

## Building an Online Community

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Why create online communities? Why put all that technology into something as fundamentally personal as volunteering—giving your time to improve a community? Let's ask the question a different way: why not?

Online communities can help solve some of the practical problems of holding a group together in these days of overloaded schedules, long working hours and even more complicated family lives. The rest of the world is using new technologies, so why not volunteer groups. But most importantly, they fit into the lives of many people today, and might be the bridge that will let you attract and keep younger volunteers.

I work in a high-tech field, so it was not surprising that my professional associations started using the Web and other online technologies early. But when my mother, a retired librarian, asked for my help so she could put the minutes of her library volunteer group online, and when my nephew's travelling soccer team started using an online calendar to keep track of their schedule and post pictures from their games, I knew these tools had gone from experimental to mainstream.

### WHAT IS AN ONLINE COMMUNITY?

There are as many different flavors of online communities as there are types of volunteer groups. Some online communities have no counterpart in the "real world"—they are made up of people who meet and interact only online. Others are an extension of a real-world association, providing tools to help them work together better. Online com-

munities serve many different purposes, and there are many different tools to meet each need. Some of the uses for an online community are:

- **To keep a large or small membership informed.**

The online community may function primarily as a newsletter with periodic updates and articles. It might also be used to call for volunteers for specific events or to ask for action. This is a simple type of community, but one that uses many of the same tools as more complex versions and can be a stepping stone. This type of group relies on a signup form to allow members to "opt in" to the mailings, and software to send a single email to everyone on the list.

Example:

- The League of Women Voters sends informational emails on events in the news on specific topics to members who have signed up to receive them.

- **To allow members to express their opinions or discuss an issue.**

These communities are often part of an informational Web site and function like a town meeting. Members can join in ongoing discussions, often divided into specific topics, or can respond to articles posted on the sites. They add a personal dimension to a Web site and are a great way to allow many different people to participate.

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Examples:

- WeightWatchers has a collection of discussion lists where members can act as a support group for each other.
- Boxes and Arrows ([www.boxesandarrows.com](http://www.boxesandarrows.com)), an online magazine, includes a feature for discussion of each article, sometimes resulting in very lively debates.
- **To provide a working team or affinity group with an email address**

Managing a list of email addresses for more than a few people can be difficult. Groupware programs create a single email address for a team, and distribute all of the messages from that address to the people on the list. These lists are often the first step in creating a rich online community, and may have anywhere from two to thousands of members. Unlike regular email, these lists often provide archives of the discussion, which can be made public or be available only to current members.

Examples:

- The Society for Technical Communication creates discussion lists for each of their board committees. Members are added and removed from the lists by the office staff as they are appointed or leave the committee.
- Many medical conditions have support groups where members can seek information, discuss developments in the field, share successes or just “vent.”
- **To provide a working team with a “virtual office”**

This use of online communities extends the email address concept, adding shared file storage, calendars, polling or voting, photo libraries, member profiles, and even online whiteboards. Most of these online

### **SOME OF THE TOOLS AVAILABLE INCLUDE:**

- **YahooGroups** ([groups.yahoo.com](http://groups.yahoo.com)) and **SmartGroups.com**  
Free web services to set up a group with a calendar, files, pictures, voting, database, messages and classified ads.
- **Communitye.net**  
A bit daunting without a techie, but a powerful tool for online collaboration
- **Topica.com**  
Software to manage discussion forums
- **Groove.net**  
A collaboration workspace from the creator of Lotus Notes
- **Evite.com**  
A tool that just handles meeting invitations, including directions and other information that attendees need.

communities are restricted to members-only, providing some of the same tools in the online community that they would have with a bricks-and-mortar office.

Examples:

- The Dogs in Service group uses a virtual office to maintain their calendar of pet assisted therapy visits, and to post forms that members need to fill out. Discussion features are also used to send emails to everyone in the group.

- **To allow a group to build an online information resource**

If the group's aim is to create a new Web site, or some other body of information, there are tools to allow the members to edit a shared set of files. There are two kinds of software for this purpose. One is “content management” software that lets members or visitors add text or other material which is then published (sometimes after an editor has approved it). Another approach is exemplified by Macromedia's Contribute which lets the job of maintaining a Web site be divided among many people.

Wikis (the name is short for “wikiwiki web”—“wikiwiki” means quick in Hawaiian) are one of the newer entries into the field, and one of the most unusual. Wikis work by allowing anyone visiting a web page within the wiki to change it, using just their browser. They are often used by people interested in a topic to collect information about it and share it with others.

Examples:

- The Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) is an encyclopedia that has been built entirely by volunteers and now includes almost

150,000 entries.

- The IAWiki (<http://www.iawiki.net/iawiki>) is a resource for the field of information architecture. It was built by a group of volunteers without a formal organization.

## SETTING UP AND LAUNCHING A COMMUNITY

### First Step: Planning

It's easy to get lost in the maze of different software tools. Each one offers different options, and does different things well. It's helpful to have a clear vision of your goals before you enter the maze and select a tool. Once you have made a choice and set up your community, it is difficult (though not impossible) to make a change.

There are a lot of good free services available on the Web, so you should start with them. The two most popular are YahooGroups and SmartGroups, so they are a good place to start. Some YahooGroups have been around for five years. Most of the free tools are based on advertising, so you have to consider whether this is appropriate for your group. For example, Web cam ads might not be appropriate for a school group. Luckily, there are also inexpensive tools available that get around this problem. In addition, there are the pricier tools that are really intended for large corporations, but which can also work for volunteer groups.

As you plan your online community, remember that technology is not a panacea. It can help solve problems by providing tools you may need, but it will not fundamentally change your group—at least not overnight. Consider the culture and activities of your group, and let the online community reflect these social patterns and needs.

### Next: Set Up the Software

The process of setting up most of the online communities is relatively simple. Both SmartGroups and YahooGroups have a series of forms to guide you through the process. The actual work of setting up an online community has gotten very simple, so worries

about the technology are no longer a reason to hesitate.

Before you start, be sure you have made a few important decisions about how the community will be run:

- Will the group be public (open to anyone) or private (open only to registered members)?
- Will new members need to be approved by a group leader?
- Will members be anonymous, or will their identity be visible to other members?
- Who will be able to send messages to the group: any member, or only group leaders?
- Who will be able to add events to the calendar, create a poll or use other features?
- What will the name (and address) of the online community be?

### At Last: Up and Running

After all that work, you probably want to just sit back and watch your new online community take off. Unfortunately, communities don't just run themselves, and putting technology in place does not automatically make people use it. You need someone to encourage, guide and nurture the group as it gets familiar with the new tools. Not everyone will actively participate at first. Some will hang back and "lurk" while others will take the lead and become your trailblazers.

Here are some tips for running a successful community:

- Be supportive (technically)  
Not everyone is equally comfortable with technology. Be ready to help members who have problems or just need a little help getting started.
- Be supportive (socially)  
You and the moderators can help everyone get comfortable with the new community by acting as good hosts. Make introductions, start discussions, and watch for members who might need a little help or encouragement.
- Practice what you preach  
If you want the group to use the calendar, take the lead and use it yourself. People are more likely to follow if someone has already blazed the trail.

- Identify leaders  
Appoint a moderator or an advisory group to guide the group and extend or revise guidelines. In some groups, this is a rotating responsibility like any other volunteer position.
- Set rules  
Create guidelines to establish how the group will be run. Clearly identify unacceptable behavior, provide examples for good practices, and be prepared to quietly enforce them. There are many examples of good “netiquette” guidelines. An example can be found at <http://www.stcsig.org/usability/activities/listfaq.html>. A longer treatment, “The Core Rules of Netiquette” are excerpted from the book *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea and are online at <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/core-rules.html>
- Know when to “take it offline”  
This might mean encouraging two members to continue a discussion by personal email or phone. It might mean knowing when to set up an in-person meeting or conference call instead of relying on the online community for everything, especially at the beginning.

Finally, don't be discouraged if the online community does not click right away. It takes time for people to get used to new ways of doing things. Keep trying and be prepared to let the group develop in its own way at its own speed. You might be pleasantly surprised by the benefits of setting up an online community: better (and faster) communication, and a whole new set of volunteers who are able to participate.

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#### FURTHER READING:

“A Group Is Its Own Worst Enemy” by Clay Shirky. This article was a keynote speech at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference on April 24, 2003, and was then published on the Web. Shirky talks about social software (or online communities) and some of the human issues he sees in their development. It has a technologist's perspective, but is a provocative read. [http://shirky.com/writings/group\\_enemy.html](http://shirky.com/writings/group_enemy.html)