



## How Communispace Corp. benefits from its customer community

Organizations increasingly see communities of practice as tools to enhance business relationships or integrate customer needs into basic business processes. One such CoP, the Facilitators' Forum at Communispace Corp., the Massachusetts-based CoP software and services provider, has proved to be an ideal laboratory for product innovation and customer relations.

For nearly four years, Communispace Corp. has used its online community of customers, The Facilitators' Forum, for feedback and new ideas, and as a way to build deeper relationships with its clients, says Julie Wittes Schlack, vice president for product design. It generates actionable customer feedback, resulting in faster product development, rapid market insight, and lower market research costs. It is also an ideal place to introduce high-value software feature adjustments at low cost, test new ideas, and market-test new software before a wider launch.

"The Facilitators' Forum is vital for determining priorities for product development, and it gives Communispace Corp. the chance to model an online community for our members," Schlack says. "It gives us a role in co-creating the experience and developing standards for practice along the way."

The community gives participants, who are facilitators for communities in their own organizations, a venue to learn the essentials of managing and facilitating communities. Because trust forms a substantial part of the glue holding members together, they give each other tips, and suggestions for problem-solving, while Communispace observes what gets shared and uses it for product innovations.

The Forum emerged during the company's first year, replacing a simple

threaded-discussion board in every client community, in which Communispace staff fielded questions and responses about the company's products. As soon as the company had a critical mass of customers to draw from, the Forum became an essential product design and customer conversation tool.

### How it works

A personalized home page greets members, who are assigned passwords for access. Members can learn what they missed since they last logged on, and click on hyperlinks that steer them to new content. Both customers and Communispace post announcements about documents or activities, which are also hyperlinked. Members can tell if colleagues are online too, increasing the community feeling.

The Forum provides several options on a left-hand navigation panel, ranging from participatory conversation to individual reading and research. At any one time, the Facilitators' Forum may offer asynchronous dialogue, real-time chat, and instant messaging. Surveys are standard features, as well as a gallery stocked with graphics and audio and text files that any member (or the company) may post and comment on. Members may also browse files and resources that have been archived in a reference center. Participants generate product ideas in a brainstorming area.

Communispace offers training to customers who will be managing communities of their own. They learn how to shape their community's purpose, set optimal ceilings for membership, maintain vibrancy, create a governing structure, and establish ground rules. Facilitators are also reminded of the importance of ensuring that their community relates clearly to their organizations' business processes and objectives.

### Facilitators' Forum: Lessons learned

- Online facilitation is a new discipline, and practitioners are hungry for opportunities to share tips, frustrations, and successes with each other.
- New needs emerge when members seek help from others, and solutions are refined through conversation. Then the conversations are turned into "how-to" documents. "How to" documents are the final step, not the first step.
- Always review assumptions about how "intuitive" or "explicit" to be in the user interface.
- Posting member photographs builds member rapport and engagement.
- Configurability between language, the user interface, and how much power is granted to members and facilitators is critical.

### Communispace benefits too

Communispace receives a continuous stream of ideas and feedback from the forum. The company may choose to build these ideas into its training and product design. Aside from providing a space for customers' to provide input, the Forum offers an ongoing chance for the Communispace to report on its use of that feedback, thereby generating a cycle of feedback and response. *PW*

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