

Creating a Successful On-line User Community



Online user communities are becoming integral parts of corporate websites.

Businesses of all types are finding ways to leverage web collaboration tools such as forums, blogs, wikis and videos to more effectively reach their user bases. The concept of “community” powerful and can extend to customers, partners and employees. In addition to providing a place for these groups to connect and share ideas, companies can use community sites to solicit feedback on their products and services.

Developing a user community requires thought, time and resources. This white paper offers recommendations on how to launch and build a successful community site.

When planning a user community, take the following steps:

Strategy

Before developing your site, determine your business goals as well as how your user community will help achieve those goals.

Website creation

Features and design are core aspects of any community. Build a site that is user-friendly and encourages repeat visits.

Marketing

No community works without customers. Consider creating a promotional campaign to help spread the word and generate new memberships.

On-going support

Actively maintain and update the website to keep users interested over the long term.

The following fifteen tips will help you create a thriving user community on your website. Keep in mind, a site like this will only be as successful as the effort you put into it. These tips will give you the information you need to efficiently strategize, create, market and support your new user community.

15 Tips for Community Success

STRATEGY

Think Through Your Goals

User communities require planning. Before beginning construction, decide what you want to achieve with your site.

- Are you looking to generate new leads? Reduce customer service costs? Increase customer retention?
- How will you measure the site's success? Useful key performance indicators (KPI's) might include new users, increased sales, lowered support costs, etc.
- What ROI do you anticipate?

This analysis will help frame your overall results.

Analyze Your Customers

Your customers' preferences should drive every aspect of your site. Before you start, you will want to consider the following:

- Demographics: What is your user group's average age?
Are they frequent Internet users?
How regularly do they visit your current website?
- Interests: How do these customers interact with your company?
How do they interact with each other?
- Motivations: What would entice a customer to join a user community?
What information will they want to see? What topics would most interest them?

Answers to these questions will help you decide which features to include.

Examine Your Products and Services

Next, consider the products and services you are selling.

- Do you have a brand that inspires enthusiasm, interest and/or loyalty from customers?
- Are you planning a promotion or a product announcement?
- Is your product or service complex?
Does it require technical or customer support?

Your response to these questions will help determine what type of community would best fit your needs. Two examples are promotional or support communities. (For more examples of community types, see www.dotsterconnect.com)

WEBSITE CREATION

Design with the Customer in Mind

Once you have chosen the type of community you want, you will design the new site.

- Determine which features will further your objectives. Obvious choices include groups, friending, profiles, blogs and customer ratings.
- When designing the site's navigation system, optimize its performance to fit the needs of your users. Spend time planning the flow of the site and test its functionality. This concept could be considered a web design basic, but it is critical to creating a successful community.
- Make it as easy as possible for users to join the community. Limit the steps required to sign up. If members must pay to join, create a large incentive. (And it will need to be large).
- Finally, make the site as visually appealing as possible. The look and feel is as important as the features.

Populate with Content

Nothing is less interesting than an empty website. Take time to seed it with appropriate and compelling content.

- Articles, blogs, events, and an "Ask the Expert" section are a good start.
- For a customer service site, create a FAQ. Fill the forums with answers to common problems.
- Discuss topics that go beyond the scope of your product or company. People won't join a community to read a marketing pitch.

Choose a Qualified Moderator

A moderator is critical to the success of any community. Moderators (also called community managers) can fulfill many roles.

- First, they can answer users' questions and remove inappropriate material.
- They can also look for trends in the data and report back on what users are discussing.
- Finally, they can research other online groups and recruit them to the community.

As the site grows, you may consider asking your most active community members to become moderators.

MARKETING

Encourage Early Site Use

Once you have posted content, build a critical mass of users (even before the site officially launches).

- Require your employees to become members and to post regularly.
- Offer preferred customers a preview. Or create a special user group and ask them to contribute as part of a beta launch. Reward them for their participation.

By developing a user base while the site is in beta, you will help to ensure a successful launch. When new users come to the site, they will see robust content and a full community.

Publicize Your Site

As you approach site completion, a publicity campaign is another excellent way to grow the community.

- If you have the budget, a direct mail or email effort can draw a crowd.
- Any campaign should include an incentive for customers to visit the site.
- Design a special invitation and gift for your preferred customers.
- Provide a referral bonus for members whose friends join.
- Send periodic (but sparing) email notifications to update your members.

These are just a few suggestions for promotions. Work with your marketing team to develop your own.

Encourage Repeat Visits

A dynamic community will continue to peak users' interest. Some additional incentives to keep them coming back include:

- Competitions: Create active competitions for the best posts. Tell people their blog or post might be highlighted at any time.
- Member Polls: Post polls and their results.
- Events: Develop an event calendar with online events and trainings.

These activities can be repeated on a daily or weekly basis, depending on your resources.

MARKETING

Reward User Loyalty

Customers who write frequent, high-quality content should be encouraged with points, rewards or increased user permissions.

- Turn outstanding contributors into moderators or give their blogs special visibility. In addition, you may ask them to mentor new members.
- Be sure to give new and upcoming users similar opportunities. Early rewards will encourage them to return.

Loyal customers are your most valuable resource. Consider them community VIP's.

Ask for Customer Feedback

Ask the users what they like and dislike about the site. What additional applications would they like to see? Customers will appreciate being involved and will become more invested in the site's success. As a side benefit, customer feedback will reduce the need for in-person focus groups and may provide new product ideas.

ON-GOING SUPPORT

Update the Content Frequently

Early on, moderators should post entries frequently (daily if possible) as well as respond to customers' posts. This way, users will always find new information when they log in. For variety, add other types of content such as video or games.

Add New Features to the Site

After a few weeks or months, consider a new feature launch.

- These help capture new customers and to re-engage lapsed users.
- New feature launches create marketing opportunities.

Continued updates such as these are essential to long-term community vibrancy.

On-going Support: Develop a Workable ROI Model

As discussed, there are many benefits to using collaboration tools. Some cannot be quantified. Others, however, such as new or repeat customers, increased sales and fewer call center calls can be calculated. Develop an ROI model that analyzes both the hard dollars and the intangibles such as brand loyalty.

Record Your Results

Track your results on a consistent basis using the platform's reporting interface and analytics tools. Weekly or monthly reporting to senior management on the success of the community will more than justify the costs. To learn more about community ROI, visit dotsterconnect.com.

A successful user community
is well supported.

If executed properly, however, these efforts will be well rewarded with a stronger user base, lowered costs and more satisfied customers. For more information on Dotster Connect, visit dotsterconnect.com or call 360-449-5900.