

WHAT MOTIVATES PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES?

By Jessica Bernstein-Wax
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Introduction

Online communities such as message boards and e-mail lists have sprung up all over the Web in recent years. Yet a huge number of these groups fail due to lack of user participation.

At the same time, scholars have published an enormous number of articles on what factors make Internet users post and view messages in virtual communities.

In this paper, I compile a list of recommendations for designing and running online communities based on a literature review conducted in the winter of 2007.

I have divided my suggestions into two categories: human and technological. The human category outlines strategies that administrators or existing members of virtual communities could employ to increase participation. The technological category consists of recommendations for software design and computer scripts aimed to stimulate message posting.

Implementing many of the technological suggestions would require significant IT expertise – and a hefty budget. Thus, some of the recommendations in this category may be out of reach for smaller organizations such as regional newspapers or online support groups.

However, because much of the research on technological methods for increasing user participation in virtual communities is quite innovative, I thought it necessary to at least touch on some of the literature in this category. However, thanks to time constraints, the technology section of this paper remains somewhat limited.

Challenges

One of the challenges I faced in developing these recommendations is the fact that experts define online communities differently depending on their academic background and the scope of their research.

Here are some of the definitions that strike me as most relevant to this paper:

- “An aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by protocols or norms.” – Constance Elise Porter, University of Notre Dame [16]

- “Online community is a social network that uses computer support as the basis of communication among members instead of face-to-face interaction. These virtual social networks may be used for empathetic support, but are more often used for common interest information sharing and problem solving.” Dorine C. Andrews [1], Barry Wellman [22]
- “A virtual community can be seen as a group in which individuals come together around a shared purpose, interest, or goal.” Koh et al [11], Rothaermal et al [20]
- “For the purpose of this study, we define an online community as a group of people with a common interest or shared purpose whose interactions are governed by policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws and who use computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.” – Preece et al [18]

Another issue I encountered is that the factors that encourage message posting and message viewing appear to be distinct phenomena (NOTE: Jessica, is this addition OK with you?), according to researchers. On some sites, lurkers – members who seldom or never post – make up 90 percent of the community. Groups that struggle with low participation rates should try to get lurkers to contribute to discussions.

Nonetheless, members who read messages and do not post do perform an important function. Preece’s research, for example, suggests that active participants may post more if they notice that a particular message thread has received many page views – or if they see a greater number of users online.

Therefore, it remains important to look at the factors that stimulate message reading in addition to those that encourage message posting.

That said, the recommendations below are geared toward motivating message posts, except where otherwise noted.

Recommendations for increasing participation in online communities

Human Factors

- **For most sites, the moderator/administrator should have a visible presence... but don’t overdo it.**

Discussion: Many experts recommend that Web administrators play an active role in welcoming newcomers, keeping messages on track and maintaining order on their sites. [4, 10]

In some cases, moderators may need to seed conversations or pose questions in order to stimulate discussion among members. [18]

However, experts caution against censoring user comments – unless discussions get too out of hand.

“While system managers or hosts usually have the ability to remove or ‘censor’ a given comment, I discourage it as a practice,” Coate writes. “I encourage all online systems to be places where controversial subjects may be discussed in a civilized way.” [4]

Of course, how an administrator defines “civilized” may vary from site to site, which brings us to the next recommendation.

- **Have a prominently displayed statement of purpose/code of conduct**

Discussion: Kim recommends moderators outline the purpose of the site and guidelines for users. [10] Statements of purpose can encourage appropriate user behavior and keep threads on track. [21]

Similarly, Preece and Nonnecke point out that many lurkers do not participate in discussions because they have an unclear idea of what is expected of them – something a visible statement of purpose could rectify.

“Lurkers who believe there is no requirement to post might contribute if there was a clear policy statement telling them that their comments would be welcome,” Preece and Nonnecke write. “It should be visible at all times, if possible, as people are known not to read policy pages.” [18]

However, researchers acknowledge that an active moderator and code of conduct may be less important in certain kinds of online communities, such as health-related support groups. Because of the nature of discussion in such groups, members may develop their own norms. [15]

Finally, some experts have suggested that moderation and guidelines may be more crucial in the initial stages of an online group. [11] Once a community is better-established, new users may learn about group norms through existing message threads and archives and community members may self-moderate. [1]

- **Maintain easily searchable archives of past conversations**

Discussion: Keeping a searchable well-organized record of past conversations is crucial to maintaining continuity of norms and a sense of community in online groups. [15] Such archives are also a useful tool for orienting newcomers and preventing repetition of message threads – a phenomenon which can irritate longtime community members and drive them from the site. [4, 9]

In addition, keeping a record of past contributions to the site may encourage participants to help each other by posting informative messages.

“If the possibility of future reciprocation is the motivation driving an individual’s contribution, then the likelihood of providing public goods will be increased to the extent individuals are likely to interact in the future and to the extent that there is some way to keep track of past actions,” Kollock writes. [12]

- **Require registration to post messages**

Discussion: Establishing trust among users can lead to lower levels of aggressive behavior and greater participation. [11]

If keeping records of past conversations is one way of generating trust among users, requiring users to register before posting is another.

To form meaningful relationships, people need to know that the user they are messaging today is the same person they spoke with last week.

“Identity persistence is also a very important feature in encouraging contributions based on reciprocity,” Kollock writes. “If identities are not registered to particular users and stable across time, and if there is no record of past actions and contributions, an account of past contributions, however loose, cannot be kept.” [12]

Similarly, member profiles can help build a sense of community and connectedness on the site.

- **When possible, connect the community with a trusted brand**

Discussion: Linking a community with a known, trusted organization can encourage participation – even among users who are resistant to posting messages. [1]

- **Hold offline events to cement online relationships**

Discussion: Most experts agree that offline meetings can stimulate discussions in online communities. [10, 11, 4]

In a survey of 77 online communities in Korea, Koh et al concluded that “offline interaction was significantly related to posting activity.” [11]

However, administrators must design their sites to maximize the link between offline and online user identities. [11] Avatars, photographs and user profiles are just a few ways of establishing this bridge.

“When offline interactions are not feasible due to geographical dispersion, the adoption of multimedia support (such as videoconferencing, PC camera chatting, and avatar chatting when hosting community forums in virtual town meetings) may give the community a sense of belonging similar to the effect of offline face-to-face meetings,” Koh et al write. [11]

In addition, hosting outreach events at meetings, seminars or fairs can help a new online community increase usership, brand recognition and trust. [1]

- **Provide narrow, relevant content (important for encouraging viewing as well as posting)**

Discussion: Narrowly focused message boards can encourage close relationships among members. [15]

In larger communities, this narrowness of focus can be achieved by creating – or allowing members to form – sub-groups based on interest or topic. These divisions, together with post filtration and message rating systems (to be discussed in the technology section below), can help members find relevant information on busy, chaotic discussion boards. [13, 21]

“The direct relationship between usefulness and viewing activity suggests that when community members perceive that a community and its contents are useful to them, they tend to view and explore the material more often,” Koh et al write. “Thus, collecting, displaying, and updating content is critical for encouraging viewing activity among community members.” [11]

In addition, making sure messages are interactive – that is, that people are responding to each other’s comments in a given thread rather than going off topic – can stimulate participation. [24]

- **Welcome and train new members – while keeping old members around**

Discussion: Maintaining a good mix of core and new members contributes to success, according to Maloney-Krichmar and Preece. [15]

Lampe and Johnston agree. “Joining persistent, large groups makes sense to the new member as they are able to see a wider array of viewpoints, and have their own messages viewed by more people,” they write. “Established discussion spaces also benefit from having new members. New participants refresh interest and activity on the site.” [13]

However, to maintain the character of the community and prevent the kind of repetitive or uninformed posting that can irritate longtime members, administrators should adopt a

policy for welcoming and training new members. [13, 18] And giving established members welcoming or moderating roles may keep them around longer.

“If the new member receives no attention for the community, they are likely to abandon the space for not appreciating them properly,” Lampe and Johnston write. [13]

Lurking rates are much higher in communities that do not welcome new members, “which suggests that special attention to acknowledging and responding to new members is important,” Maloney-Krichmar and Preece argue. [15]

Protocols for welcoming newcomers can be people- or technology-powered.

People-powered examples include: a mentoring system where experienced members greet newcomers, give them tours of the site, introduce them to the group, invite them to introduce themselves, or provide feedback on posts. FAQ pages that tell members how to post may also be helpful.

“Perhaps one of the most effective means to change the beliefs of lurkers so that they become novices is for regulars, leaders and elders to nurture novices in the community so that lurkers can see that those who are new to the community are treated well,” Bishop writes. [2]

On the software design/technology side, developing ratings systems that evaluate the quality of posts and give feedback is one method for training new arrivals to the community (I will discuss ratings systems more below).

- **Promote diversity of viewpoint**

Discussion: While similarity of interest or experience often drives people to join online groups, community members tend to post more when diverse opinions are represented in discussions – and when those differences are pointed out to them. [14]

In his 1994 *Wired* article, “Nine Principles for Making Virtual Communities Work,” [7] Mike Godwin suggests front-loading new groups with “talkative, diverse people.” Employing a moderator who posts provocative discussion topics likely to elicit disagreement among users can be another solution – particularly in the early days of a site. [18]Technological Factors

- **Maintain a stable, high-speed IT infrastructure**

Discussion: Technical problems will interfere with participation and deter users from returning to the site. Enough said. [7]

- **Employ a user-friendly interface – or don't**

Discussion: Preece et al's research indicates that many lurkers do not participate in discussions because they cannot figure out how to use the software. [18]

However, simple interfaces may turn off users in high-tech forms or attract uncommitted participants. [21] Such concerns apply more to forums that already have an established core of users and need to attract only high quality new posters to keep conversation fresh.

- **Consider rating systems, top contributors lists and message filtration systems**

Discussion: Systems that rate the quality of messages can help teach new members what sorts of posts are valuable and reward them for providing quality information. They can work in concert with filtration systems that prioritize posts based on ratings and thus help users navigate through the chaos on especially busy sites. [13]

Top contributors lists are another way of rewarding participants for the quality and/or quantity of their work.

“A simple technique used by the Linux community involves posting a list of the top contributors each week with the number of messages each has sent,” Preece et al writes. [18]

- **Consider “designed incentives”**

Discussion: Harper et al define designed incentives as “mechanisms built into a software interface that encourage or motivate users. Examples include the points Yahoo! Answers contributors use for posting high quality messages and the privileges, such as forum moderator, that Slashdot members earn for writing highly rated posts. [9]

Harper et al argues that sending online community members invitations to participate in discussions increases message posting, provided the invitations emphasize the uniqueness of the members' knowledge and differences between their views and those of other participants. Members with differing views should be mentioned by login name to emphasize the social nature of the forum. [9]

A study conducted by many of the same authors, suggested that people are more likely to contribute in discussions that feature a range of viewpoints. [14]

Finally, citing a correlation between frequent page views and willingness to post comments, Lampe and Johnston suggest employing software that tracks frequent viewers and “[marks] them as potentially valuable participants early in their tenure on the site.”

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