send this quantity of members the survey. Based upon the quantity responses, it may be necessary to send out more surveys to meet the quota for each category.

Be sure to use a stratified sample of the different clusters of members in the community (use either the level of activity or the date members joined).

Like growth and activity, collect this data and plot it on a graph as shown below:

Sense of community	Spring 10	Summer 10	Autumn 10	Winter 10	Spring 11	Summer 11	Autumn 11
# Members responded to survey	27	42	45	44	78	77	41
- total reinformcement of needs	81	126	180	176	468	539	328
- avg. reinforcement of needs	3	3	4	4	6	7	8
- total membership	108	84	225	176	312	462	246
- avg. membership	4	2	5	4	4	6	6
- total influence	54	84	135	308	780	924	451
- avg. influence	2	2	3	7	10	12	11
- total shared emotional connection	27	42	90	88	78	308	123
- avg. shared emotional connection	1	1	2	2	1	4	3
Total score	270	336	630	748	1638	2233	1148
Average result	10	8	14	17	21	29	28
% of total	10%	8%	15%	18%	22%	30%	29%

Sense of Community KPIs
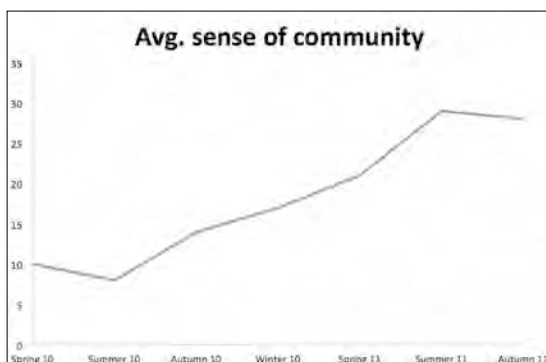
Average sense of community

Turning strategy into action

Now you have the theoretical understanding of community development, you can develop an action plan to further develop the community. The action plan is a clear document that highlights what needs to be achieved and when it needs to be achieved (and in large-scale terms, who needs to achieve it).

This plans ensures focus and accountability. It keeps the community manager focused upon the important task of *developing* the community as opposed to *maintaining* the community. Even the best community managers often struggle to resist the lure of reactive work (responding to isolated occurrences) as opposed to advancing the community as a whole.

Using the community management framework you can place all community management activities in to one of eight categories (see chart on page 17). Within each category are specific tasks for the community manager. The action plan shifts the balance towards the tasks that are most important at each particular time.

As a practical example, if you have a community with reasonable levels of growth and activity, but a low sense of

community, the strategy would emphasize the elements that constitute the sense of community (membership, influence, integration of needs, and shared emotional connection).

Time allocation guide

Over the years, I have compiled a rough estimate of how much time a community manager should spend on each activity. To develop the action plan, multiply the total number of hours available by the percentage, based upon which stage of the lifecycle your community is presently in.

	INCEPTION	ESTABLISHMENT	MATURITY	MITOSIS
Strategy	5%	5%	5%	5%
Growth	45%	25%	10%	25%
Moderation	30%	20%	25%	20%
Content	0%	10%	10%	10%
Relationships	15%	15%	15%	15%
Events and Activities	0%	10%	10%	10%
Business Integration	0%	5%	10%	10%
Technology	5%	10%	15%	5%

For example, a community manager with 40 working hours to spend on the community in the establishment phase would spend two hours a week on strategy (data collection/analysis), 10 hours on growth, eight hours on moderation, four hours each on content, events/activities, and the user experience, six hours on relationship development and two hours on business integration.

The proactive first principle

To ensure the focus remains on developing the community, apply the *proactive-first* principle: unless there is an urgent technical issue in the community (or a life-threatening situ-

ation), the community manager will undertake the *proactive* tasks first.

An average day

An average day for a community in the establishment phase might be:

- **9am – 10am:** Creating content
- **10am – 12pm:** Growth activities
- **1pm – 2pm:** Organizing events
- **2pm – 3.30pm:** Moderation
- **3:30pm – 5:00pm:** Relationship development

Naturally, this is a utopian version of a community manager's day. In real life, an array of issues will most likely arise that disrupts this schedule significantly. However, the focus on what needs to be accomplished and the approximate balance of time needed to complete each activity is essential to effective community management.

Some tasks here are better batched together as opposed to spread throughout the week. For example, it might make sense to create most content in the beginning of the week, or allocate two hours on Friday to collecting data, as opposed to 20 minutes every day.

User experience activities, business integration, strategy, and most content are better batched into blocks of several hours on specific days. The remaining tasks are better spread throughout the remaining days.

Then you need to drop the specific activities into these blocks of time. This list isn't comprehensive, but does identify what should be achieved on any particular day.

STRATEGY	GROWTH	MODERATION	CONTENT
Collecting Data	Direct invitations	Guidelines	Creating calendar
Analyzing data	Promotion	Social density	Informative content
Establishing goals	Referrals/WOM	Initiating discussions	Entertaining content
Communicating goals	Search/ Miscellaneous	Resolving disputes	Persuasive/ inspiring content
Ecosystem scanning	Converting newcomers into regulars	Steering the community	User generated content
		Soliciting responses	
RELATIONSHIPS	**EVENTS/ ACTIVITIES**	**BUSINESS INTEGRATION**	**USER EXPERIENCE**
Personal participation	Online and regular	Engaging employees	Maintenance
Cultivating volunteers	Online and irregular	Tremendous value exchanges	Future scanning
Befriending key members	Offline and regular	Price	Optimization
	Offline and irregular	Products	Miscellaneous
	Content and discussions	Promotion	
		Place	
		People	
		Process	

Within each of these lists, you can pick out the tasks most appropriate to your community. The average day becomes a more specific day:

- **9am – 10am:** Content: Write entertaining content about recent community activity and informative content about upcoming events in the sector. Update the community history page.

- **10am – 12pm:** Growth activities: Directly invite 10 people with a shared interest in (x) to join. Reach out to previous invitees and check how they're integrating with the community.

- **1pm – 2pm:** Event organizing: Plan upcoming regular event series on improvement in the topic. Find four guest speakers and schedule/announce the event.

- **2pm – 3.30pm:** Moderation: Initiate self-disclosure discussions to increase familiarity about how members first became interested in the topic. Highlight the new most popular topics. Solicit responses to yesterday's discussions from newly arrived members.

- **3:30pm – 5:00pm:** Relationship development. Reach out to three members who have made a unique contribution and see if they would like to write a regular article on that topic.

This is merely an example. By undertaking the process, however, you can maintain a forward-looking approach to community development. The goal is to keep focusing on *developing* the community, not maintaining it.

Community health metrics

Unfortunately, life gets a little more complicated. Just tracking progress won't reveal some major problems. You also need to track the overall health of the community, the level of responsiveness, interaction, and liveliness.

In the following chapters, I explore each element of the framework in greater depth and highlight how you can combine data and theory to optimize every single task.

Growth

You are responsible for growing the community. Too many community managers wait for members to arrive via search traffic or other serendipitous coincidence rather than proactively growing their community.

But what sort of growth do you want? Do you need to replenish members you're losing? Expand the community? Or penetrate further into the audience you already have?

Remember, growth doesn't mean merely persuading someone to visit the site. It includes converting a newcomer to a regular member of the community. You must welcome newcomers, ensure they make that first contribution to the community, and keep them participating.

ANALYZING YOUR CURRENT LEVELS OF GROWTH

You need to know whether the community is growing or shrinking. You also want to know the speed of growth. In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam explained the main reason for the rapid decline in a number of once-thriving community-based organizations is a lack of new blood replacing existing members. This problem is even more epidemic in online communities.

In Putnam's review of communities, membership was local and relatively static. Members usually left when they moved away, which was rare, or when they died (or became too frail to participate), which was also rare.

In online communities, membership is far more dynamic. Members leave when they get bored with the topic, find new jobs, have new life commitments, or simply when something

new comes along. A considerable emphasis needs to be placed upon both 1) retaining existing members and 2) ensuring a steady supply of fresh blood to replace departing members.

You need to calculate whether the number of active members in the community is growing or shrinking. You also need to determine the best sources of growth to optimize your promotional activities and how newcomers progress into regulars.

Note that I am referring to *active* members in a community, people who have made a post within the previous 30 days. The number of *registered* members is a meaningless statistic; it doesn't reveal how many members are active. It's easy to get a lot of people to register; it's harder to keep them active after six months. The other problem with registered members is that members don't delete their accounts when they leave a community. Therefore, the number of registered members continues to rise regardless of what the community manager does.

That's great news if you're tracking how many members actually become active in your community. It's bad news if you're trying to meaningfully develop your community. Imagine if your community ever hits its 50th birthday (Surprised? Don't be! The WELL, one of the internet's oldest communities, recently celebrated its 30th birthday)—a number of your members will have since died. Yet, you would continue to count them as members of the community.

Now replace '*died*' with lost interest in the topic, got a new job, had new life priorities, moved away, etc. You will forever continue to count all these people as members. You might laugh, but the oldest internet communities are hitting their 30th birthday.

So don't count the people who performed the mere act of completing a registration form as members. Only count those

who made an active contribution to the community within the past month.

This number is useful because it reflects your actions. It's a number that can go up and down. Scary, perhaps, but useful.

USING DATA TO OPTIMIZE GROWTH

The best way to grow a community is to target segments (or clusters) that share a demographic, habitual, or psychographic attribute.

I suggest launching your community with a focus on just one of these segments. Once you've reached critical mass, you can begin expanding by identifying and approaching new segments to join. You can cater the community activities specifically to this audience.

For example, let's say you run a community for comic book fans. After an analysis of your target audience, you identify several different segments. There is a rather large cluster that lives in Boston, another cluster that lives in London, and another in Idaho. You also notice that there are people who prefer niche anime comics, others who like adult comics, and still another group that is deeply interested in historical comics like Superman, Spiderman, or even *Radioactive man!*

You notice that there isn't already an established community for comic book fans in Boston, so you expand your community in this direction. You identify several people in Boston and conduct psychographic interviews. This reveals that they aspire to be comic book collectors, feel relatively isolated in their love of comic books among their friends, and are big fans of three well-known Boston comic book authors.

Now here is where it finally gets interesting!

Using this data, you can craft an outreach message inviting them to join a community and find other comic book lovers.

You can tell them you're creating a unique group just for Bostonites in the community; a place where they can share their collections, arrange meet-ups, and find others just like them.

But getting them to join the community isn't enough. You can schedule interviews with comic book bigwigs and invite those in Boston to submit their questions. This gets them not only to visit the community but to actually participate as well.

OPTIMIZING THE CONVERSION PROCESS

If the process of growing the community were as described above, communities would be far easier to build. Unfortunately, people are fickle. It's relatively easy to get someone to participate in the community, even two or three times; it's far harder to convert them to a regular, active, member of the community.

It's common for most people to drop out after visiting the community but before becoming a regular member. In fact, the number of regular members compared with new visitors is usually miniscule. For many, this presents a frustrating problem. For data-driven community managers, like you (!), it presents a terrific opportunity.

You need to analyze the newcomer to regular member conversion funnel, pinpoint where members are dropping out, and then use proven theory to improve the ratio of newcomers who become regulars.

I've outlined the five stages of conversion on the following page. It begins with the first visit, then registration, participation, becoming a regular, and volunteering.
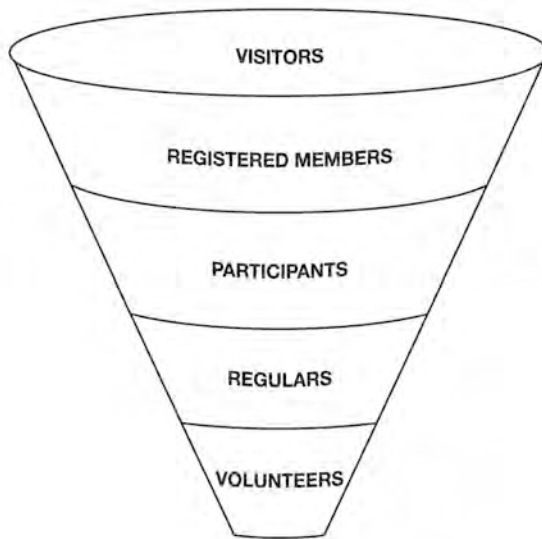
Conversion Funnel

STAGE 1: PROMOTIONAL EFFORTS TO OUTREACH

How many visitors are your promotional efforts attracting to the community platform? If you've been working hard to get bloggers/journalists to write about your community and send traffic your way, you should then be able to see how many visitors each media outlet sent.

To measure this top-line figure, use the number of unique new visitors per month via Google Analytics. This involves multiplying the number of unique visitors per month by the percentage of new visits as shown on the following page:

```
# Visitors Overview
# 20110401-20120430
# ──────────────────────
```

Month	Unique Visitors	% New Visits	Unique new visitors
0	21,639	66.13%	14310
1	18,454	63.79%	11772
2	20,726	64.64%	13397
3	22,884	67.60%	15470
4	24,183	69.34%	16768
5	25,088	71.49%	17935
6	25,656	71.59%	18367
7	27,146	71.53%	19418
8	29,048	71.45%	20755
9	32,465	70.41%	22859
10	33,249	62.00%	20614
11	32,496	58.39%	18974
12	32,977	58.36%	19245
Total	346,011	66.16%	228921

Visitor numbers
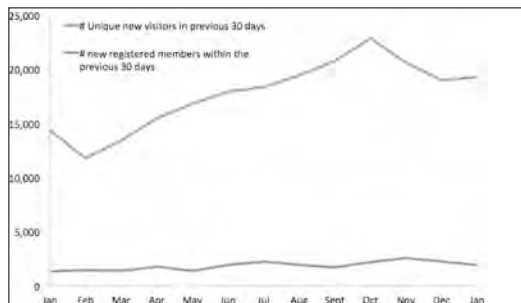
Conversion graph

This data shows a general increase in the number of unique new visitors within the previous 30 days.

You use unique new visitors for several reasons. First, unique visitors are the number of unique IP addresses that have visited your site. This excludes a single person visiting multiple times (at least from the same IP address). Second,

you assume that returning visitors are generally members (not always true, but highly likely). You want to know the number of individuals that are likely to register for the community during this time.

Improving the number of unique, new, visitors

To improve the number of unique, new, visitors, identify what sources of traffic have or haven't worked well. Then spend more time working on good sources of traffic. If one blogger sent you twice as much traffic as others, you might want to spend more time building a closer relationship with that blogger.

You also need to differentiate between the different channels of growth: direct growth (targeting people with whom you have existing contacts/relationships), word-of-mouth growth (mentions by members/sharing content on various platforms), promotional growth, search and other sources.

Imagine, for example, if you directly invite members to join a community. You invite your Facebook fans or Twitter followers to join. You can identify which unique channel works best. And, even within that channel, you can identify which specific type of message works best.

Head spinning? Let's break it down.

YOUR PLATFORM HAD 275,000 VISITORS WITHIN THE LAST MONTH.

- 80,000 of them came via search.
- 100,000 of them came via Facebook/Twitter.
- 50,000 of them came via word-of-mouth activities.
- The rest came from a variety of smaller channels.

Within social media platforms of your existing audiences, you see that 80,000 came via Facebook and 20,000 via Twitter.

Within that Facebook list, you can cross-reference when visitors visited (the average link on Facebook lasts a matter of hours) and see which messages were most effective. For example, did most people visit when you published a specific link or post in a particular style? Is there a pattern there? Remember that you want to know about *statistical significance*.

So a change of 1% to 5% doesn't matter much unless it's over a sustained period of time, but a change of 40% is something you want to pay attention to.

You want to identify within each channel which specific messages lead to growth. When you know this, you can optimize these messages. You can identify a balance that will optimize the number of visitors to the community platform and shift your own efforts to match this.

Unfortunately, it gets a little more complicated. Not all visitors are created equal. Search traffic, for example, is likely to result in fewer registered members than directly inviting your friends to visit and join the community. Instead of just tracking the number of visitors to a community platform, you need to identify the conversion ratio of visitors to registered members.

So, you want to know not only sources of growth to traffic, but also which sources lead to registered members. Using Google Analytics, you can identify that. You browse where visitors visit from and where they go once they arrive. How many click on the link to register? How many who register actually complete the registration process?

Key metrics:
- Unique visits per traffic source per 30 days compared with the previous 30 days.
- Registrations per traffic source per 30 days compared with the previous 30 days.

- Activities within each traffic source that led to membership growth.

Possible interventions

The standard intervention at this level is to try multiple channels of growth. There are four channels for growing a community:

1. **Direct recruitment of people you already have some connection with.** For example, your mailing lists, social media followers/fans, and other existing contacts. Data may be collected both from community analytics and mailing list data (usually the number of people who clicked the link to visit the community). Be aware that some platforms, such as Twitter, aren't easy to track because many hits appear as direct traffic. So you need to specifically measure this by the bit.ly clicks or by measuring the increased visits within the hour after that tweet was published.

2. **Word of mouth/referrals is your existing audience mentioning the community to others.** This may be extremely difficult to measure without a clear program/link for encouraging referrals. However, it's not impossible to put together a rough estimation. This will include increased direct visits during the period of significant WOM/referral activities, visits to specific pages set up for this activity, and traffic from Facebook/Twitter sharing (from members, as opposed to you).

3. **Promotion is gaining coverage in external channels where your target audience tends to congregate.** Don't try to measure every single piece of coverage; work backwards from those who Google Analytics shows as delivering a good source of traffic. If you aren't measuring direct visitors, then measure the increase in visitors during the period of that promotional activity. This includes mentions in popular groups, coverage in top news sites and invitations to mailing lists.

    - Try multiple promotional techniques. For example, host a live chat with a popular person of influence and encourage them to mention it to their audience.

- Build relationships with popular bloggers. This includes mentions in popular groups, coverage in top news sites and invitations to mailing lists.

4. **Search/miscellaneous traffic can be measured directly by almost any platform analytics package.**

STAGE 2: VISITORS TO REGISTERED MEMBERS

Once you have optimized the number of visitors to your community, you need to increase the number of those visitors that register to become members. First, however, you need to identify this figure.

Measuring visitors to registered members

Compare the number of newly registered members within the previous 30 days (or month) with the number of registrations during the same period. Google Analytics doesn't show the number of registrations unless members are taken to a registration-complete page.

To get the number of new registrations, you probably need to either individually list members by the date they joined and find out how many joined during any given month, or use a platform that has a statistics package that shows you how many members joined during the previous month.

Visitor to registered member conversion	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
# Unique new visitors in previous 30 days	14,310	11,772	13,397	15,470	16,768	17,935	18,
# new registered members within the previous 30 days	1306	1411	1377	1725	1372	1898	2
Registration conversion %	9.13%	11.99%	10.28%	11.15%	8.18%	10.58%	12.(

Visitors to newcomers
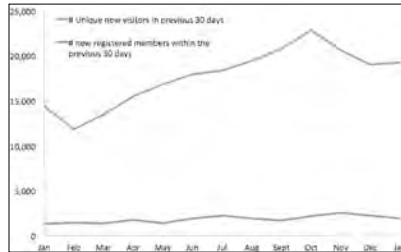
This graph shows that even though the number of unique new visitors has risen, the number of newly registered members has not increased at the same pace: a clear loss of potential members.
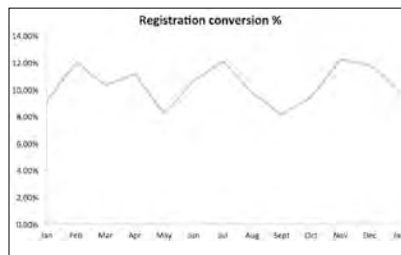
A single graph shows the ups and down of the registration conversion percentage.

Optimizing the newcomer to registration conversion ratio

To highlight exactly where you can increase this ratio, you need to break the registration down into a series of steps you expect members to take.

A typical process for a newcomer to become a member is:

- Step 1) Visits (unique new visitors)
- Step 2) Identifies something interesting to respond to/participate in
- Step 3) Clicks to register
- Step 4) Completes registration form
- Step 5) Opens confirmation e-mail
- Step 6) Clicks the link to confirm registration

At the moment the only data points you have are at the two opposite ends; you need data throughout this process. By tracking the number of members that click the registration link, the number that complete the registration form, the e-mail open-rates (where available), and the clicks to confirm the registration, you gain the necessary data.

For example:

| Visitor to registered member conversion												
# Unique new visitors in previous 30 days	14,310	11,772	13,397	15,470	16,768	17,935	18,367	19,418	20,756	22,869	20,614	18,974	19,245
# visitors to registration page	4293	3675	4005	4785	5143	5229	5512	5972	6413	663	5992	3830	5471
# completed registration form	2999	2674	2903	3558	3600	3993	3689	4057	4138	4641	4203	3845	3709
# opened confirmation e-mail	1789	1704	1741	2235	2060	2195	2655	2431	2282	2574	2907	3707	2238
# clicked confirmation e-mail link	1431	1494	1392	1958	1894	1902	2496	2084	1901	1907	2730	2507	1995
# new registered members within the pre	1306	1411	1377	1725	1372	1898	2219	1890	1681	2152	2520	2238	1907
Registration conversion %	9.13%	11.99%	10.28%	11.15%	8.18%	10.58%	12.08%	9.73%	8.10%	9.41%	12.22%	11.80%	9.91%

Visitors to registered members conversion
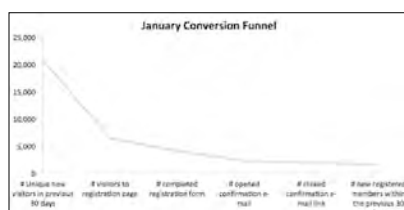
This analysis is solely for the most recent month.

You can now identify specifically where members are dropping out and design interventions to improve this ratio. The biggest win in the graph above would be from unique new visitors in the previous 30 days to clicks to the registration page.

Increasing clicks on registration page

There are several ways to improve clicks on the registration page.

- **Target more interested members.** The biggest influence upon the likelihood of a newcomer becoming a regular member is their strength of interest in the topic. If you take extra care to only invite from pools of people with an above-average level

of interest in the topic, it should be easier to convert them into regular members of the community.

- **Tweak the positioning of registration.** You don't want registration to appear in big, flickering, lights at the top of every page. You do, however, need it to be prominently positioned on the website.

BackYard Chickens

- **Position the latest activity above the fold.** The fold is a term from when newspapers were delivered to customers folded. Stories positioned above the fold would receive far more attention. Today, it also refers to the area of the website you can see before scrolling down. Don't waste valuable real estate on a large graphic; show the latest activity above the fold on the homepage of the community.

Lenovo shows the latest activity above the fold on their homepage for the community.

- **Use a prompt to register.** After members have clicked (x) pages on the community, they are prompted to register. They become engaged in the community before being invited to join and respond to a discussion.

Increasing completion of the registration form

Once members have clicked on the registration form, your conversion rate should be extremely high. Keep the amount of data you require at an absolute minimum. Anything more than their desired username, e-mail, and password is irrelevant at this stage.

- **Let members create their first contribution, then prompt the member to register.** This is slightly different from what I suggest above. Instead of prompting members to register after they visit (x) pages, this allows members to create their first post to the community (usually in response to a discussion) and then prompt them to register. Technically more difficult to execute, this approach is more likely to motivate newcomers to complete the registration process to avoid losing the post they already created.

- **Reduce the copy required to complete the registration form.** Many registration forms ask for copious amounts of irrelevant

information. The form to join GenerationBenz.com continues for six pages. The registration form to join the Camden community in London even asked members personal questions such as their sexuality. None of this is necessary. All you need at this stage is a login name, an e-mail address, and a password.

Spreedly signup

- **Change the tone of copy.** Some community platforms do not allow you to use a simplified version of a form as shown above. Instead, you might need to tweak the copy to encourage a registration. This may include highlighting existing members, benefits of the community, or activities members can participate in once they have joined.

- **Tweak the design of the form.** You can also tweak the color, size, and layout of the registration form. Avoid being too clever. It's better to stay simple.

- **Use Facebook/OpenID registration.** Another option is to allow members to register via accounts on other platforms, e.g. Twitter, Facebook, or OpenID.

Increasing opens of the confirmation e-mail

A surprisingly large number of members are typically lost between completing the registration form and opening the confirmation e-mail. To ensure better rates of confirmation e-mail opening, try the following:

- **Change the 'from' address.** Some people instinctively don't open e-mails from organizations. Try using the community

manager's name to send the e-mail (as opposed to the name of the community).

- **Increase the speed the confirmation e-mail is sent.** Anything longer than a minute is a failure. Members want to participate straight away. If they don't get an e-mail for 30 minutes, a few hours, or even a few days (!), then you're almost certain to lose the member. The sooner the confirmation is sent, the better.

- **Change the subject line.** It is worthwhile testing several different subject lines to find the one that is best suited to your community. You might find, for example, that "(community name) new member confirmation" isn't as engaging as "30 minutes until your brand new account self-destructs."

- **Run a spam filter check.** If the ratio here is extremely low, do a spam filter check. Most e-mail platforms now allow you to do this. They test the spam filters with the major account providers to see if it's likely to end up in the spam folder. If this happens, keep tweaking and changing until it doesn't.

Increasing clicks on confirmation e-mail link

Next you want people to click the confirmation link. The conversion rate at this stage is usually high, but could be higher. There are again some tweaks you can make within the body of the e-mail itself that can increase your ratio. These include:

- **Reduce the quantity of copy.** Confirmation e-mails rarely need more than a single link explaining the recipient has to click the link below.

- **Highlight a specific action to take (or bonus for clicking the link).** In the rare scenario when reducing the quantity of copy hasn't had a big impact, try highlighting a specific action members can take within the community (once they have clicked the link). This should usually be to participate in a topical interaction.

The results of these interventions will vary by community.

You should have a regular process for benchmarking, testing interventions, and then adapting to what works best. Optimizing is an ongoing process, not a single event.

STAGE 3: REGISTERED MEMBERS TO PARTICIPANTS
Now you have increased the number of members that register for the community, you want to ensure they participate. A member who doesn't participate is a lurker, and lurkers hold very little value to the community.

This metric is relatively simple. You look at the number of new people who have completed the registration process in the data and compare it with the number that have made a contribution.

If this figure isn't immediately apparent in your data (Google Analytics won't track this), then you may need to use a surveying technique. You might need to use systematic sampling of 100 to 200 members (this picks a member per every Nth (e.g. 10) that joined as listed by date—relevant due to the likelihood of older members being more likely to have made a contribution than those who joined yesterday). Of these 100 to 200 members, how many made a contribution?

How does this compare to last month? If they didn't make a contribution, why didn't they make a contribution? What could be done to improve this figure? Again, you want to look at the trends per month and identify if this figure is improving, getting worse, or has remained relatively flat.

For example:

Registered member to participants	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Members sampled	32	107	54	74	64	64	72	71	101	103	78	84	91
Members whom made a contribution	11	17	18	12	24	29	25	25	32	33	30	25	38
% of members whom made a contribution	34%	16%	33%	16%	29%	35%	35%	35%	32%	32%	38%	30%	42%
Est. no. members made a contribution	449	224	459	280	392	655	770	665	533	689	969	666	796

Registered members to participants

Here are sampled members who joined in the previous month and how many of them made a contribution then to the community. This gives you a percentage figure, to multiply by the number of registrations during that period for an estimated number of members that made a contribution.
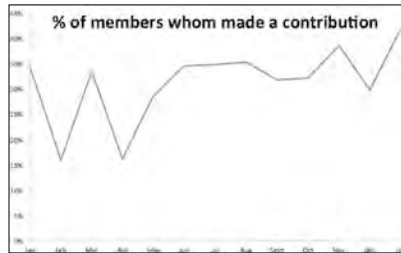
% of members contribution

Here are ways to convert more newly registered members into active participants:

- **Change the post-registration page.** After clicking the confirmation link, don't send newcomers to the homepage. Instead send them to a page that highlights something they can participate in straight away. This should be a topical discussion, poll, or registration for an upcoming event/ activity. Solicit that first contribution as soon as possible.

- **Change the welcome e-mail.** Change the e-mail sent after the confirmation link is sent. Keep this welcome e-mail short and highlight a discussion that you want members to contribute to. You can update with a new discussion every week.

- **Create a newcomer area.** Create a specific, visible, newcomer area in the community, which explains the basics, and how newcomers can get involved. Make this a visible link from the homepage of the community.

- **Reminders to participate.** If newcomers have joined but haven't made a contribution, schedule an automated reminder highlight saying you're sorry about that and offer something they can do in the community.

- **Personal welcomes (and types of welcome).** In the early stages of the community, you might also personally welcome members. If a personal welcome does get a member to participate over a long period of time compared with other methods, you should keep doing them. Otherwise, stop doing them. Your time is limited; how you spend it matters.

STAGE 4: PARTICIPANTS TO LONG-TERM MEMBERS

Now it becomes more complicated. You want to know how many first-time participants become long-term members. Long-term members are defined as still active after six months.

The only way to get this data is to sample those who participated six months ago and compare that number with the number of those still participating today. Again, you can't sample all members.

It's a multi-stage process, because you want to know specifically when members drop out. The more specific you can be, the better you can design an intervention to help. You want to know what activity stage members tend to drop out (e.g. after the first contribution, second contribution, fifth contribution) and when members tend to vanish (e.g. after one day, one week, one month, six months).

Both are important. The activity stage indicates what activity hurdle members need to jump to become regular members. The time stage indicates the point after which the community begins to become a habit for members.

For example, it's common for communities to attract people who participate heavily for a very short duration of time and then get bored and vanish. At a pure data level, this might make you think you need to plan an intervention after the 25th contribution as opposed to simply finding a way to get a member to stay after the second week.

With some of our clients, for example, we often find members make a single contribution but then never return. This might be because they forget about the community. Visiting the community never becomes a habit as it does with, say, Facebook or Twitter.

It might be because the notification system is awful and members never learn when people reply to their contribution and, thus, have no reason to return. If you make a contribution, leave the community and never hear back, you will probably never visit the community again. Even a minor change in this area, such as changing the notification system from opt-in to opt-out, can have a staggering impact upon the conversion ratio.

Brett Taylor, founder of Friendfeed and former CTO of Facebook, noted that his data showed that if members befriended five individuals on the platform, they would likely become permanent members of the community. This is true of most online communities (five is not necessarily *the* number but *a* number exists for your community).

Once Brett knew his number, he could plan interventions that would encourage members to befriend five people on the platform: finding people that members knew via Gmail/Facebook integration, introducing members to members like them, automatically entering them into groups based upon details listed in their profile pages or hosting newcomer-related activities that would force people to interact with each other.

Unless you're collecting data along both activity *and* duration of membership paths, you won't be able to pinpoint what sort of intervention you need to plan.

Measuring the participants to regulars

In an ideal world, it helps to have a data package built in to the community platform. However, for many of you, this won't be an option. Alternatively, you can use 100 members in the *systematic sampling* method described on page 75.

Divide the group into active/non-active members. Then, within the dropout group, identify where they dropped out. Place them in different categories. First contribution to second, second to third, third to fifth, fifth to tenth, etc.

Months since joining	1	2	3	4	5	6
Members	57	37	21	19	19	15
% decrease		35%	43%	10%	0%	21%
Contributions since joining	1 to 5	6 to 10	11 to 15	16 to 20	21 to 25	26 to 30
Members	100	47	31	24	11	8
% decrease		53%	34%	23%	54%	27%

*Months and contributions since joining*

The table above shows the latest figures available. You see that a sample of 100, which made a contribution six months ago, was used for the time duration. Of these, 37 were still active after two months, 21 were still active after three months, 19 were still active after four months, 19 still active after five months and 15 still active after six months.

Below, I have used a sample of 100 members who made a single contribution six months ago to identify where they dropped out: 47 made six or more contributions, 31 made 11 or more contributions, 24 made one or more contributions, 11 made 21 or more contributions and just eight made more than 26 contributions.
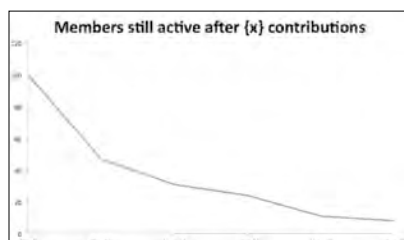
Members active after contributions
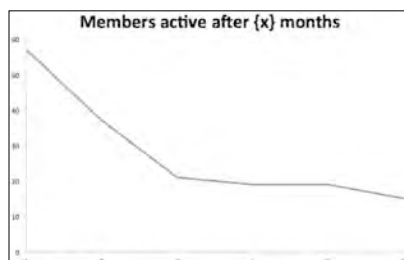
Members active after {x} months

You can see that the number of members that leave after three months is relatively low compared to the first three months. You might plan a series of activities to keep a newcomer engaged for the first three months.

Let's use another example. Imagine that you notice members are vanishing after the third week. You might plan a ritual or some sort of graduation for members every third week of the month. You might write a post that mentions members by name, has a few details about them, and gives them access to specific forums within the community platform.

You also want to collect anecdotal data on what types of contributions members who became regulars in the community made compared with those who left. What was the difference? Were there particular discussions that those who became regulars participated in at each phase compared with those who

didn't become members? Can you place these contributions into categories? For instance, "*self-disclosure discussions,*" "*status-jockeying discussions,*" and "*conveying information discussions.*"

You can guide newcomers into participating in the types of discussions that are likely to keep them engaged in the community. In addition, was there anything else that regulars did which those that left didn't? Did they complete their profile? Upload a picture of themselves? Submit a story? Have a discussion with a community manager?

By doing this, you should be able to see which type of discussions and activities helped members progress through each stage. Some of this is undoubtedly subjective, and part of it is sheer luck, but it should be possible to review 100 members and get a fairly good idea of what turns a newcomer into a long-term community member.

Possible interventions

- **Reminders/notifications.** You might add or tweak your notification system. The notification system should be opt-out and remind members when there is a new response to their own contributions.

- **Guide to self-disclosure discussions/status-jockeying.** Guide the newcomers into self-disclosure or status-jockeying discussions. Try to get members interacting in discussions in which they have an emotional stake and are thus likely to return frequently to see the responses to their own contributions. This helps create the habit of visiting the community.

- **Rituals/graduations.** You might use a ritual/graduation for newcomers after they have made a certain number of contributions or been an active member for a certain period of time. This might be increased levels of access to the community, a detailed sheet of inside jokes, mentions in news posts, or a listing in the community history for that month.

- **Buddy systems.** In mature communities, you may have an insider group or base of volunteers with whom you can develop a buddy system—members take responsibility for building relationships with newcomers and keep them active and happy within the community for the first few months.

- **Web reputation system.** For mature communities, you can add web reputation systems, scoring/ranking systems that make an individual's implicit reputation explicit. This motivates newcomers to increase their standing and existing members to continue participating to maintain their standing.

- **Events/activities.** You might develop a series of events for newcomers to participate in—quizzes, beginner-level guides to the topics, or even in-person meetings for newcomers.

- **Newcomer threads/forums.** In addition to newcomer threads and forums, you might also initiate threads solely for newcomers to ask questions regulars might consider basic (or even dumb). You might also write content about newcomers.

- **Cultural education.** You can ensure newcomers get quality, positive, responses from their early contributions. Research shows that the initial response to a member's first post is a major factor in whether the user will make a second response.

- **Provide ownership opportunities.** One method to keep members engaged beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm is to facilitate opportunities for members to take ownership over areas of the site by writing a regular column for the community, conducting interviews, taking responsibility for responding to certain discussion topics. This should only be enabled after (x) months of membership, or after (x) contributions to the community (the figure should vary depending upon when members are dropping out of the community).

You can extend this process further, say from six months to a year, from members who make five contributions a month to those who make 50. Just remember that the goal is optimiza-

tion of the process and, as I have said, optimization of your own time to achieve the best possible results for your community.

Beyond a certain point, further optimization of the process won't be the best use of your time. The secret is to find that sweet spot.

STAGE 5: LONG-TERM MEMBERS TO VOLUNTEERS

If you work on the assumption that every member could become a volunteer for your community, then it's worthwhile tracking how many *do* become volunteers.

Community volunteers are the most effective means of scaling the online community. Community volunteers can take on a variety of roles: initiating and responding to discussions, inviting people to join the community, creating content, keeping members engaged, moderating discussions, promoting the community externally, hosting activities/events for the community and collecting/analyzing data.

As the community manager's time is limited, recruiting volunteers provides the most scalable method of doing more with the same amount of time. Recruiting a number of volunteers should be an integral and ongoing part of the community manager's role—and certainly one worth tracking.

Keep in mind that the number of community members who become volunteers will be low; almost certainly in the low single-percentage digits compared to the number of members in the community. This is not a cause for alarm, but rather an opportunity.

By increasing the number of volunteers you can significantly increase the level of growth, activity, and sense of community. Your role shifts from managing members to managing volunteers. You can get far more done. You can increase the overall

energy of the community. It's not all you now, it's a diverse collection of people running the community.

How we gather this data

This is the easiest data to gather; look at the number of regular members in the community and the number of listed volunteers. In most communities, the community manager knows the volunteers personally. In larger communities, it should be possible to list members by their access level within the community platform (e.g. 128 members have level 2 access).

The key metric isn't the absolute number of volunteers (although that can be interesting) but rather the number of volunteers to the absolute number of active members. You want to know the number to whom you have given advanced access levels in the community compared with the total number of returning visitors to your community (or if your platform can list the number of active members within the past month, this figure is an adequate substitute).

This will mean bringing data from two different sources into an Excel spreadsheet (and then using that spreadsheet to create a graph)—isn't data fun?

Clearly, there is a danger that a negative attribute could be construed as a positive. For example, while you want the number of volunteers to active members to be as high as possible, you shouldn't automatically assume that an increase is a good thing.

If the number of volunteers remained constant and the number of active members plummeted, you would see a sudden, sharp, rise in your ratio. Before you whoop for delight, be aware that this is terrible. It means your volunteers are either doing a bad job, or something very wrong has happened in the community. It's most likely your volunteers are failing.

On the other hand, if your volunteers do a terrific job and the number of active members in your community *increases*, the ratio would drop. This means your volunteers are doing great, but you're not recruiting enough volunteers to keep pace with the community.

It's also worthwhile tracking the volunteers-to-growth ratio, volunteers-to-activity, and volunteers-to-sense of community, all of which will provide a good indicator of how your volunteers are doing in each area.

Key metrics:
- Regular members to volunteers (advanced access levels)
- Number of volunteers to sense of community
- Number of volunteers to growth

Possible interventions

- **Add a *get more involved* area.** Most communities would benefit from an area within the community that would allow motivated members to get more involved.

- **Proactively seek out people who make contributions to get more involved.** If someone makes a series of outstanding contributions to a community, you might want to contact them to see if they can become a regular volunteer for your community on that topic.

- **Have volunteers coach additional volunteers.** You might get your existing volunteers to recruit and coach new volunteers. This is ideal because it takes you out of the process.

- **Headhunt volunteers.** You might also personally headhunt the members you want to become volunteers. Some might naturally show higher levels of maturity and expertise than others.

- **Host an application process.** In one of my first communities, we had an application process for volunteers. It was competitive. Members had to explain a little about

themselves, their motivation and their experience for the position. It also had the effect of gaining better volunteers.

Content

Many of us have the wrong idea about the role of content within an online community. You can waste a lot of time trying to create what you think is the 'best' content for your online community. Fortunately, however, there is a better way.

My first proper community management job was working for the Virtual Gamers Association. This was an organization of video game centers, where people would come to play games against each other using PCs, PlayStations, or Nintendos. For the first few months, I would spend hours every day scanning the various video game news sites and trying to write the most informative post.

Not only did it consume a lot of my time, it was demotivating and failed to provoke a big reaction from the target audience. Most of the target audience read the same news sites as I did and didn't want to wait a little longer to get the news from me (we are pretty fixed in our news-consumption habits). Worse still, it put our site in competition with the larger news sites, which we wanted to promote us.

About three months in, I was short on time and needed to get a news post up as soon as possible. One of our gaming centers had recently held a competition, so I wrote about the matches and got a quote from the winner.

Within six hours, that post had gained 37 comments (the average was one or two). The people involved in the event had participated; other gamers had chimed in with their views, and even better, one of the bigger sites had mentioned it as

a snippet, which sent more traffic our way. I had stumbled across the biggest secret about community content.

From then on, nearly all my content was about the community. I did interviews with members, I wrote about upcoming events, I wrote about what members were achieving both inside and outside of the community. I let members submit their own columns and posts too. I even wrote a few gossip columns (trust me, be careful with that).

The result was instant. Members began visiting every day to see if they or their friends had been mentioned. This site became the local newspaper for my community. Our members spent a lot of time responding to discussions. The number of return visits and activity skyrocketed.

This brings us to the fundamental rule of community content:

THE BEST CONTENT FOR A COMMUNITY IS CONTENT ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

The role of content is not to provide the latest information. That's a cutthroat business that will take up a lot of your time and (even if you are able to succeed, which is tough), won't produce big results. The role of content is not even to inform individuals about the subject or the organization.

Content about the topic or the organization encourages people to read and not participate. You're creating a content site instead of a community.

Think of your content as the equivalent of a local community newspaper that tells you what's going on in the local community. The content area of an online community is the same. It tells you what's happening in the local online community.

This means you need to make it about people *in* the community.

The role of the community newspaper

As modern communities become increasingly large and diverse, people use the local community newspaper to integrate themselves into smaller, more homogenous communities.

As the internet becomes a busier, anonymous, place, people need 'local newspapers' to integrate themselves into groups of individuals. Local newspapers help individuals to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to a group of likeminded people.

Individuals judge the importance of all but the very largest news stories by its impact upon their group. While events such as 9/11 are considered important by all within the country and around the world simply via its unsurpassed coverage, any less major stories will be given different levels of importance depending upon the impact they have upon the local communities.

However, people need a narrative to gauge the impact such news has upon their community. The local newspaper performs a key role as a facilitating agent for the community, including building consensus, highlighting conflict, and providing a reference group for others in the community.

Establishing a social order and narrative

Newspapers also perform less-deliberate roles. For example, newspapers (and all media) also establish a social order among individuals within the community. Those who are frequently mentioned are considered important and worthy of constant coverage. These individuals are at the top of the social ladder. Those who are never mentioned rank towards the bottom of the social ladder.

Individuals who undertake noteworthy activities or are involved in significant events will receive increasing levels of attention. While this may merit negative as much as positive attention, it still provides an effective motivation for soliciting positive contributions to a community.

The joy of a local newspaper is any individual can be mentioned for any remarkable action. Readers never know when they will find friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family mentioned in the paper. They also know that there is a high probability that they, too, are likely to one day be featured in the newspaper.

The local newspaper puts the many different facets of a community into a narrative and sets the agenda. The newspaper establishes which news and people are most important. It creates a consensus around the community and provides the means for individuals to be able to follow the *ongoing story* of the community.

Inform and entertain

Community newspapers do provide a range of relevant information, from upcoming events and job advertisements to the latest topical news and a summary of what has recently taken place within the community.

For example, if you have a community event coming up, that would merit attention (it doesn't even have to be your event—just an event that will be of interest to members).

A community newspaper will also provide entertainment. This may include guest columns, gossip, interviews, reviews, previews and other elements most commonly associated with newspapers. The entertainment value of newspapers is not to be underestimated. Newspapers without such content struggle to achieve and sustain high levels of readership.

Social

Finally, a local newspaper tells the local community what to think about issues. Many people struggle to make up their mind, even when they have personal experience with the issue. They seek out the opinions of others and try to be on the right side of the community majority.

The community newspaper is both the consensus of community opinion and the determinant for the community's opinion. While this may appear subversive, such a role is beneficial to a community. It provides a community with a shared emotional connection, which is vital for a strong sense of community.

Local newspapers play a major role in the success of communities. I believe that online communities need a similar newspaper element. Like many thriving hyperlocal communities today, a community needs a newspaper that is focused on telling the stories of people in the community.

Such an online newspaper will provide information for members, establish a social order and facilitate strong bonds and heightened sense of community. Online community managers should look to local community newspapers for content inspiration and avoid getting drawn into the *industry news* trap.

So the goal of content is:

- **Creates a narrative for the community to allow members to follow what's happening.** If they miss a few days, they can read the content to catch up.

- **Provides a reason for members to visit the community every day or frequently.** They can see if they or their friends have been mentioned.

- **Develops a sense of community among members.** It provides a unique identity. Members get to learn more about other

people like them. They feel they are going through an experience as part of a group as opposed to being alone.

- **Establishes a social order among the community and highlights the top members.** This social order challenges people to continually participate positively in the community to maintain or increase their status.

- **Subtly influences the community by emphasizing activities that you wish to encourage.** If you want more members participating in a specific discussion, you can write content about that discussion.

PRINCIPLES OF GREAT CONTENT

Initiate discussions and activities

The catch of making the content about the community is you need things in the community to write about. This often means you need to initiate those things. You might, for example, initiate a discussion within the community and then write a news post about the discussion.

Or you might initiate and write about an event (see the events and activities section on page 163). If you're short on inspiration, you can pick up a local newspaper and see the types of stories they write about.

Use a consistent tone of voice and frequency

The content of the community should be written in a voice that reflects the personalities of members in the community as reflected in your audience analysis. This tone of voice may be caring, sardonic, sarcastic, casual, laid back, formal or a cross between several categories. Try to avoid the content sounding like a corporate press release.

Content must also be published at a regular frequency. For most online communities, content will be posted daily. Don't make three posts one day and then be absent for a few days.

There are many types of content. Each type falls within a category such as interviews. The community manager needs to identify what categories are most popular and then specifically which elements within the category are most popular.

Mention people by name

Community content must mention names of people in the community in up to 90% of stories. If you read any local newspaper, you will overwhelmingly see stories that mention people by name. In fact, local newspapers know to cram as many mentions of people in the community as possible.

They do this because they know that the more names mentioned, the more people are likely to read the newspaper to see if they or people they know are mentioned. Mentioning names of individuals affected by the news or writing about specific people increases readership of the content considerably and enhances the sense of community among members.

Mentioning names also spotlights members, which helps encourage desired behavior and develop a social order among members. A social order is required for individuals to compare themselves against each other. A social order provides people with icons they aspire to be and a means of tracking progress vis-à-vis those to whom they feel superior.

Aspiration and spotlighting

Members who are frequently featured in community content are quickly established at the top of the community's social ladder. This will usually be those who have made the best contributions, made the most contributions or have some other unique attribute that distinguishes them from other community members.

They are, essentially, being rewarded for their contributions with increased visibility and status. By showcasing these individuals, you're inviting others to also make quality contributions so they too can be *spotlighted*.

These individuals become the reference point toward which others aspire. You can see this effect in celebrity and fashion magazines. Readers aspire to imitate various aspects, from hairstyles, to fashion, to achievements and even the negative behavior of the celebrities featured in these magazines

You should use content to give individuals who have made contributions that you want others to emulate a high level of exposure. This spotlighting (showering attention upon specific people) is one of the key influences a community manager retains over the community.

The clear challenge is determining which members deserve to be spotlighted in the community.

Developing a recognition criteria

A criterion for recognition is a set of rules that determine which individuals to spotlight. In some communities, this will be determined by a reputation system rather than subjective judgments.

This criterion may include:

- **Excellent contribution.** A user who makes an outstanding contribution to the community should be featured.
- **Number of contributions.** A member who has made a certain number of contributions within the community might be regularly mentioned within news posts, interviews and other types of content.
- **Veteran members.** Members who have been registered for a long period of time may be mentioned more frequently than newcomers. This rewards those who have registered early and ensures veterans don't feel 'crowded out' by newcomers.

- **Expertise in a specific area.** Members who have high levels of expertise in a particular area may be mentioned in reference to such fields.
- **Newcomers.** It is useful to mention some newcomers to the community. This is likely to increase goodwill towards newcomers and help newcomers become emotionally invested in the success of the community.
- **Subjective.** It is also useful for the community manager to have both subjective and ad-hoc reasons for giving attention to members. For example, the community manager might decide to spotlight a member with a unique personality or in a remarkable circumstance.

Using data, you can track quality contributions, the number of contributions, or a number of *good* contributions within a specific area.

Your criterion will not be a static set of rules but a continuous development. As members contribute news posts, have been members for longer and have made increasingly outstanding contributions, the spotlight bar will continue to rise.

THE SOCIAL ORDER DEBATE

Content establishes a social order that encourages both aspiration and a sense of superiority over those below. Although this sense of superiority may seem negative, it performs a fundamental role in retaining members.

A sense of superiority over others is a way of retaining members and helping members judge where they stand within a community. It may sound manipulative and conniving; certainly I've seen some people push back on this. Yet this process helps the community in the long run. All social groups need some form of social order to function.

Members need to compare themselves against each other. If they only see those standing higher, they might decide that

the social ladder is impossible to climb within this community. By being able to gate their progress either up or down the ladder they are *more* likely to participate.

CONTENT CATEGORIES

A broad variety of content may be used for an online community, including the following:

News

News is the key source of content and primarily features what is happening within the community.

There are two types of news: news about the community and news about the community's broader ecosystem. Community news covers updates that may include:

- **Latest events.** Organized both inside and outside of the community, these events can include challenges, competitions, online live-chats, offline meet-ups and broader events taking place within the ecosystem.
- **New members.** News posts might be used to welcome new members and help convert these members into regular participants.
- **Latest/most popular discussions.** News can highlight the latest and most popular discussions taking place within the community, including links to where people can participate.
- **Member contributions.** News articles written by members or excellent pieces of advice and insights for other members.
- **News about members.** News about members of the community might include their latest achievements such as having a child, getting married, being promoted to a new job/starting their own business.
- **Update on a relevant issue.** If the community is fundraising or participating in a specific cause, it should provide regular updates to members of the community.

Announcements

Similar to news, the content will periodically include announcements from the company or about the community highlighting some major news or change that will impact members of the community. An announcement might, for example, be the launch of a new sub-group within the community or a call for volunteers to participate in the community.

Feature articles

Community content should include more in-depth feature articles such as:

- **Interviews.** Interviews should be a regular feature to shine an immediate spotlight upon members of the community. These interviews may be with either members of the community, those from the organization, or VIPs from within the community's ecosystem.

- **Analysis.** Content may include in-depth analysis on relevant issues within the community. Issues ideally should be based upon data and evidence.

- **Stories/articles.** Major sources of articles are stories about members of the community and information articles on an interesting topic. Stories might involve how members became interested in the community, what other members think of the subjects and their achievements. Articles can concern any topic that the community might have an interest in. This might be a profile of a relevant company or individual, an overview of a major issue or a narrow focus on something specific.

- **Surveys.** A community may undertake a survey and collect research that it can later publish as a feature article.

- **Reviews/previews.** The community may publish reviews or previews of upcoming events, products, services or happenings within the ecosystem.

Opinion/guest columns

- **Thoughts.** Members of the community, the community manager or people within the organization may write thought posts on their passions. This should rotate between different people to sustain a high level of interest. Members who contribute consistently good ideas should be invited to provide a weekly column for the community.

- **Predictions.** The community manager or others may create prediction posts about an upcoming topic. Or, better, the community manager may ask 10 to 20 community members to make predictions on a topical relevant issue. These predictions can then be presented as a single feature.

Classifieds

- **Jobs.** A community might have regular content about jobs within the sector and people on the move within that organization's sector. The jobs section can also highlight companies that are hiring.

- **Buying/Selling.** The content might also include members who are trading items in the community in a weekly or monthly round-up.

Promotions and advertisements

- **A community may periodically offer a promotion for members that is paid for by the advertiser or the organization.** An article can then cover the winner's experiences.

Statements from the community

An online community must assert itself within its ecosystem. It needs both its members and other individuals within the ecosystem to appreciate its rising status as an influential player.

One popular source of content, therefore, will be regular statements from the community on topical issues. These should be quickly written by a small group and put to the com-

munity for feedback within a few hours. This content should then be submitted to media publications in the sector.

Miscellaneous

A variety of other potential sources of content do not fit any of the categories above. These include content in different formats (videos, pictures, live-blogs, etc.) and uncommon content, such as a member of the year or collaborative statements.

User-generated content

It is essential that members have the opportunity to contribute content to the community. This allows them to feel a genuine sense of influence over the community and reduces the workload for the community manager. User-generated content will come via a regular core group of volunteers and through single contributions.

Communities should allow members to submit news (for approval), interviews, information about events, tip-offs, gossip and anything that may be construed as relevant to the community. The community manager may then either approve the topic, edit the article so it's suited for approval (and appears under the name of the member who submitted the article) or decide not to publish but thank the contributor and explain why it is not suitable.

User-generated content (excluding discussions) might also include photos and videos taken by the community managers or links to articles that a member feels others should read. The community needs an option or a channel through which members can submit this news.

CATEGORY REPETITION

Media channels have long embraced category repetition as a means for their content strategies. Category repetition re-

duces the workload, sets expectations and is finely targeted at a specific audience. The categories of content used for *Time* magazine and the *National Enquirer* are very different, for example.

Category repetition means that categories of content are repeated in every edition. A monthly magazine, for example, will frequently use a similar layout with very similar content. This content may include a combination of news articles followed by an exclusive interview, upcoming events, letters from readers, an exclusive preview/review, and a jobs section. These same categories will be present in every issue with only small alterations.

Category repetition trains the audience what to expect in each issue. Audiences expect and want familiarity in content. We also see this pattern in many television or radio shows, in which the content changes, but the categories of content remain relatively unchanged for months, or possibly years.

How many viewers/buyers of TV shows, magazines and newspapers would continue to purchase if they had little idea of what to expect? Category repetition provides the structure for the medium. The success of such a magazine/radio show/program depends as much upon the categories of content it uses as it does upon the content itself.

By embracing category repetition, these publications are also able to plan many months of content in advance and ensure they have the resources to produce such content by the required date.

Category repetition within the community

A community manager should also embrace category repetition. Such repetition provides members with a sense of stability in the community while also providing a motivation

to return to see what's new. Category repetition is a useful tool for recruiting volunteers and stimulating excitement about an upcoming event or activity in the community.

Category repetition ensures that infrequent events, genuine exclusives and other unique activities receive more interest. This content stands out among the usual categories and thus attracts more attention compared with categories that are used randomly or interchangeably.

Identifying the content categories

You must identify the categories of content you will consistently use within the community. Initially these may be based upon intuition, experience, elements that have worked in other communities within the community's broader ecosystem or by audience and sector analysis data indicating a preference for certain types of content.

Content categories most likely will include news articles, interviews, a regular feature series and either jobs, gossip, classifieds or opinion columns. As you recall, there are several sub-categories within each that the community manager may specifically adopt. You may also *rotate* categories based upon set interval periods.

Each category of content should be both quantitatively and qualitatively measured. The quantitative measurements include click-throughs, page views, average time on site and return visitors. From this data, the community manager will, over a period of several months, be able to isolate the most popular categories of content and make recommendations about what should be included in the future.

Qualitative data includes what appears in the comments, whether the content is mentioned elsewhere, and what impact the content appears to have had upon the community.

Rotation

With the exception of news about the community, content categories should be rotated after significant lengths of time to keep the format fresh. Repeating the same category for an extended period of time leads to both poor writing and less exciting material.

For example, the most exciting people to interview may already have been interviewed within the first few months. Or the best opinion column topics are likely to have been covered after six months.

When the content is rotated, the community manager is able to test out new ideas and allow, for example, new VIPs within the ecosystem to emerge or new topics to arise. Previously popular categories can later be reinstated.

The community manager should create a content calendar, use regular content series and encourage contributions from other members. Content should not be overly time-consuming to write. A short news post about activities taking place in the community is better than trying to get the latest news before anyone else.

Develop a content calendar

Many community managers fall victim to reactivity. As the community grows, urgent issues increasingly take priority over the community manager's work. Time spent on initiating activities, building relationships, recruiting members and creating content gradually diminishes in favor of responding to the urgent issues of the day.

However, these seemingly urgent issues are simply the most visible (such as an argument) as opposed to the most critical to community development.

In a recent survey of community managers, around half spent the *majority* of their time resolving conflicts or removing bad content. This is common among community managers who work without a clear agenda for each day.

Without a calendar, community managers are in danger of falling in to a reactive process of managing a community and not proactively developing the community. Another benefit of a calendar is that by scheduling content on a daily basis, you are forced to create content for each day.

Establish intervals

Your content calendar will repeat its categories at a consistent interval. You need to decide how long that interval is. For example, a monthly magazine has a simple interval period of one month. Yet this varies considerably depending upon the medium. Many newspapers have an interval of a single day.

Unlike media publications whose intervals were defined by their distribution restrictions, websites can choose any interval. Intervals may be daily, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly or even annually, but you can narrow these options down through process of elimination.

Daily intervals are ill-suited to an online community. Too much content would both overwhelm members and the community management team. Annual intervals are too long a time frame. It is impractical to plan out a calendar for an entire year. This is also true for bi-annually or quarterly. So decide if your calendar intervals will be weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly.

Your choice is largely based on the size of the community. For smaller communities, the intervals are likely to be weekly. As the community grows, the calendar will be repeated bi-weekly and, later, monthly. However, unlike many of the

community management principles I have covered, there are few fixed rules concerning the interval period.

Most interval periods are established as much by the organization's resources and forward planning as by characteristics of the community. Regardless of the length of the interval period set, it should remain consistent. An interval period of three months, followed by two weeks, followed by a further month will be confusing for the audience to follow and difficult to plan for.

Creating a calendar

A content calendar should identify not only the categories of content that will be used, but also the specific content that will feature within that category for that date.

You can look at both online and offline content produced within the sector to identify the most popular categories. This is easier to identify in online content by both the number of comments such categories receive and their placement upon the community platform. The inclusion of these categories is usually a good indicator in itself that they are popular with the audience.

From the categories of content listed below, identify which you will use on which days.

- News
- Announcements
- Feature articles
- Guest columns
- Classifieds
- Promotions
- Statements from the community
- Miscellaneous

For example, a calendar at a single-week interval may look like:

- **Monday:** Daily Community News + Feature interview with Mark Smith about (topic)
- **Tuesday:** Daily Community News + Opinion column from a community member (John Doe)
- **Wednesday:** Daily Community News + Promotion of live-chat about (topic)
- **Thursday:** Daily Community News + Feature interview with Jane Roddis (VIP)
- **Friday:** Promotions day (sponsors discount offer) + Welcome newcomers
- **Saturday:** Summary of the week
- **Sunday:** Preview of the week ahead

Remember that within each category are several sub-categories. News, notably, may be about the latest events, new members, new/popular discussions, unique contributions, member milestones/achievements or an update on a topical issue.

In the sample calendar above, the daily community news is a constant update of the latest activity. The other category features can be reused every week.

On a calendar with a monthly interval, categories such as newcomer of the month, member of the month, offline-meet up content, activity/challenge day may also appear. In addition, a major event will have a significant impact upon the calendar. Regular calendar events may be set aside to focus on building up excitement for the event and covering the event once it is in process.

Measuring content

So what do you need to measure? Whether content is successful and which types of content are most successful.

Key metrics
- Number of return website visitors to each item of content.
- Average time spent on each item of content.
- Number of times the content has been shared on other social media platforms.
- Familiarity with other members from the sense of community measurement.
- Average number of visits per member to the community within the past 30 days.

You want to discover which types of content gain the most visitors, the most time spent on the page (the article is fully read), the number of times it's shared externally (word of mouth), and whether members feel stronger levels of familiarity with other members.

Moderation

In the past, the entire role of community management was comprised of moderation. Moderation was defined as removing the "bad stuff." The moderator (usually the webmaster who created the site) would kick out the spammers, remove the off-topic posts, and resolve disputes.

Today we know that moderation is about far more than removing the bad stuff. Sure, it's important that your community is not overwhelmed with inappropriate material. But this is just one part of moderation. Moderation is better defined as facilitation. I especially like how Collins and Berge (1996) classify facilitation. They include the tasks:

1. **Pedagogical (intellectual task): to contribute unique expertise or insight within the content.** As a community manager, you have access to the company, a deeper understanding of the community, and/or experience within the topic.

2. **Social (friendly environment): to promote human relationships.** Also, to affirm and recognize input, provide opportunities to develop a sense of community, maintain the group as a unit and help members work together.

3. **Managerial (organizational, procedural, administrative): set the agenda for the community and overlook the managerial tasks, including managing the flow and direction of the discussion without participants.** Use meta-comments (comments about the discussions themselves) to remedy problems in context, norms, agenda, clarify, irrelevance and information overload.

4. **Technical: ensures participants are comfortable with the technology being used with the ultimate goal to make the technology transparent.**

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

For an organization-based community, moderation is an essential role. Without a moderator, the community may be attacked by spammers, be overwhelmed by conflict, be dominated by a small insider group, be legally liable for actions, burn out from activity, or overload members with information.

Spammers

Unmoderated communities are likely to fall victim to spammers, individuals or 'bots' (software scripts that automatically create many accounts on a website). Spammers post promotional messages to the annoyance of community members.

Spammers frequently overrun unmoderated communities. Spammers drown out the voice of genuine participants and sabotage any meaningful conversation. In recent years registration technology, such as asking registrants an obvious question a pre-programmed bot cannot answer (e.g. *What is Michael Jackson's surname?*), or including a code verification graphic bots cannot read, has helped prevent attacks from spammers.

However, few anti-spam processes can prevent real human beings from registering and spamming the community, and they can be highly efficient. Spammers often only need one response among millions to earn a profit.

Even the most sophisticated technology has not entirely been able to prevent spammers (bots or human) from entering a community and posting promotional messages. Therefore, a community moderator needs to be very aware of this problem and remove such messages quickly when they do appear.
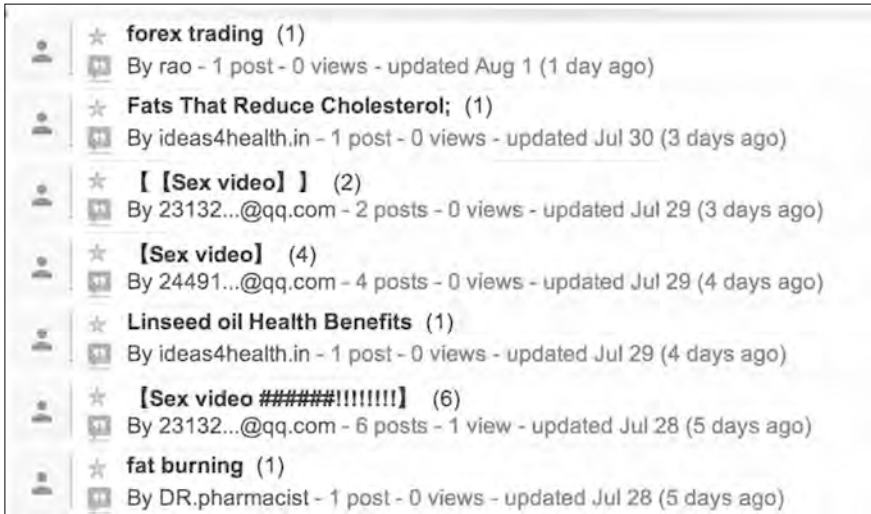
It doesn't take long for a community to be overrun with spammers.

Inappropriate material

The community might be infested with members who repeatedly post inappropriate material that isn't removed.

This material may include *flaming* comments (deliberately provocative attacks on individuals), publishing of off-topic messages to the wrong discussion boards, posting of pornography or illegal software, or thinly veiled messages from members promoting their own businesses.

Information overload

Information overload is an increasingly important concept both in the halls of academia and among street-smart practitioners. A community that becomes too difficult to follow will repel both new and existing members.

Jones et al. (2008) found empirical evidence that information overload constrained interaction. Most notably, they found

that 40 participants in an online conversation within 20 minutes was the maximum number that could be sustained.

Jones also found that as the volume of messages increases, users are:

1. More likely to respond to simpler messages.
2. More likely to end active participation.
3. More likely to generate simpler responses as the overloading of mass interaction grows.

A community moderator can help prevent information overload by dissipating activity more broadly into specific interest matters in the community or implementing a tighter moderation policy.

In communities that attract a large amount of activity, such as those listed on big-boards.com, a new discussion can appear and be pushed down off the screen within a matter of minutes. It becomes difficult for anyone to follow a discussion.

Lack of narrative

An unmoderated community lacks a narrative that members can follow. Similar to information overload, it becomes difficult to follow the discussions and individuals no longer feel they are experiencing the community in a similar way. For example, it may become difficult for members to know who and what is popular within a community at any given time.

A community moderator must help create that narrative within the community and provide structure to the daily discussions and debates.

Declining activity

A community moderator plays a major role in stimulating and sustaining discussions within a community. A community without a moderator can struggle to sustain a critical mass of

activity. Members are reluctant to participate in communities that do not appear active, yet activity cannot increase without their contributions. A dip in activity can become a downward spiral without a moderator to take corrective action.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

In addition to removing the obstacles I've described, you also need to encourage members to participate.

This means directly or indirectly stimulating and sustaining activity within the community. This can be done directly (initiating discussions, soliciting opinions to questions, messaging members to invite them to start a discussion) or through more psychological processes (highlighting specific activity, concentrating discussions, shaping motivational community guidelines, etc.).

Moderation activities that encourage participation include:

1. **Guiding members' contributions.** You can do this through both a welcome guide outlining what members should do in the community and a constitution defining acceptable rules of behavior.

2. **Ensuring social density (the amount of activity within a given area) is consistently high without being too high.** You need to dissipate activity when it becomes overwhelming in one area (by creating new areas for discussion, etc.) or concentrate activity when areas of the community become too sparse (removing/combining areas/topics).

3. **Stimulating, initiating, and sustaining discussions.** Proactively stimulating and responding to discussions also involves soliciting opinions from members and highlighting discussions you want members to participate in.

4. **Steering the direction of the community by giving prominence to discussions deserving of more attention.** This involves locking/unlocking threads, creating sticky threads, tweaking the dates or times threads are posted, and so forth.

Key metrics

- Total number of posts per month.
- Total number of active members (refer to active members from the growth section) per month.
- Total number of new discussions per month.

It is not possible to measure the quality of discussions or the steering of the community by any method that isn't entirely subjective. Therefore, I recommend that an independent person is responsible for assessing quality. If you include it as evidence, clear examples should be used that demonstrate where the quality has or hasn't improved.

CONFLICTS AND ANTAGONISTIC MEMBERS

Resolving conflicts and calming antagonistic members can be a time-consuming process. Many community moderators spend the majority of their time resolving disputes between members and complaints against members.

However, few community moderators excel at resolving conflicts, notably conflicts between groups, and many hesitate in removing members.

Community moderators therefore need a clear process to resolve conflicts and handle antagonistic members.

The benefits of conflicts

Conflict in a community does not necessarily hurt the community. Many conflicts between members help develop the community, highlight issues people are passionate about, and increase the sense of community between members.

Scott Peck (1990) identified four stages of community:

1. **Pseudo-community.** This is the first phase where members are keen to get along. Members are usually extremely polite and want to establish a pleasant social order.

2. **Chaos.** Conflict begins taking place between members. Members feel comfortable enough to assert themselves.
3. **Emptiness.** The community lacks a social order after a large number of fights.
4. **True community.** Members have established strong relationships and express themselves honestly and genuinely. Members have developed a process for handling conflicts.

Conflict is an essential stage of community progression. Almost all literature relating to stages of group development refers to a period of conflict in which members express themselves and establish a sense of order based upon an enhanced understanding of each other.

Debates are engaging. Members are likely to participate more frequently if they are involved in a heated debate. Contrary to popular belief that members will leave the community as a result of disputes, there is no evidence to support this theory.

Members are far more likely to leave because the community is boring, i.e. there is little to emotionally engage them. This is common in communities in which there is no friction between members or heavy-handed moderation of such conflicts. For example, if members are engaged in a heated debate about the greatest footballer of all time, a moderator should not lock the thread from further discussions.

When should the community moderator be involved?

A conflict only requires resolution when it becomes an obstacle to participation. Members may be assertive and direct in expressing their view on the topic, but personal attacks cross the line. "*You're wrong!*" is perfectly fine. "*You're a retard if you believe that*" provokes a personal argument, which has no place in the community and offers no benefit to the community.

Moderation is also necessary when the conflict spreads into other areas of the community or overwhelms other discussions. If the same conflict keeps arising, unprompted in a variety of threads, topics, groups or categories, the community manager must step in and resolve the issue between members.

Causes of conflicts

Several competing theories for causes of interpersonal conflict exist but one of the more popular separates the causes of conflicts into five distinct categories.

1. **Individual characteristics.** Conflicts caused by character traits that are prone to antagonizing the other person. For example, an extremely laid back person working on a project with someone with a high attention to detail.

2. **Team characteristics.** Attributes of one team versus the attributes of another. This occurs when the online communities attract segments that may conflict such as those with strong beliefs for and against religion, political groups, or methods of organizing activities.

3. **Project characteristics.** Projects with a tight deadline or that force individuals to work in a manner they are unaccustomed to are likely to provoke a conflict.

4. **Organizational characteristics.** When the organization has overlapping areas of responsibility and competition between individuals for senior positions, conflicts may arise.

5. **Environmental characteristics.** In environments with shortages of resources, adverse conditions, etc., conflicts are common.

Loss of status

Most causes of online conflicts are very similar. Members are concerned about losing status before other members. Because all discussions in a community are public, a disagreement can quickly provoke a defensive reaction that begins a downward

conflict spiral. Members feel the need to protect their status in the community.

Two members enter into a perceived zero sum game: for one to maintain status, the other has to lose. However, neither will ever feel defeated and online members will continue debating permanently.

Selecting a strategy to resolve the conflict

Five simple strategies for addressing conflict are:

- **Compromise.** Reach an agreement that meets the needs of both parties—difficult, but the ideal resolution.
- **Accommodation.** Persuading one party to accept the other's demands. You can persuade one member to take the high road or exchange the need to have the last word with a mention in an upcoming news post (or other form of recognition).
- **Avoidance.** Persuading one or both sides to leave the conflict behind without a defined resolution or distracting or otherwise preoccupying members.
- **Collaboration.** Both sides are persuaded to work together to find a resolution.
- **Competition.** Deliberately rejecting the view of one participant to satisfy the other might be appropriate in a conflict between a newcomer and a regular.

Resolving a conflict

Once a member has sparked a conflict that turns personal (or dominates discussions outside of the topic), the community manager should intervene to achieve a resolution.

The community manager must determine which conflict resolution technique to use. Not all of these strategies are created equal. Accommodation and compromise are the most common, with collaboration and competition the least com-

mon conflict resolution strategies. Avoidance may serve as only a temporary solution if there are simmering tensions that are not resolved.

To resolve a conflict, you need to interact with all members concerned by e-mail or personal message (not by public discussion). Explain that the conflict is harming the community and it needs to end. Use an e-mail with a cc to all concerned and see if they can chat between themselves and resolve the issue.

You may then create an e-mail outlining the issue and suggesting options the participants may agree on. Each can then reply with their own concerns until they have found a resolution.

Rig the game against the participants

You might suspend both members from participating in the community until they have resolved the conflict. This uses basic game theory to rig the game against the two participants. Members who cannot participate in a community until they have resolved differences have a force compelling them to resolve their conflict.

Escalation against antagonistic members

Many community managers are either too slow or too fast to remove antagonistic members. They either remove the antagonistic member without fully realizing the role this individual plays within the community, or they spend copious amounts of time trying to convert the antagonist into a happy member.

But antagonistic members aren't always bad. They can provoke discussions, highlight topics that other members were hesitant to address, put forward opposing (if unpopular) viewpoints, and prevent *groupthink* in communities. Communities where everyone agrees and gets along are dull.

Even the most antagonistic members can unite the community against them. This sounds crazy (and I've received plenty of criticism for it), but a community united against a few individuals can actually derive benefits.

The question you need to ask is *Does this antagonistic member kill or boost discussions?*

Antagonistic members might not be breaking any rules, but may still have to go simply by virtue of squelching every discussion they participate in. Otherwise, antagonistic members should be allowed to stay because they have a beneficial impact upon the community.

Don't fall into the reactivity trap. Don't get sucked in to spending hours of your time trying to deal with antagonistic members. Make quick decisions and take quick actions.

I often offer clients a six-step escalation process:

1. **Do nothing.** This is my favorite step. It doesn't require much work. If neither the number of participating members nor the quantity of contributions is declining, let it slide.

2. **Reason/befriend/distract.** If the antagonistic member is clearly a problem, you react in one of three ways. First, if it's likely they don't realize they're antagonizing members (this is surprisingly common, usually a personality issue), explain they need to tone their language down because members have been complaining. If they have a genuine grievance or concern, try to ask them what the real problem is and how you can help solve it. Finally, if they are focused upon one particular issue, distract them by giving them a column, or responsibility for a certain topic to express their viewpoint.

3. **Suspend.** If none of the above works, suspend the member and explain why. Suspension can range from three days (one day isn't enough) to one week.

4. **Ban.** If after a suspension they still cause problems, remove them from the community. Lock the account or ban the IP address from registering an account.

5. **Edit/repel.** Some members continue to register new accounts (or mask their IP address). They're intent on causing trouble. Some community managers get caught in a cat-and-mouse game. They ban the new accounts and others continue to spring up. An endurance game, it continues until one side gets tired. It's best left to volunteers. I've had some success by editing comments posted by the member to something softer (usually complimenting other members).

6. **Contact ISP/police.** If the member continues to return or is engaged in threatening/illegal activity, either contact their ISP or the police. You can jump straight to this stage if necessary.

CONCENTRATING AND DISSIPATING ACTIVITY

Your community needs to appear highly active without over-whelming members. This requires the moderator to maintain a careful community-balancing act of concentrating and dissipating activity.

This role is further complicated by the irritation members will feel if the website changes too frequently. Members prefer familiarity in their surroundings. A community that changes its structure too frequently will confuse and irritate members.

The challenge is to balance activity without changing the structure more frequently than necessary.

The activity principle

Another aspect of the moderation role is to sustain consistent levels of social density through the community platform. If one region becomes too popular, it becomes difficult for new-comers and regulars to follow. Over time, a smaller number of members account for increasingly large number of posts.

In this situation, you need to break the community into distinct groups based upon strong common interests. You can use the demographics, habits, or psychographic data to identify clusters of members within the platform who might like

a smaller group or forum category within the platform dedicated to that topic.

If any smaller forums grow large enough, it might even make sense to develop a community platform solely for this audience. The Rock And Roll Tribe recently launched a new community Pop Geek Heaven for those interested in pop. It was clearly popular within the existing community so they created a place for it. CoinTalk recently launched StampExchange, a community for those interested in stamps.
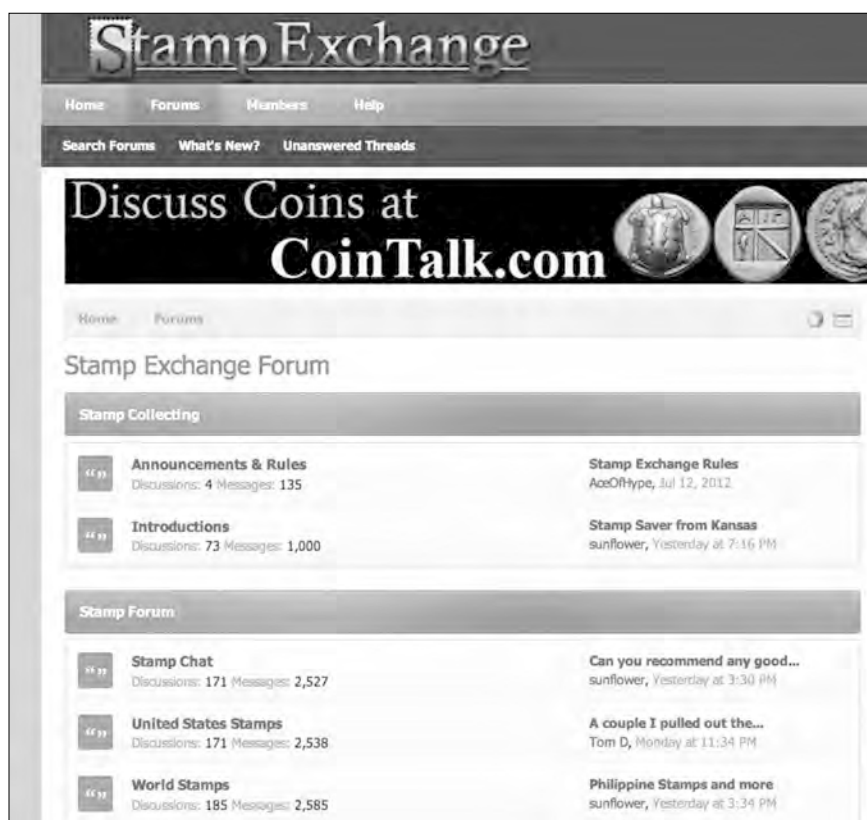
StampExchange

Concentrating activity

Many online communities fall victim to having activity spread thinly across too many categories or groups. This causes several problems. First, the community platform feels empty, which dissuades potential contributors from making a post in the belief fewer people will read and respond to their contribution.

DigMyDrive

This sense of sparseness will also impact the sense of community that members feel with one another. A thin community will appear less successful and members will be less inclined to assume the community's group identity. Members of a genuine community are participating as a contribution to the group's future success. Activity begets further activity, inactivity begets further inactivity.

Also, members will be confused about where to post. The more options there are, the more difficult it is for members to understand where they should post a category. The member has to make a tougher decision. In an advanced community,

this is less of a problem. In a community with a low level of activity, it can severely reduce the number of posts.

Finally, posts are less likely to receive a response. Members would have to spend a greater amount of time browsing through mostly inactive categories to find the posts to respond to. This decreases the likelihood of members bumping into each other in their digital discussions.

Slow expansion

At the launch of the community, the number of areas in which posts can be made should be restricted to a mere few, perhaps just one. Only after the community has expanded and information overload is a likely issue should the community moderator dissipate this activity.

An excellent example is the East Dulwich case study. At the launch of the community, there were relatively few categories for members to participate in. As the community grew, so did the number of categories to accommodate what members in the community were doing.

The East Dulwich Forum at launch.

This was the East Dulwich community at its launch. The num-

ber of categories is heavily restricted to focus activity within key areas.

As the community grew, so did the number of activities within the community.
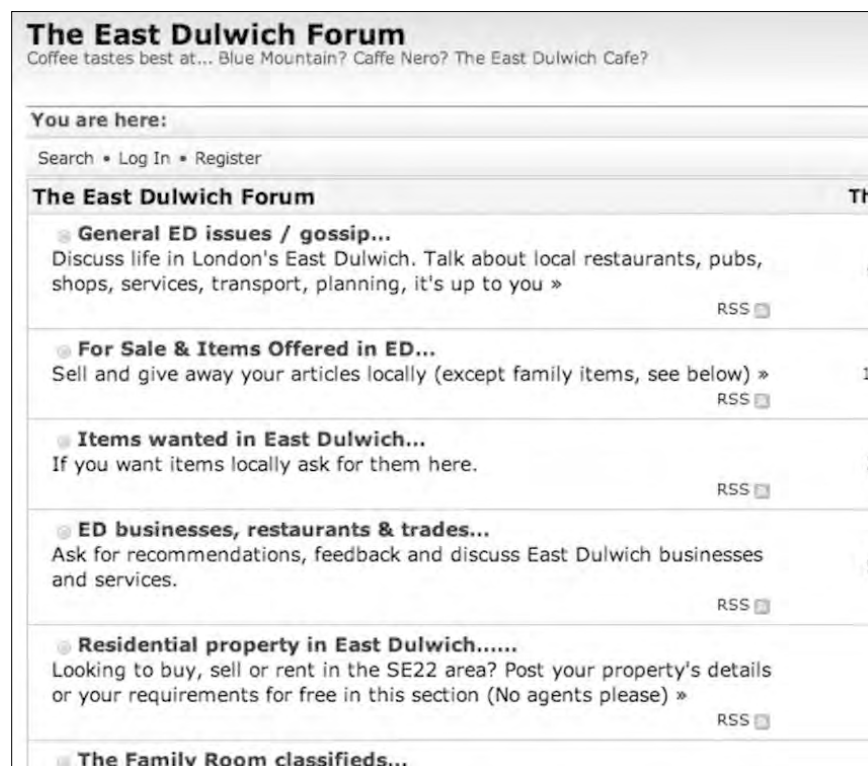
The East Dulwich Forum after growth.

Remove and reduce quiet or inactive areas

You should remove or combine quiet areas of the community, where possible, into related groups. If there are barely active groups for members from Romania, Lithuania, Russia and Czech Republic in the community, you could combine them into a more active Eastern Europe group.

But what if Poland is a very active group? Should it also be combined into the Eastern Europe group?

The answer is no. Do not infringe upon a highly active group (or category). It may be perceived as an attack on their group identity. Members are free to join the Eastern Europe group if they like, but it's a decision they can make without interference. The majority will prefer to retain their own group identity.

FireArms created sub-communities for every state in the USA regardless of popularity. States with a high number of members such as Texas are listed alphabetically below states such as Rhode Island, Maine, and Hawaii.

Forum	Latest Thread		
South Dakota Gun Forum South Dakota Gun Forum - Forums for South Dakota gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to South Dakota.	Looking to get into shooting by maso157 07-06-2012 06:48 PM	2	24
Tennessee Gun Forum Tennessee Gun Forum - Forums for Tennessee gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Tennessee.	Coming to Gatlinburg by rsfrid 05-18-2012 10:08 PM	7	36
Texas Gun Forum Texas Gun Forum - Forums for Texas gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Texas.	Outdoor range - Austin by jln370 07-26-2012 04:25 AM	44	271
Utah Gun Forum Utah Gun Forum - Forums for Utah gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Utah.	suggestion on where to move? by Cat1870 07-23-2012 01:00 AM	7	77
Vermont Gun Forum Vermont Gun Forum - Forums for Vermont gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Vermont.	The Green Mountain State by shadow38 07-23-2012 11:07 PM	1	12
Virginia Gun Forum Virginia Gun Forum - Forums for Virginia gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Virginia.	Gun show at dulles expo by cvia 07-29-2012 12:22 PM	16	80
Washington Gun Forum Washington Gun Forum - Forums for Washington gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to Washington.	Where are the WA members? by JustinM 07-29-2012 05:18 AM	5	59
West Virginia Gun Forum West Virginia Gun Forum - Forums for West Virginia gun and firearm enthusiasts to plan shooting events get togethers and discuss Firearms and 2nd Amendment topics related to West Virginia.	7.65 x 54 argentine ammo for... by reddawg2001 07-17-2012 09:42 PM	4	33
Wisconsin Gun Forum Wisconsin Gun Forum - Forums for Wisconsin gun and firearm	Where in Wisconsin you from? by MiguelAngel	2	51

FireArmsTalk

It would be prudent for FireArms to create sub-communities when there is a clear demand for such a category. Other states could be included in a Northeast category. Meanwhile, Texas itself may need further sub-categories due to its sheer size.

Few communities embrace this approach, however, because they fear it appears disorganized. This is to their detriment. The quest for neat, parallel categories is at odds with the natural evolution of group identity. Do not be inclined to neatly categorize members at the expense of their own group identities. Let these group identities flourish in whatever form makes most sense.

Identifying friendship groups

Another approach to develop a community is to identify friendship groups that are forming within the community and create places for them to talk. These may be open or private. Give them a unique, relevant name. The most successful communities are filled with forums and groups named "The London Shoreditch gang," "The 3am insomniacs club," or "Mike and Joe's freeze-flower forum" not "General Chat," "Advice," or "Classifieds."

These names may make little sense to outsiders but create a strong sense of community among insiders. If you understand the name, it's because you're a member of the community. This increases the sense of identity and bonds between members. Members are more likely to feel ownership over an area of the community.

By embracing a bottom up approach to dissipation, the community manager can be sure that areas of the site will be popular with members and maintain a consistent level of social density throughout the community.

Identify popular topics

Create a new category for popular topics within the community. Identify topics either through their popularity, the frequency with which they are discussed, or their relevance to community members.

The community moderator should carefully watch which topics within a community gain the biggest response. For example, if a frequent stream of people ask novice questions about the topic, the community moderator could create a separate place within the community where newcomers can feel comfortable asking questions and members can go to answer them.

Another example might be the controversial issues you identified in the audience analysis. These issues are likely to consume a lot of discussion within a general thread, so the community moderator might create a unique category for each of these issues.

Identify experts and influencers

A final method of dissipating activity is to identify experts and influencers within the community and create sections that they can run. These people have the authority to bring others with them. They can set the agenda for discussions, moderate discussions and enjoy the responsibility that comes with having direct control over an area of the community.

Experts and influencers can be identified either via the quality of their contributions, the quantity of their contributions or the response to their contributions from others. If the community platform uses online reputation systems, influencers can be quickly identified.

Once a new category/group has been created, the moderator should promote it via the daily news story and an e-mail to

members of the community to participate. You should, where possible, also transfer existing discussions on the topic to this forum category.

New groups take a bit of time to get going. Take care to ensure the community reaches the critical mass stage of the community development process prior to developing new groups.

Initiating and sustaining discussions

In the early stages of community development, you will need to initiate most of the discussions yourself. You therefore need to initiate discussions that will engage your members.

There are three types of discussions:

1. **Convey information.** People interact to exchange information with one another. This is the rarest of the three interactions and often misidentified as the most valuable by organizations aiming to develop a community.

2. **Bond with others.** This refers to all conversations that lack purpose, but increase the sense of kinship between members, like chitchat between friends that leads to greater familiarity. When two individuals meet they will commonly interact through safe topics and try to identify a common interest. Through such bonding discussions, members will increasingly disclose information about themselves and gradually trust, and be trusted, by other community members.

3. **Status-jockeying.** Similar to bonding, people interact to defend or increase their status. This is common among existing members, and isn't necessarily bad; having an established pecking order is good for community structure.

The challenge is to initiate the right balance of discussions. A good adjusted balance would be one-third bonding, one-third conveying information, and one-third status.

CoinTalk discussions

Intervention

By measuring what types of discussions generate the most posts, you can subtly shift the balance in that favor. This might mean initiating more discussions in that category or bumping/post-dating conversations in the more popular types of discussions.

However, be careful to pay attention to the overall number of responses to all discussions. If you shift the balance too far, the overall number of discussions may fall. While, say, status-jockeying discussions might be the most popular type, if all discussions were status-jockeying, the community itself would become tiresome and participation would fall.

You need to track the overall number of discussions to ensure that this doesn't decline while adjusting the balance of discussions.

Initiating discussions

You can now also use this data to initiate discussions that are likely to appeal to members. Identify which members are really passionate, then ask members to give their opinions or share their own experiences on the topic. You can even ask hypothetical questions.

Examples of possible bonding/status discussions

Common popular discussions in online communities include:

1. **What is your favorite _____? Ask members to list their favorite experiences, objects, or people concerning the community's topic.** It's open-ended and allows for every individual to participate.

2. **What is your average day like? People love to talk about themselves.** We also like to compare our lives to the lives of others. A question along these lines will usually provoke a number of responses.

3. **What do you think about _____? People are keen to express their views on relevant issues; however, they are less likely to ask for the opinions of others.** The community manager can initiate a discussion that asks members to express their opinion on a topical issue and summarize responses they receive.

4. **What advice would you give to someone who _____? Asking for advice is a popular approach to increasing participation.** People like to share what they know. This is a status-jockeying discussion. It also provides a useful vault of information for members to explore.

5. **Can anyone recommend _____? Like the advice discussion above, this encourages status-jockeying as members compete to provide their best recommendations.**

6. **What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you while _____? Discussions that ask members to recount a memorable personal experience are excellent for bonding.** By sharing this information, members are more

likely to like each other. These discussions are also interesting for others to read.

7. **Can anyone fix _____? Present a difficult problem and ask members to submit their solutions.** This is a status-jock-eying discussion in which members try to solve the challenge better than others for increased status in the community.

8. **What is the best/worst _____? This is another common post calling for people's opinions on a topic and may be a sub-category within the community's overall scheme.** Questions may refer to equipment, experiences, companies, or products.

9. **Who do you most admire _____? These popular discussions invite members to identify the individuals within the community's sector whom they most admire.** This is useful not only for increasing participation within a community but also for identifying individuals to interview in the community and gathering interview questions.

10. **Is (x) really better than (y)? Identify a controversial issue and use it to spark discussion in the community.** This should be a discussion members will have a split opinion on. It can later be summarized into a content topic within the community.

11. **If you weren't _____would you _____? Create a hypothetical situation and ask members how they would react to the situation.**

12. **Who/What are your top five _____? Ranking is addictive.** Ask members to rank their top five anything. This may lead to an overall ranking for that subject within the community.

13. **How would you handle (topical issue)? If your members were in charge, how would they handle a topical issue in your sector?**

14. **What _____do you use? This discussion is relevant in almost all online communities.** People can compare the benefits of the products/services/equipment that they use. This can also be included as a profile question.

15. **Does anyone know how to_____? Does anyone know provokes interest, and the how to can be broad or specific.** People are likely to participate.

16. **Has anyone tried _____? Again, this is a broad question letting the community moderator stimulate a discussion on the topic of their choosing.** Both a bonding and status-jockeying discussion.

17. **Is _____right about _____? Take someone's stance on a topical issue and throw it open to comment by the entire community.** This can prove an excellent channel to engage journalists within a community and solicit opinions from members that can be used to create a statement/response from the community.

18. **Is it ever ok to _____ Another type of hypothetical question, asking members about ethics will stimulate a high level of debate and self-disclosure.**

19. **What should every newcomer know about _____? This is a fantastic thread for newcomers within the community.** It allows members to provide feedback directly to newcomers looking for quality information. These discussions are ideal to be made into permanent sticky threads.

20. **Share your pictures/top tips here.** Sharing advice and pictures can be an easy win for stimulating activity. Try it. I suspect you will find it easy to gain lots of valuable insights.

Your mileage with these prompts will vary. The key is to build discussions around topics that you know members are very passionate about.

Guidelines

It is also possible to optimize the guidelines for the community. However, it's first important to realize that only a tiny number of members read your current guidelines. They have little influence upon member behavior. No amount of tweaking the content of the guidelines will change the behavior of members.

Worse still, the members who read the guidelines are those least likely to break them. Yet members need to know how to behave in the community beyond that which can be gleaned through the social proof provided by other members.

First, you need to measure the number of infractions committed by members during a week. This provides the benchmark against any further changes. Then you need to develop interventions to reduce this figure.

- **Tackle the most common infractions.** One possible intervention is to identify which rules are broken most frequently. You can then either amend this rule (is it preventing members from doing something they genuinely want to do?) or you can publicize it. Send an e-mail or post a sticky thread highlighting this rule and enforcing a one-week suspension for people that break the rule.

  This approach works best when the same rules are being repeatedly broken (perhaps unwittingly), by a large number of members. The goal is to publicize the rule.

- **Tackle the most frequent rule-breakers.** Another approach is to identify those breaking the rules most frequently and directly approach them. This may involve introducing a three-strikes rule, asking the members to stop breaking the rules or having a *wall of shame* for members who constantly infringe against the rules.

  This approach works when it's a relatively small number of members breaking a large number of rules. It means you need to measure the number of rules broken and the number of rule breakers over a one-month period.

Community constitution

Another possible intervention is to give greater meaning to the rules and create a document that is more likely to be read by newcomers and regulars. An online community constitution is a collection of principles established by the community defining the community's purpose and basic conduct.

A constitution should not be established by the organization at the initial launch of the community but should be a process the community is engaged in shortly after critical mass of activity has been achieved.

The community manager contacts founding members and volunteers for their thoughts on the constitution. Together, these few members draft a set of principles for the community. This should be a short document that defines the following:

- **Purpose of the community.** Why does the community exist? What benefit does it provide to members? Is the purpose to exchange information? Give each other a support group? Share emotions/feelings? Make friends with likeminded people?

- **Personality of the community.** Is the community loving? Jovial? Serious? Intelligent? Sarcastic? Let the community members identify the personality of the community. The moderator should be willing to solicit other opinions.

- **Beliefs of the community.** Does the community believe that information should be free? That certain products should be banned? That humor is the best medicine? How could the industry be better? What are the core, sacred, beliefs of the community?

- **Community governance.** How is the community run? What rights/powers/protections do members have? How do members gain more power? What can the community manager do or not do? It is important to define the role of the community manager in enforcing administrative powers.

Developing this constitution is a collaborative exercise. The community moderator must engage members and proactively seek their input (if not entrusting the entire process to volunteers). The purpose is to provide members with an opportunity to develop a greater sense of ownership over the community.

This constitution should be a document that is revised at biannual periods during the lifetime of the community. This

allows newcomers to contribute to the constitution and encourages members to again visit the platform.

Once this draft set of principles has been created, it should be presented to the entire community. Input should be proactively solicited in this stage. The greater number of members who participate in this process, the greater number of people will support the community and feel they have a sense of ownership over the very essence of the community. This will lead to increased participation and evangelism for the platform.

Groups are more likely to obey rules they have established than those imposed upon them by authorities.

Welcome guide

A final approach is a welcome guide, a document that subtly guides new member behavior. The objective is to create something positive, not negative.

The welcome guide is a document that explains the culture of the community and helps members to get started. It should be specific in what members *can* do, but it should not appear, nor read, as a *rules* document.

The welcome guide should include:

- **How to get started.** Cover what is new and popular in the community that week. List specific activities members can participate in immediately. Be specific about what members might like to say and how they like to say it (i.e. avoid making errors of etiquette).

- **Community culture.** Detail the culture of the community. Mention any inside community jokes, basic etiquette, rituals and a list of the most common topics. It is also prudent to advise members of what not to do when they make a contribution. What tone of voice, words, topics and language should they avoid using?

- **Community history.** Include a summary of the community's history (linked to after the summary) explaining the evolution of the community. This should read as an interesting guide to the biggest conversation, key moments and controversial issues.

It is vital to measure the success of each of these efforts. You want to see the number of infractions decline and thus free up more of your time for other activities.

STEERING COMMUNITY TOPICS/FOCUS

The community moderator performs a key role of steering the direction of the community. The moderator has the power to spotlight discussions that s/he believes should have greater prominence over other discussions.

This can be achieved through several processes:

- **Bumping.** Bumping a post is a common expression prevalent in forum-based communities. It means to reinitiate activity in a discussion that has dropped down the list of topics, by adding a comment to the discussion, often with the word 'bump' in the post. For example "I'm bumping this post back up, I don't think we quite agreed on this yet." Any member is able to do this.

- **Locking.** In most communities, the moderator has the power to lock discussions. This can be used to prevent discussions from spiralling into personal conflicts, to end discussion on an issue that is causing difficulty to the community or redirect the community's attention to other matters.

- **Unlocking.** The community moderator has the power to unlock previously popular posts for new discussions by new members. This can redirect the community's attention back to popular discussions, stimulate activity, and focus the topical issues within the community.

- **Sticky threads.** Perhaps the most visible element of moderation, the community moderator has the power to give certain threads greater prominence. These might be threads

on a topic in which the moderator would like to encourage discussion, attract new members, or reignite discussion on certain topics. Through the simple act of making a thread 'sticky' at the top of the forum page, the community moderator wields a great deal of power and influence over the community.

- **Deletion.** The community moderator may remove inappropriate posts. This should be used as a last resort. It is far more preferable for the member to edit or remove the post themselves.

- **Moving.** A moderator can move discussions from one section of the community to another. This gives the moderator the power to create new forum categories. It can establish a particular focus on a niche topic or redirect many active members to their own place to prevent them from crowding out newcomers.

- **Soliciting contributions from other members.** The community moderator also has the power to solicit contributions from other members to particular discussions. This raises the prominence of some discussions over others. It engages members in some discussions at the expense of others.

These powers provide the moderator with the ability to subtly steer the direction of the community. If the moderator would like a specific topic to be discussed in greater depth, the moderator can find these discussions and give them greater attention. This is a simple nudge to members to participate in these areas.

The moderator should not tell people what to talk about, nor ask them to talk about certain topics. The moderator just gives greater prominence to certain topics and people.

OVERALL GOALS OF MODERATION

Moderation should have goals beyond merely preventing the community from self-imploding. These goals should include one or more of the following:

- **Increase the overall number of participating members.** This is useful for both communities that are growing and those that have a significant participation inequality (a tiny number of members providing a majority of the posts).

- **Increase the number of posts.** More activity from existing members can be measured by the total number of posts to a community within a given time frame.

- **Increase the number of discussions members initiate, leading to greater levels of participation, sense of ownership and activity overall.** The goal is not necessarily to get members responding to discussions, but to get more members to start discussions.

- **Improve the quality of discussion.** Although highly subjective, it's an excellent objective when it fits with the community's positioning and sense of identity. Increasing or focusing the quality of discussions can attract more members and engage them at a deeper level. This will involve steering the community and tighter moderation policies; it's very common in communities of practice and profession. The rapidly growing StackExchange network is built entirely upon the quality of discussions as a positioning tool.

- **Facilitate closer bonds between members to increase the overall strength of the community.**

- **Focus/steer the community toward specific topics, goals, or people.**

Key metrics

Like other aspects of community management, you can use data to measure and optimize your moderation goals. Here's what you need to know:

1. **Number of participating members to show how successful moderation activities are in encouraging members to participate in the community.**

2. **Total number of posts per month for the broad activity success metric.**

3. **Average number of posts per member.** Are members participating more or less than last month? You may want to remove the top and bottom 5%.

4. **Total number of discussions initiated per month.** When combined with total posts, this reveals the average number of responses per discussion per month.

5. **Number of conflicts per month.** Record the number of conflicts you get involved in, and who else participated.

6. **Number of antagonistic members.** Track how many antagonistic members you had to deal with and at what stage in the escalation process you stepped in.

Don't make casual inferences. As *Black Swan* author Nicholas Taleb is fond of pointing out, with so much data available to us, it's easy to find things that correlate. If you look hard enough you might find the growth of your community closely matches the average rainfall in Venezuela…which doesn't mean you need to make it rain in Venezuela to grow your community. Be careful about what you're measuring in the community and its connection to the actions you take. You're halfway to becoming a world-class community manager.

Thank you for downloading the free sample of *Buzzing Communities*. I'm honored to have been able to offer so much of this book to so many people for free.

By now, you've learnt a few of the key skills to becoming a world-class community manager.

Would you like to learn the rest?

Buy the full book to learn:

- How to increase and sustain high levels of activity.
- How to measure and increase the return on investment.
- How to influence what members do in the community.
- How to develop an entire calendar of activities for your members

…and everything else you need to know to become a world-class community manager.

You can buy the book through the links below:

North America Amazon.com: http://goo.gl/cKvFx
North America Kindle: http://goo.gl/oQJ7z

Both print and Kindle editions are available on Amazon sites worldwide.

Thank you!

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