Best Practices for Community Engagement
Introduction

Communities are dynamic environments, so their success can be a moving target. Simply launching a community is not enough to create value for your company or your customers. Activity can wane (or get out of hand) without ongoing attention to how you promote, manage, and moderate the community. This best practice guide is intended to help Oracle RightNow CX Cloud Service customers make continuous improvements to their community environments. It outlines best practices and benefits for maintaining and moderating your community. It should take about one hour of focused time to complete. Additional time of up to 20 hours (or more) may be needed to implement any changes to your community configuration based on insights you discover while working through this guide.
Develop Successful Online Communities

Over the past several years, community architects, community managers, and community strategists at Oracle have been working with dozens of companies on developing and nurturing successful communities. In the process, these experts have collected and honed several best practices proven to boost community engagement. These practice areas are designed to help you maintain a healthy member base while keeping the community in alignment with your organizational goals and policies.

1. Make It Easy to Find

If your customers can’t find your community, they won’t be able to use it. In addition to an organized marketing program to promote your community (which goes beyond the scope of this guide), instituting these best practices will ensure that customers who may be interested in your community can actually locate it.

**Best Practice 1.1.** Prominently display a link to the community on your Website.

**Benefit.** Having a prominent link (within the top-level navigation, if possible) helps direct customers who are interested in using the community to the right place.

![Figure 1. Serena Software prominently features its community in the top-level navigation of its Website.](image)

**Best Practice 1.2.** Allow visitors to view community content without logging in, but require them to log in to participate.

**Benefit.** Allowing at least a portion of your community to be accessed without a login will foster significant engagement with existing or potential customers. Protecting contribution to your community with a login to enforce adherence to your community policies is still recommended.

**Best Practice 1.3.** Ensure that Google and Bing can accurately index your community content.

**Benefit.** Indexing of your community by the major Web search engines will greatly increase customers’ ability to find your content—many customers prefer to do a Web search before trying anything else.
2. Properly Organize Your Community

Intuitive organization of your community will not only ensure that members are able to easily navigate it but will also minimize potential maintenance headaches down the road. Companies sometimes start by building a grand community “field of dreams”—hoping that if they build it, the customers will come. This approach almost always fails. Instead, starting small with a simple and general community structure and expanding or specializing the structure as you grow is recommended.

**Best Practice 2.1.** Add Welcome panels on key pages to help people get started.

**Benefit.** These panels provide context to participants by letting them know where they are and what they can do at their current location.

**Figure 3.** CloroxConnects displays a Welcome panel that is easy to follow and helps orient members.

**Best Practice 2.2.** Use one post type per hive (a community area or space), and use this post type across similar hives.

**Benefit.** Communities often use too many post types, which not only makes it more difficult for members to understand the difference between types but also creates more work for you if you ever need to move a thread with a different post type.

**IMPORTANT:** Not adopting this best practice can cause a substantial maintenance problem for you in the future.
Best Practices for Community Engagement

Figure 4. This example shows how overly specific post types (idea, item, note, and so on) might be consolidated into a single, all-encompassing post type.

**Best Practice 2.3.** Replace the system term *hive* with more-generic terminology that fits your community (such as *area*, *space*, or *resource*).

**Benefit.** Adapting the terminology to the customers will provide a better user experience.

Figure 5. The commonground social network uses the same “topic” post type across all of its discussion forums. This single post type makes it easy to move threads between hives.

**Best Practice 2.4.** Consider removing any areas of your community that have not had activity in a three- to six-month period.

**Benefit.** Doing this will make the community feel more active and inviting, which improves member engagement.
Best Practices for Community Engagement

**Figure 6.** The posts in this inactive “Beginning Photography Questions” area might need to be rolled up into a more general forum: “Photography Questions.”

**Best Practice 2.5.** Display the Twitter stream (or other real-time social media activity) of your community members.

**Benefit.** Displaying this activity adds value to the community, both by drawing attention to your very active members (which helps them feel important and appreciated) and by making the community even more current and up-to-date.

**TIP:** Find people to connect with by browsing through their user profiles to see who is sharing links to their blog, Website, or Twitter or LinkedIn account. People who share this information in their profiles are inviting interaction and will almost always be receptive to further engagement.

**Figure 7.** Adobe Group’s community manager maintains and displays this list highlighting the Twitter activity of community members.
Best Practice 2.6. Give users a clear call to action.

**Benefit.** Words such as *post, share, ask, start, add, view, subscribe, vote,* and *preview* will help improve the usability of your site, by making it clear what actions can be taken.

![Image of Agile Commons](image1.png)

Figure 8. Agile Commons uses active verbs in all six of its top-level interactions.

Best Practice 2.7. If you have long pages of content, add a custom footer that mirrors your top-level navigation.

**Benefit.** This change provides a natural segue for additional interaction and helps cut down on scrolling.

![Image of Agile Commons](image2.png)

Figure 9. Agile Commons uses a custom footer that mirrors its top-level navigation. This improves the usability of its tall posts that have many comments.
3. Specify Your Community's Policies

Community policies provide the real meat of what goes on in your community. Guidelines as well as terms and conditions help define what kind of behavior is encouraged, what is discouraged, what is never acceptable, and what risks are associated with participation.

**Best Practice 3.1.** Include a public Legal Terms and Conditions page that covers topics such as spam, intellectual property, and sharing of personal information.

**Benefit.** This page helps ensure that your company and its community members are legally protected.

![Figure 10. The AnswerArmy community features a link to Terms of Service in its footer.](image)

**Terms of Service**

You Agree to: These Terms by using AnswerArmy (“the Site”). Your acceptance and use of the Site constitutes your agreement to all applicable laws and legal norms. By proceeding and using the Site, you accept, without limitation or qualification, these Terms of Use and acknowledge that any agreements between you, AnswerArmy.com, Inc., and its subsidiaries and affiliates (collectively, “AnswerArmy.com”), are superseded with respect to this Limited Notice. You do not agree and accept, without limitation or qualification, these Terms of Use, please exit the Site.

**Ownership of Content**

The intellectual property contained in, including, without limitation, all written and visual content, is owned and copyrighted by AnswerArmy, or delivered with all rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Any content that is a trademark, logo, or a trade name of any legal entity and is protected from unauthorized use or distribution. If you distribute any content, you must obtain permission from the content owner. AnswerArmy reserves the right to remove content that is in violation of our copyright policies. AnswerArmy’s term of use also includes the following disclaimers:

- AnswerArmy reserves the right to remove content that is in violation of our copyright policies.

**Best Practice 3.2.** Include a public Community Participation Guidelines page that defines your community culture.

**Benefit.** This document is an important step to ensuring healthy and productive member behavior. It also enables the community moderator to cultivate and enforce the desired community culture.
4. Cultivate and Reward Good Behavior

It isn’t enough to define the culture of your community; you also have to perform day-to-day activities to encourage customers to be part of this culture, build trust between your company and its community members, and otherwise foster good behavior.

**Best Practice 4.1.** If a problem occurs and it is your fault, acknowledge the problem, apologize for it, and communicate how you are going to act to rectify the situation. This approach reflects the AAA framework (see Figure 12.).

**Benefit.** Taking responsibility for mistakes will minimize the chance that a problem will get out of hand and spill into other social media channels, which could damage your brand.

**The Three A’s**

1. **Acknowledge.** Start an apology by telling the person that you accept that something happened: "I didn’t meet my deadline."
2. **Apologize.** Make sure you clearly and simply say that you’re sorry, with no excuses tacked on: "I’m sorry, Ellie."
3. **Art.** Explain what you’ll do to improve or rectify the situation: "I’ve finished the work now and will better scope my time next time."

These simple steps, done in this order and sincerely, will make a world of difference.

**Best Practice 4.2.** Handle violations of your community policies in a professional manner.

**Benefit.** Enforcing policies in a constructive manner will ensure that they are followed and that members do not feel alienated.
Figure 13. This sample private note is used in the RightNow Community if a customer has cross-posted (redundantly posted a comment to multiple locations).

**Best Practice 4.3.** Make sure your moderators are proactively engaging with members.

**Benefit.** Seemingly minor acts can often make a big difference in increasing the engagement of your community members and employees. See the Community Engagement Tune-Up Checklist¹ for some specific moderation suggestions.

---

¹ Available on the Tune Up pages of the Right Now Community. 
http://www.rightnow.com/files/RightNow_Community_Engagement_Tune-Up_Checklist.xlsx
Best Practice 4.4. Go the extra mile to keep top members involved in your community.

**Benefit.** Community participation often follows the 80/20 rule—meaning that about 20 percent of members will contribute about 80 percent of the valuable content. Going out of your way to ensure that top members are involved and feel valued will go a long way toward promoting a vibrant community.

Figure 14. A moderator created this post asking for comments and received 195 responses—many from users who wouldn’t have taken the time to create posts on their own.

Figure 15. Business Exchange uses its home page to highlight and thank featured users.
5. Continuously Track the Performance of Your Community

Although it is difficult to objectively compare the performance of your community with that of other communities, it is a good idea to track your performance over time to make sure you are always improving.

**Best Practice 5.1.** Benchmark your community against itself.

**Benefit.** By watching measurements such as the number of registered members, page views, post views, and post comments, you can take action if the numbers unexpectedly change.

![Content Views Chart](image)

Figure 16. This chart shows a spike in page view activity on June 8, the day of a product release, and a general upward trend in overall views.

**Conclusion**

Now that you are familiar with best practices for community engagement, you can use the Community Engagement Tune-Up Checklist to perform an assessment of your deployment against these best practices to see where you have the greatest opportunities for improvement. Note that these practices are intended to be used as rules of thumb to help you develop a successful online community.