



Where serious technology buyers decide

Six Strategies for Creating a Successful Online Community



By Christine Herbert, Senior Director, Social Media and Online Community, TechTarget

Creating and growing an online community—particularly in the IT space—is both an art and a science. While IT heavy hitters like SAP, Microsoft, IBM and Cisco have figured out how to create vibrant and engaged online customer communities, many IT marketers still struggle with finding the right formula for community success. The following six recommendations are meant to provide you with the strategic foundation required to build a successful online community.

1. Define your vision.

Do you have clearly defined and strategic reasons for wanting to build or engage at the community level? What are your ROI objectives? What audience will it serve? What topics will you cover? Trying to be all things to all people is a setup for failure, so figure out the answers to these questions as best as you can at the get-go.

Start by creating a vision or mission statement for your community. It will be the compass you can turn to again and again to make sure you are realizing the right vision. Whether you have multiple objectives or just one or two, stating your intent up front is crucial to your ultimate success. Common KPIs for community investment include:

- Cutting down on service and support time
- Soliciting user feedback and spending less money on testing
- Building brand awareness and loyalty
- Driving traffic to your main site content
- Creating advocates and evangelists for your company and products
- Producing user-generated content
- Generating leads and direct sales

2. Find the right community platform.

You can't build a community without a robust and scalable technology platform to support those efforts. But do you need traditional forum-style software or a more robust, full-fledged community platform with innovative badge programs, blogging and gamification features? (Your mission and vision will help define this for you.) Just as importantly, will it integrate with the rest of your back-end systems? How much custom development will be involved? And can you afford it?

Once you know what your basic requirements are, start your research, aggregate your short list, and get out some RFPs. Take a look at CMS Critic's [List of Forum Software](#) article and [The Forrester Wave™: Community Platforms, Q4 2010](#) report for help narrowing down your options.

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3. Invest in superstar community managers.

You can have the best vision and technology platform in the world, but if you don't invest in some great community managers, you're going to be up a creek with your community efforts. From setting the right tone and building membership to creating content and giving TLC to your top 1%, your community managers will be the face, voice and backbone of your community. Community success or failure will largely rest on the shoulders of this frontline team. Do not underestimate the importance of this! Many companies will invest in a great technology platform, but then fail to invest in the human capital required to achieve online community success.

4. Integrate community into a holistic marketing strategy.

An online community is just one piece of a larger integrated marketing strategy—or at least it should be. As you plan the launch and ongoing growth of your online community, revisit all your marketing initiatives to determine how you want to fit community into the holistic puzzle. How can your online community contribute to your content marketing, social media, banner advertising, partnerships, SEO and PPC efforts—and vice versa? Map out community marketing plans and incorporate your community strategy into campaign calendars.

5. Don't forget the metrics.

Remember those KPIs we talked about during the vision stage? You need to have the right analytics and reporting tools to actually measure those. Make sure your Google Analytics, Omniture or other web metrics tool of choice is properly tracking and reporting on community site activity. Beyond basic metrics like page views, visits, time on site, and pages per visit, create reports that identify:

- Most active members (including top 1%)
- Most active content items
- Most popular topics, tags or keywords
- Top search terms driving traffic to your community
- Member lists by demographic, geography, activity level or topic interest

Also consider enterprise social media management tools (e.g., Sprout Social, Radian6 or Sysomos) to supplement your basic web metrics. They'll help you see how your broader social media community is contributing, interacting and overlapping with your site-level community—and help you leverage those opportunities.

6. Be patient and committed.

Don't expect your community to be an overnight success. Building an online community is not a "set it and forget it" or "build it and they will come" exercise. It requires executive buy-in, vision, budget, technological and human resources, and tight coordination with other digital marketing initiatives. If you don't have the time, resources and budget to invest in the care and feeding of your community for at least a couple of years, don't bother. It takes time to foster a community and generate growth. Set the right expectations up front to ensure that your community is given the time it needs to build momentum and thrive.

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Ready to go move from strategy to execution?

Read "[Top 10 Tips for Killer Community Engagement](#)" by TechTarget's TechnologyGuide.com rock star community manager, Chris Leonard, to learn tried-and-true lessons of community engagement.



About the author

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About TechTarget

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TechTarget has offices in Atlanta, Beijing, Boston, Cincinnati, London, Mumbai, San Francisco, Singapore and Sydney.

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