

# 10 Best Practices for Managing Online Customer Communities



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Done right, online customer communities can help companies deeply connect with their customers and prospects, capture marketing insights, and build brand advocates.

From our experiences facilitating online communities over the past seven years, we've found that panels,

chatrooms, blogs and focus groups just skim the surface compared to what marketers can learn from continuously talking with people in their communities.

However, we've also observed that companies' instincts on how to manage their communities are often too self serving, relying on research techniques rather than social networking engagement principles. The reality is that running communities is counterintuitive to what marketers typically do when they get a group of customers together. It's not about just asking questions and getting feedback, although plenty of that goes on in communities. Nor is it about responding to and trying to 'fix' negative issues that customers raise. It is about creating a sense of community among people with common interests, and then tapping into the community in multiple ways, through a variety of methodologies to get into the hearts and minds of customers.

**Based on our collective experience, we have developed these best practices for managing online customer communities.**

## 1. INVITE THE RIGHT PEOPLE, KEEP IT PRIVATE AND SMALL.

When you find people who have a common interest and put them together in a community (fewer than 400 people), their energy explodes. Screen people to uncover interests, passions, and willingness to participate, and avoid using only simple demographic and geographic criteria. Second, keep the community private. More of the right people are likely to participate in private communities than public communities because they feel more comfortable in an environment where they know what they say will only be seen by other identified community members, the facilitator and company representatives.

## 2. VIEW MEMBERS AS ADVISORS TO THE COMPANY.

Think of community members as valuable advisors to your company, not as a market research panel. When you treat community members as advisors they will go to amazing lengths to help your company—and for very little compensation. People in one of Communispace's shoppers communities recently drove over 100 miles to check out and compare

competitive stores despite high gas prices. An important note: be sure to let your community advisors know how your company is using their ideas. The more you reciprocate, the more people will help your company.

## 3. FIND THE SOCIAL GLUE, MAKE IT MEMBER-CENTRIC.

The more focused the community is on topics of shared interest and relevance to its members, the more involved they are likely to be. Don't base a community on just your product or company. Rather, find the commonalities among potential members that are also relevant to your business, and ask people for help in better understanding that particular topic or domain. For example, one pharmaceutical client is exploring the emotions behind a disease and how people make treatment decisions rather than just testing drug ads. A financial services client is exploring not just how people feel about their brand or even just their category, but how and why members have come to consider themselves consumer activists.

## 4. WORK AT BUILDING THE COMMUNITY.

Communispace clients are often stunned when they learn that, on average, 68% of community members are actively participating within 48 hours of joining the community. One reason for such high participation is this best practice: create community building activities that help people quickly understand what the community is about, make them feel comfortable participating, and allow them the means over time to get to know one another. Some of these community building best practices are creating 'rituals' like Tuesday night chats or 'random thoughts' weekly polls asking people to post personal profiles, share personal stories relevant to the community's focus, or upload photos, like pictures of their favorite pet or the inside of their medicine cabinet.

## 5. BE GENUINE, ENCOURAGE CANDOR.

The community's facilitator should set a genuine, open, and candid style and tone for the community. When a new member starts a conversation, make a big deal about how much you value the comment as this will reinforce the behavior. For example, the facilitator may respond, "Hey, great idea. We want to hear everything so please say what you want." Or the reinforcement can be a spontaneous award. Make a conscious effort to give people permission to be honest and say what they really think.

## 6. JUST PLAIN ASK.

Companies often over-think how to phrase a question or issue to community members. The best way is to just ask, simply and straightforwardly. One client came up with a dozen ways to try to understand why African Americans didn't use their products.

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### **7. PAY EVEN MORE ATTENTION TO WHAT MEMBERS INITIATE.**

While companies regularly poll members and ask them to take brief surveys and answer questions, the best insights often come from discussions started by members. How members talk to each other about how an issue or product 'fits' into their lives can be incredibly revealing, as is how members influence one another. Within 24 hours of launching an investment community, there were 11 different dialogue topics underway and only four of those had been seeded by the community facilitators. The rest were created by members around issues they care about. Listen more than ask.

### **8. DON'T SQUELCH THE NEGATIVE.**

One of the most common mistakes marketers make is to try to squelch conversations about negative feedback. "We can't let them talk about that!" is a common reaction. However, some of the best lessons come from hearing about those things that annoy, disappoint or outrage customers. Encourage members to give the good, bad, and ugly.

### **9. DON'T ASK TOO MUCH, TOO OFTEN.**

As marketers get to know their community, many become overly-enthusiastic about the ability to ask customers all the time, any time, about everything—new product ideas, advertising concepts, competitor moves. Don't ask members for too much too often or they will become fatigued.

### **10. USE THE RIGHT MIX OF TECHNOLOGIES AND METHODOLOGIES, AND KEEP EXPERIMENTING.**

Make sure the community is built on multiple underlying technologies and methodologies so that people aren't stuck just answering surveys or posting to message boards, and so you can mine the insights with the right analytics. Engage members through a variety of functions: conduct live chats, create visual member profiles, use icons to classify discussion replies, upload advertisements; ask members to review products, keep diaries. Communispace recommends blending a range of methodologies and modes of expression including ethnographic, storytelling, mystery shopping, role playing, video diaries, and polling. Similarly, keep experimenting with ways to more deeply involve people, create a richer community experience, and analyze what the community's conversations mean to marketing strategies.

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