Best Practices for Growing an Online Community

Building an online community is just the beginning. Now you need to ensure that people show up to participate. This means promoting your site and providing content that will enable you to attract and retain members. The following best practices should help.

1. Develop a Plan
Set growth goals from the outset, defining the rate at which you want membership to expand. Then begin developing a list of programs and events that will help you meet those goals. Keep in mind, however, that communities rarely experience steady growth from the start; instead, long plateaus and occasional spikes are the norm.

2. Run an Awareness Campaign
Use e-mail, Web banners, and other paid advertising to invite potential members to join. Be sure to explain exactly how they’ll benefit from membership, and include a link to the registration page.

3. Introduce Yourself to the Larger Ecosystem
List related blogs and communities in your blog roll, and mention them in your content. Ask them to link to your community in return. The more connections you make, the more visible your community will become.

4. Optimize Your Website for Search Engines
If your community can’t be found through a search engine, it might as well not exist. To make sure people can find it, use the right keywords, update content frequently, and link to external sites.

5. Use Your Community as a Hub for Offline Events
As you plan and publicize an event, point your steering committee and attendees to the community. (You may even consider requiring them to join.) Then use the community as an essential resource for collaboration and planning.

6. Articulate the Community’s Purpose
Having an unclear mission statement is a sure way to drive visitors away and make existing members wonder why they joined. Make your intentions obvious, so visitors know whether it’s worth their time to explore and ultimately join your community.
7. Emphasize the Human Element

Place member photos in prominent positions on the community’s home page. Studies show that people spend more time looking at human faces than at other images.

8. Make Your Community Site Easy to Use

Posting, commenting, voting, and uploading files should be simple and intuitive, and your site should include clear instructions for all such activities. In addition, content should be easy to find and the interface should be aesthetically pleasing. If you have doubts about your site’s performance in any of these areas, you should consider commissioning a usability study.

9. Highlight Recent Activity

Make it obvious that people are visiting and using the community, by displaying recent activities and recently active members. To get things started, use employees, partners, and friends to seed the conversation.

10. Keep Registration Short and Impersonal

A long registration form that asks for too much personal information will drive potential members away. Ask for only the most important information. As a rule of thumb, it’s best to keep the registration form above the fold.

11. Take Care of New Members

Send a message welcoming each new member, complete with a list of the top features they should explore. Also consider creating a forum that encourages users to introduce themselves when they join. Last but not least, take extra care in responding to participants’ first posts.

12. Encourage Word of Mouth

Make it easy (both technically and culturally) for members to invite friends to join the community—set up refer-a-friend mechanisms and introduce programs that reward existing members for bringing in new members, for example.

13. Provide Visitors with Extensive Access

Before they sign up, people want to see what your community has to offer, so allow public access to as much of the content as is practical. It’s typically best, however, to keep visitors from posting and commenting until they’ve joined.

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