An Oracle Best Practice Guide
April 2012

Best Practices for Reputation Management
Introduction

Reputation management in your online community is critical to creating an environment that produces great user-generated content. It is also essential for gaining and retaining some control over the social dynamics in your community. All communities will experience troublesome postings—you are not alone.

This best practice document serves as a guide for community managers and administrators on how to configure and manage Oracle RightNow Social Experience’s reputation management system. It presents the reputation management system’s capabilities (including reputation levels and ranks, icons/badges, and activities and points) and discusses important considerations and best practices for setting up, managing, and getting the most out of this system. This document includes best practices—sourced directly from actual online communities—for using reputation systems and brings together the most-effective guidelines.
Purpose and Structure of a Reputation Management System

The social dynamics of online communities can be both subtle and complex. They not only vary between use cases (such as an innovation community and a support community) but also within them (support communities in different industries, or even in the same industry, but at companies of different sizes or with different corporate cultures). Implementing and managing a reputation system can give you some control over the social dynamics within your community.

Reputation systems have several purposes and goals:

- Promoting high-quality content by assigning value to content generated within the community. (Members may be more interested in reading, or may put more credence in, content created by those with high reputations.)
- Building trust and strengthening loyalty of members.
- Motivating members to participate by rewarding and recognizing the quantity and quality of their contributions. Many members are motivated, at least to some degree, by increasing their reputation within the community and reaping whatever rewards may come with that.

This document focuses on the third goal: motivating members to participate. If the reputation system is designed with this goal in mind, the first two items tend to take care of themselves. The success of online communities depends largely on the participation of community members. This participation needs to be by as many different members as possible (although a small group of core enthusiasts and influencers will participate disproportionately to their number) and has to be sustained over a long period of time. Fundamental to generating this participation is ensuring that the right motivations are in place for the different types of members.

The basic concept of the reputation system is that members receive points for many of the different ways they participate within the community. The more they participate—and the higher the quality of their contributions (as deemed by the community itself)—the more points they amass. As their number of points reaches certain plateaus, they achieve different ranks.

Configuring the Reputation Management System

The reputation system is configured from the Reputation area (Admin -> Reputation). Configuring the system means performing the following five tasks:

1. Deciding on the number of reputation levels
2. Naming each reputation level
3. Associating an icon with each reputation level
4. Defining the number of points needed to attain each reputation level
5. Setting the number of points received by each member for each one of nine reputation actions
These tasks are all managed in the Reputation area, within the Reputation Levels and Reputation Actions sections, as shown in Figure 1.

### Reputation Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Delete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>500</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Gold" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Delete" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver</td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Delete" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronze</td>
<td>100</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bronze" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Delete" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>default</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Member" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Delete" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add Level

### Tips

- **Reputation Actions** are actions in the community that generate Reputation Points.
  - Points are awarded for actions proportional to the value of the action. For example, if rating a post or giving positive feedback earns 10 points, thumbs up earns 5 points, thumbs down earns 10 points, and negative feedback earns 15 points, then the values are 5, 10, 15, and 20 points respectively.

- **Points** can be adjusted in a range from 1 to 100.
- **Images** can be resized to create small, icon-sized images (e.g., 32x32 px).

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### Reputation Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create Post</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Comment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Post</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate Post</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate My Post</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate on My Comment</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Save Reputation Levels  Cancel

Figure 1. A reputation system includes defined reputation levels, icons, and assigned points for each reputation action.

In the example above, the reputation system is configured as follows:

- There are four reputation levels.
- The names of the levels are Member, Bronze, Silver, and Gold.
- The Member level does not have an icon; the Bronze, Silver, and Gold icons are trophies in the relevant color.
- When community members amass 100 points, they reach the Bronze level; when they amass 250 points, they reach the Silver level; and so on.
- Creating a post earns a user 10 points, as does making a comment, rating a post, and so on. (This example is not especially colorful, because all the point values are the same; the power of this reputation system lies in its ability to grant different numbers of points for different actions—more on this later.)

The challenge, of course, is to design and configure a reputation management system that works well for your specific community.
Initial Considerations

The following considerations should factor into the design of your reputation management system:

- Personal motivations are complex. They cover a spectrum—some individuals are by nature open and sharing, whereas others tend to be competitive (and sometimes even combative)—and they can change over time. The law of unintended consequences is always hovering, so reputation changes can result in unexpected reactions. And members can take reputation more seriously than you think they will. Experience with reputation systems shows that simplicity (although not necessarily complete transparency) tends to work best.

- Members should ideally move up through the ranks at a reasonable speed: not too quickly (or they aren’t challenged) and not too slowly (so they don’t become frustrated). A rule of thumb is that an average member should advance to a new rank every one to two months.

- The separation between levels can be larger at higher point totals than at lower point totals. In other words, it should be easier and take less time for a member to go from Level 2 to Level 3 than for another member to go from Level 12 to Level 13. At the lower levels, you want to be particularly encouraging and reward moderate participation. At the higher levels, members have been doing this for a while and know they’re in for a challenge.

Number of Reputation Levels

How many reputation levels should a community have? Although there is no set answer to this question, here are some guidelines:

- A minimum of 4 levels is recommended, although having 5 to 15 levels is more common and provides more flexibility as the community grows. There is no maximum number—some communities have more than 30 reputation levels—although these larger numbers can become confusing to members and unwieldy to manage.

- The larger the community, the more reputation levels it should have. Community size often relates to use case. For example, a private community focused on insights and innovation (which may have fewer than 500 or 1,000 members) may do just fine with 5 reputation levels. A service-and-support community with tens of thousands of members may warrant 10 to 20 levels, or even more.

Names of Reputation Levels

Selecting a naming scheme can be a challenging step, as the names are typically fraught with a lot of meaning, perhaps even beyond what you intended. It’s also not the kind of thing that’s easy to change down the road.

There are three primary considerations when deciding on a naming scheme for reputation levels. When possible, try to use names that

- Are relevant to the community and connect to the company. If the community is about gardening, don’t use a naming scheme based on sports. Rather, using gardening metaphors—flowers, herbs, and so on—may work well.
• **Provide for flexibility.** A closed scheme (such as hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades) offers nowhere to go once these four levels have been set. You will have painted yourself into a corner if you decide to add one or more levels six months later.

• **Show some type of hierarchy.** A higher level signifies a greater commitment or degree of expertise; the reputation level names should, if possible, convey this. (Note that some communities designate reputation levels with numbers instead of words. This certainly shows a hierarchical model, being quite apparent to all users that Level 9 is higher than Level 5. But numbered levels can be unpopular with users and tend to work best in communities that are more competitive than collaborative.)

Reputation-Level Icons

Reputation-level icons are displayed in the community next to the name of each member who has reached a given reputation level. Ideally, the icons you use

• **Should convey achievement.** This is why trophies and stars are often used.

• **Should be relevant to the reputation-level name.** Members should understand at a glance what the icons signify.

• **Shouldn't be too large or too small.** The system does not resize images. Large icons can throw off the display, so it is encouraged to keep icon sizes to 16 by 16 pixels.

Reputation-Level Points

Because attaining each reputation level requires a preset number of points, it is important to think through the spacing between levels. You don’t want it to be too easy or too difficult to go from one level to the next.

• **Linear spacing scheme.** If the spacing between levels is the same, that’s a linear scheme. In such a scheme, if Level 1 is reached by amassing 100 points, for example, Level 2 would be reached with 200 points, Level 3 with 300 points, and so on. What’s nice about a linear spacing scheme is its simplicity. It also lets members progress at a predictable pace through the system. However, the most-active members will likely achieve the highest levels relatively quickly.

• **Geometric spacing scheme.** In this type of scheme, the separation between point levels increases, but at a consistent rate. For example, in a geometric spacing scheme, if Level 1 is reached with 100 points, Level 2 would be reached with 250 points, Level 3 with 450 points, Level 4 with 600 points, and so on. In this case, the spacing starts out as 100 points and then increases each time by 50 points (the spacing between levels goes as follows: 100, 150, 200, 250). This scheme increases the number of points—and therefore the amount of time—between attained levels, adding to the challenge of moving up the reputation ladder.

• **Mixed spacing scheme.** What often works best is a scheme that starts out with a linear scheme at the lower levels and then changes to a geometric scheme at the higher levels.
Reputation Actions

Points need to be assigned to each of the nine actions that contribute to a member’s reputation. Again, in the example above, each action receives 10 points. That’s a simple and straightforward allocation, but it won’t necessarily motivate members to participate in the way you want.

For example, if every action is assigned 10 points, members will get the same 10 points for creating a post as for rating a post. But the former almost always takes more time, requires more thought, and contributes more to the community than the latter. If it is desirable for members to create posts, they should probably be rewarded with more points for performing that action than for rating a post.

Points are assigned a value between –100 and 100. Positive numbers are typically used (it’s beyond the scope of this guide to go into the situations in which negative numbers may be warranted). When assigning points to actions, the important things are to

- Consider the relative importance in your community of the different actions and how you want to reward them.
- Relate the reputation actions to point levels. (In fact, it is usually recommended to make point assignments first and then set the point levels.)

Note that some reputation actions are ones that members can perform over and over. For example, members can create as many posts as they want, garnering a certain number of points for each post. This doesn’t necessarily mean that this member’s posts are any good, just that there’s a certain number of them. And a post that says only “Hi” generates the same number of points as a post that is especially insightful. This is the main reason why the creation of posts, for example, although certainly desirable, is not the sole reputation criterion.

That said, quantity should be rewarded as long as quality is too. The following list breaks down the nine reputation actions according to quantity versus quality.

- **Quantitative actions.** Members have direct control over these five reputation actions, which they can perform over and over. Although most members don’t perform these actions solely for the purpose of getting points, some may do so.
  - Create a post
  - Make a comment
  - Rate a post
  - Rate a comment
  - Invite a member
- **Qualitative actions.** Members do not have direct control over these four reputation actions, which provide qualitative feedback on a member’s reputation.
  - Comment selected as best
  - Comment on my post
• Rating on my post
• Rating on my comment

Other Considerations

This section discusses several important aspects of the reputation system, beyond only its configuration and management.

Visibility into Reputation Program

It will be readily apparent to members that a reputation system is in place within the community, in that they will see their own and other members’ reputation levels and reputation icons. But you may or may not want to let the community know the inner workings of the reputation program itself. For example, you may decide to let members know the numbers or names of the reputation levels but not the points needed to reach each level or how many points they receive for particular actions.

How to decide what, if anything, to reveal to the community? That’s a subjective decision that varies from community to community. On one hand, transparency is usually encouraged in online communities. On the other hand, providing too many specifics about the reputation program can turn the community into an overly competitive environment, foster dissent, and prompt members to game the system.

The degree of visibility into the reputation system can also depend on your particular community use case. For example, large-scale public communities focused on service and support tend to give less visibility into the reputation system than do small, private communities geared toward generating insights and innovation.

Note that if your community does not make the reputation system particularly visible, some members will understandably ask for further clarification. You’ll need to respond to such questions. Your Oracle customer success manager (CSM) can help you sculpt the appropriate communication.

Recognition and Rewards

In many communities, members who achieve higher ranks do so for personal reasons. For them, reaching a new level is its own reward. Sometimes, though, other rewards are warranted to thank particularly prolific and helpful members and encourage participation. Possible recognition and rewards include system rewards, personal rewards, and tangible rewards.

System Rewards

These are rewards that are provided via the community platform itself. Examples include

• Access to a private area of the community
• Membership to an invitation-only group within the community
• Blog ownership
Personal Rewards
These are interpersonal forms of “thank you” that are usually greatly appreciated by members. This list is brief, but there are many other creative ways that members can be rewarded in a personal manner.

- Note (in e-mail or postal mail) from the community manager or other stakeholder (such as a business executive) thanking members for their contributions
- An invitation to a conference or an event

Tangible Rewards
These rewards are typically more appropriate in small, private communities focused on insights and innovation than in large service-and-support communities. Studies have shown that paying for community participation can get into sticky territory, so offer tangible rewards with caution.

- Corporate swag (such as mugs and T-shirts)
- Free or discounted products
- Coupons
- Payment (cash, payment via systems such as PayPal, gift cards, and so forth)

Evaluation and Adjustment
The reputation system should be observed and evaluated on a regular basis to ensure that it is enhancing community participation and not being used inappropriately by members.

What to Evaluate
To evaluate whether the reputation system is functioning optimally, there should be a review of the member-level distribution and of members' rank-level progression.

Distribution of Levels

The social dynamics of online communities tend to follow repeatable patterns, as does the distribution of levels within reputation systems. Observing this distribution enables you to discover whether anything is amiss.

- **Where to observe.** The distribution is in the Admin -> Analytics and Reporting -> Reputation area, at the top under Reputation Levels.

- **Expected distribution.**
  - **Large-scale/public/service-and-support community.** Most members will be in the lower levels. The first level (really, the zero level) will have the overwhelming majority of members.
  - **Small-scale/private/insights-and-innovation community.** A more even distribution is expected here. Most members will still be in the lower levels, but these communities tend to encourage, receive, and sometimes even require a high degree of participation. This means that more members will reach higher reputation levels, evening out the distribution over time.
• **Flags.** Having numerous members who have reached high levels may indicate a problem. If this happens, it may be due to a flaw in the reputation system (perhaps overrewarding of certain actions) or intentional manipulation of the system by a group of users.

**Rank-Level Progression**

Are members moving up through the ranks in a reasonable time frame?

• **Expected progression.** Most registered users do not participate enough to move beyond the base reputation level. The best practices, then, apply to those members who get to at least the first level. At the lower levels, it should take one to two months for members to move from one level to the next. At the higher levels, which require a degree of participation that only the most dedicated and engaged members achieve, levels can be spread out more, with the time frames correspondingly being spread out more as well.

• **Flags.** If members move very quickly (in days or weeks) to a new level, it may be because the points given to one particular reputation action are out of proportion to those of the other actions. If members move very slowly (taking three or four months) between lower levels, the points given to the various reputation actions may be too low in relation to the point levels.

**Member Input**

Members can be perceptive when it comes to reputation. They raise concerns in public discussions or send private messages to moderators. Take all such comments and communications seriously.

**When to Evaluate**

Although community managers should be regularly looking out for potential problems with the reputation system, a purposeful evaluation should ideally be done every three months.

**Adjustment to the Reputation Management System**

• **Adding levels.** If new levels are warranted, it is preferable to add them above the highest existing level than to place them between levels. This causes less confusion and minimizes unexpected frustrations.

• **Changing points for reputation actions.** Ideally, you won’t need to change the point allocation, but if you do need to, there is a lower chance of an adverse effect on the community if points are increased rather than decreased.

Note that although adjustments are sometimes necessary, they can have a dramatic effect on the community. The reputation system runs constantly in the background, regularly updating point scores and reputation levels. But points are based on the current reputation system, not the historical one. This means that, if a member is at Level 8 one day and the points for reputation actions are adjusted, that member may log into the community the next day at—surprise!—Level 7. All adjustments should therefore be thought through carefully.
Conclusion

Online reputation is a complex and subtle thing. Configuring an effective reputation system takes a solid understanding of the community members and their motivations and goals. Because of this, it should be addressed during the latter stages of the community’s social design. By following the best practices outlined in this guide, you can effectively configure and manage your reputation system. Such well-designed systems motivate members to participate more in your online community and contribute high-quality content.