



A Jaffle Design white paper:

Online Communities

Tools to support user experience

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The purpose of this paper is to evaluate four communication tools, which can be used to develop an online community area on websites. Advantages and disadvantages of the tools will be evaluated and recommendations will be offered, based on best practice and theory in online community development.

Online Communities

There is an implicit assumption in literature on collaborative work that the group/community is actively directed towards a shared goal or has a common purpose. As with any form of group activity, there may be some elements of social interaction as well as the simple fulfilment of a task. Teamwork and collaboration require some degree of *trust* between team members to be effective. It is important to take trust into consideration when choosing and developing communication tools for an online community.

Understanding the challenges of social interaction and social organisation is crucial in developing an online collaborative environment. When building an online community for collaborative purposes, it is important to minimise or avoid barriers to communication either technical or social, such as lack of trust and purpose. Group boundaries must be clearly defined so that there is a clear sense of who might make use of collective resources. To make online communities work, ongoing interaction and promotion has to be in place (Godwin, 1994).

Community Tools

Community-building tools include:

- *Mailing lists*
- *Discussion boards*
- *Newsgroups*
- *Chat*

Mailing lists

Mailing lists connect people via email messages. Members send messages to a central address and the message is sent to all subscribers from there. Receivers can choose to

reply to the sender of the message or to the whole list of subscribers. Mailing lists can be controlled and edited by a moderator, which would be necessary if an organisation chooses to develop a community using list servers. It is possible to create sub-groups of mailing lists, a useful way to customise and reach different segments within a community as implemented in the Development Gateway.

Advantages:

- It is a 'push' technology; there are no check-in requirements for members; and it automatically delivers to each member's mailbox;
- It is low-cost and;
- It gives organisations the ability to reach virtually anyone in the group/network.

Disadvantages:

- Messages sometimes come out of order;
- Archiving is not always used; if a list's messages are archived they are sometimes difficult to retrieve and;
- Active groups may produce messages that are out of focus and unrelated to the primary topic of discussion.

Discussion Boards

The discussion board is an asynchronous tool that can be used to create an online community. Because participants do not have to be online at the same time, they have more time to consider what they are writing (Powazek 2002, p13).

Threaded Discussion Boards

With a threaded system, messages are divided by topics and discussion "threads" are formed on the basis of responses to various messages.

Advantages:

- Good for discussions where people need to be able to find answers to a particular question easily;
- Topics are generally well organised.

Disadvantages:

- Difficult to manage without a moderator, because real life conversations drift, which often creates new topics. Unless they are moderated, threaded discussions may easily lose their “thread.”

Linear Discussion Boards

With a linear system, each post in a given topic arrives in chronological order. The result is more like a real conversation.

Advantages:

- Great for social conversation and in-depth discussion of important issues;
- More conducive to displaying conversation the way people really talk.

Disadvantages:

- Difficult to come to some kind of resolution or conclusion;
- Hard to find specific information again if you want or need it later.

Newsgroups

Newsgroups are a mix between discussion boards and mailing lists. Usually there is a barrier to entry. There are also different levels of information and only subscribers can post messages. News groups are usually not moderated and it is common for newsgroups to be dynamic with plenty of participation. This is a good way for members to leverage and build interesting communities, which provide members with the actual content they are seeking. Newsgroup members must download message titles and can choose which messages they will actually read.

The advantages and disadvantages are similar to email, with two differences:

First, newsgroups are not a ‘push’ tool – the member has to download and remember to check them. Second, this tool allows the user to download only the headers instead of the entire message – it is a way for the user to customise.

Chat

Chat systems are another community tool that facilitates synchronous online communication. Chat sessions may be public or private. Chat is usually, but not always, a many-to-many communication mode of conversation. It can be used for meetings, brainstorm sessions and other work-oriented applications. They can be a good way of developing strong relationships between community members, creating a positive working environment, and can also be an effective tool for project discussions. Chat rooms are a great way to bring an exciting virtual community together in real-time (Powazek 2002, p155).

Advantages:

- Cost-saving, real-time communication tool;
- Allows people to be more personal and can assist in virtual relationship building efforts.

Disadvantages:

- Some chat tools do not allow archiving of the chat log, so important information can be lost;
- A lot of planning and guidance may be required in the presentation of the environment.

Criteria for Selection

Organisations may have an opportunity for community development if their user groups are spread around the globe. Time and location would therefore be important criteria in the selection of communication tools. When deciding which tools to use, it is important to consider what the features of various tools enable users to accomplish.

Important selection criteria include user bandwidth speeds, access costs, and computer and browser types. Geographic and time zones affect the type of community tool and the development of the community (leverage). These criteria must be taken into account when choosing communication tools. Organisations must also decide if they want to host a private or public community or a hybrid one (Veen 2000; Powazek 2002).

Organisations, may consider implementing a mix of both synchronous and asynchronous tools to facilitate communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing between its diverse, geographically dispersed clientele/employers/members.

Organisations may also consider making the community area private with barriers to entry. However, if the goal is to attract new and more diverse members and ideas, the community should be public and non-exclusive.

Enhancing the User Experience through Community

Powazek (2002, p.78) believes that "web communities happen when users are given the tools to use their voice in a public and immediate way, forming intimate relationships over time," and that "community helps to form with your audience, and to enable them to form relationships with each other." He also suggests that if used correctly, online communities can help to convert users from one-time browsers to regular users or members of a community.

The following table provides a number of suggested strategies to enhance the user experience.

Strategy	Description	Benefits
Provide Membership	Offer registration at the site to access premium content and services	Community building, targeted marketing, subscription opportunity (if appropriate)
Personalise User Experience	Present content in which the site visitor has indicated interest through previous browsing or member profiles	Community building, targeting members and making them feel involved in the community.
Support Users	Provide responsive and convenient member service	Community building, customer and site loyalty, repeat visits
Communicate via Community	Allow visitors to communicate with each other and the publisher through the site	Community building, user and site loyalty

(Tomsen 2000, p104)

1. Identify the community purpose or goal;
2. Identify the target audience and users of the community;
3. Decide which interaction tools serve the purpose of your audience and how to structure the community space;
4. Plan how to host or facilitate the community;
5. Build the interface;
6. Determine how to draw in users and leverage the community;
7. Decide how to maintain and nurture the community.

Conclusion

Choosing the right tool to meet audience needs is essential for a successful community.

The implementation and choice of a communication tool depends significantly on the purpose for the community.

Asynchronous tools do not require scheduling and are more convenient for communities where time zone differences are a consideration. A combined use of discussion board and email could be successfully and effectively implemented.

A chat tool might be included to help build strong relationships between individuals or groups. A chat tool is ideal for discussions for given topics.

Bibliography

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