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Art 272-Research Paper 1

Building Online Communities

Human beings are social creatures. We have lived, worked, and played in groups since our earliest days. So the term “community” is no stranger to us. A community can be defined by many things. “A group of people living in the same locality and under the same government.... A group of people having common interests.... A group viewed as forming a distinct segment of society.... Society as a whole, the public,”(Van Doren). These are just a few definitions, from specific to broad. A community can be a group of people that are similar or different, far or near, a group of all ages and cultures. But something must tie them together. “A community is a group of people who gather together around a shared purpose, activity, or interest,” (Fleming). One medium in particular is known for tying communities together, no matter where their members come from: the World Wide Web.

The internet is a perfect mode for communication, so it is no wonder that communities arise out of it naturally. These communities take many forms, but they all tie people together by allowing them to communicate across cultural, geographical, and physical boundaries. A web community is a unique type of community because it does not require people to be physically together to communicate. “When pundits speak of ‘community’ on the net, they’re referring to the unique power of that medium to bring people together across incredible physical boundaries.... People use these spaces to interact in a number of ways,

based on topical interests, similar lifestyles, shared activities, alternatives to real-life meetings, and so on,” (Alt). Web communities use various modes of discussion to connect real people in virtual spaces. People are attracted to them for the same reason they are attracted to any community: social interaction, friendship, support, and a sense of belonging to a group.

People join web communities “to meet a need (such as social, information, learning, or other need), and they normally stay because of relationships,” (Fleming). Web communities offer users an easily accessible, fast-paced, and diverse connection to others all over the world. They allow people to express themselves and reach out to others. “People have an inherent need to express themselves. Experiences that allow people to communicate with each other or simply to be heard tend to be rewarding, satisfying ones,” (Shedroff, 178). Web communities have become increasingly popular in recent years as new technologies arise to connect people faster and more easily. But not all communities are successful. Building a web community takes time, work, and dedication. A community doesn’t just spring up because it can, it arises out of a need and its success depends on its purpose, execution, and the people behind it.

Building a successful web community is a challenge, so where does one begin? Looking at successful web communities already in place is a good place to start. Most successful communities form around a specific idea or interest, aimed at a specific audience. Slashdot, for example, is a web community for technology-oriented “nerds.” Parent Soup is a support community for parents. Ebay is a community where people can buy and sell almost anything. There are many examples of communities that act as support groups, fan clubs, and discussion forums for specific topics or genres. Most importantly, a web

community fills the needs of the audience and the creators. “In a successful community, the goals of the site owner and the needs of members must intersect. Your members need a reason to come back to your community time and time again,” (Bernal). Successful web communities have a clearly articulated purpose and goal, and the members get something out of the experience. “Web communities happen when users are given tools to use their voice in a public and immediate way, forming intimate relationships over time,” (Powasek, xxii). There are a variety of tools that communities use to connect people.

Just as there are many ways to communicate with others in real life, there are many ways people can communicate on the web. When building a web community, the form of communication must reflect the goals and feeling of the site. Before beginning a community endeavor, the use of technology brings up many issues. For instance, will the creator choose to buy software, build the community with free services, or create a custom community by hand-coding it? Often new technology must be learned before a community can be built. It all depends on the community and the resources of the person creating it.

Building a web community does not just happen. Initial planning is needed before anyone starts communicating. First and foremost, a community must have a purpose. “If you can’t define the purpose, it will be difficult to promote your community to other people and potential partners. It will also be hard to keep people engaged,” (Bernal). Usually this purpose fills a need for both creator and users, and this may evolve over time. “Your community’s purpose will evolve, but you need to start somewhere... define your initial purpose as clearly as you can... see if you can identify an ongoing, unmet need that your members have in common and which your community is uniquely

suiting to address,” (Kim). A community may center on a specific topic, lifestyle, or event. A clear, defined purpose is what separates a successful community from an unsuccessful one, it gives people a reason to be there.

The audience is also of utmost importance. The community creator must consider what type of people he wants to attract and what their needs are. The entire community should be designed with the user in mind. The more specifically the audience is defined, the easier it will be to design the community to fit that audience. The audience’s tastes, interests, opinions, demographics, and experience must all be taken into account.

After the purpose and audience are defined, it is time to write a mission statement. “Your mission statement is the most direct expression of your community vision. It spells out what type of community you’re building, why you’re building it, and who you’re building it for,” (Kim). You will also have to create guidelines and rules to keep the community focused on this mission. Setting up rules at the beginning will let everyone know what to expect and how to behave. “Every community site comes with a set of rules.... The challenge, then, is to set the rules wisely, communicate them clearly, and enforce them fairly,” (Powasek, 91). Guidelines help to initiate new members, outline what is expected, and keep the community running smoothly. How the rules are defined and how strictly they are enforced depends entirely on the community environment.

Once the plans are laid down, the design of the virtual space begins. The design of the site must be as simple and user-friendly as possible to keep the community running smoothly. The look and feel of the site should reflect the site’s mission and purpose, and the navigation should be logical and easy to

follow. How a site looks will greatly affect how users perceive it, and how they use it. "The visualization is integral to the communication--as it is the organization made visible," (Shedroff, 90). An organized, simple space will make it easier for people to communicate, while a cramped, confusing space will most likely turn people away. First impressions make a big difference. Consistency between different areas of the site is also important so that users will be able to have a sense of where they are in the site.

Setting up the technology is the next step in building a community site. There are a plethora of ways people can communicate over the internet, and each brings its own set of issues. "Choosing the appropriate communication tools for your community is critical. Communication tools are generally private or public; synchronous (messages are exchanged in real time), or asynchronous (messages accumulate, so you need not be online simultaneously to interact)," (Steuer). Message boards, chat rooms, blogs, instant messaging, and member profiles are examples of common modes of communication. Which you choose depends on the nature of the community you wish to build. The cost, time to run, and availability of communication tools are considerations as well.

Once the planning is done, the site is designed, and the technology is in place, the work has really just begun. In order to attract the desired audience, content and other community elements must be addressed. Content is of utmost importance. If there is nothing interesting to see, learn, or read on the site, why visit it? The content is also important in starting conversations and creating a first impression to visitors. "The key to creating a vibrant online community is to inter-link the content and community.... That way the content is acting as an example and inspiration for the community. The community, in turn, becomes

active in the content of the site," (Powasek, 46). Eventually, as the community grows, members will contribute more and more content to the site, but something must be there to attract them in the first place. "It's not exactly easy to get big membership numbers on which to draw for ongoing content, first you have to convince people to join your site, and contribute or comment on other work, and for that you need to start with good content," (Haughey). The content should fit the idea of the site and appeal to the audience you want to attract. It can then act as a filter, making sure that only those interested in the content contribute to it.

There are many other issues that arise when a community is started. Before going into a community project, they must be addressed. First of all is the issue of identity. When people communicate online, they can choose any identity they wish. Being able to communicate anonymously frees a person and makes it easier for them to open up, but on the other hand it can lead to irresponsible behavior. "If identity is unknown or unstable and if there is no recollection or record of past interactions, individuals will be motivated to behave selfishly because they will not be accountable for their actions," (Kollock). Many communities require users to give their name and e-mail when contributing, others go as far as to require users to create member accounts. These measures are examples of barriers to entry. "A well-placed barrier to entry will develop your site's identity and filter your audience to those with the most knowledge and passion for the subject," (Powasek, 169). Barriers can take the form of requiring names, registration, or simply the content itself. Anything that requires people to commit interest to the community can be a barrier. Over time, other issues may arise in a community. As members become comfortable, they

will begin to feel a sense of ownership for the site. “Members must feel some sense of ownership of the community or they will not participate, care about, or defend the community,” (Shedroff, 190). This ownership is what makes the members want the community to be part of their lives. It can be fostered by creating an intimate environment and encouraging participation. Members may gradually want to be more and more a part of the community. Many successful communities rely on members to write content, maintain the site, initiate new members, and take on other tasks. Creating a sense of ownership makes members want to be part of the team, not just users. Honoring long time members and offering expanding roles for members can help them find their place in the community.

When the community site is finally ready to be opened to the public, the work is just beginning. Advertising the site and maintaining it day in and day out can be laborious but very rewarding. “When you actually launch, do so gradually. Opening community areas one at a time can ease the engineering burden. This follows the design principle of organic growth, and provides an incentive to users to keep returning,” (Streuer). Once the community opens, it may take several months to work out all the bugs, get the identity established, and attract new members. One thing that can aid the growth of a community is to advertise the site and spread the word to friends, colleagues, or interested parties. “As the owner... it’s your job to attract users. The standard promotional approaches (search engine, word of mouth, submitting links to other sites) apply. This is the easy part. Making sure the right people stick around is harder. In a healthy community, that’s not your job,” (Chromatic). Developing a devoted

member base is important to sticking to the community goal. Finding quality people to contribute sets an example to future members.

The person who sets the biggest example to the community is the host, or moderator. This is one of the most difficult jobs in an online community. Hosts fill many roles. "Hosts or facilitators foster member interaction, provide stimulating material for conversations, keep the space cleaned up and help hold the members accountable to the stated community guidelines, rule, or norms," (White). The host should be a vocal and vital member of the community who is easily recognized as a source for help, a leader, and an example. "A host is... an exemplar. Good hosts model the behavior they want others to emulate: read carefully and post entertainingly, informatively, and economically... assume good will, assert trust until convinced otherwise, add knowledge, offer help,"(Rheingold). Hosts above all must be good communicators. They are often the ones who solve problems, deal with misbehavior, welcome new members, and set the overall tone for the community to follow. A host has to create trust so that when they speak, people will listen. "Fairness and consistency are key practices when you're running an online community," (Haughey). A patient, trustworthy, interesting, and vocal host will help to create an intimate and friendly community space.

A successful community will undoubtedly grow. As more and more people participate, a rich knowledge base develops. The community takes on a life of its own, and the results can often be surprising. It is important to let a community evolve in an organic way, and to be flexible when change strikes. All in all, it is the people who make up the community that will decide its direction. "Effective community managers are responsive to the needs of their members,

and while following the guidance of your members will not necessarily lead you in the direction you originally had in mind for your community, it will evolve in the way most valuable to the members,” (Alt). Adapting to growth is a part of every community’s life. Often a community will get so big that a sense of intimacy is lost. This may be a good or bad thing, depending on the goals of the community. “The inability of a single engaged community to grow past a certain size, irrespective of the technology, will mean that over time, barriers to community scale will cause a separation between media outlets that embrace the community model and stay small, and those that adopt the publishing model in order to accommodate growth,” (Shirky). Once a community reaches a certain point, it may be difficult for all the members to participate, so the size of the community is important in determining how engaged it will be. Sometimes, massive growth can lead to the decline of a community, so it is important to consider the size of the audience and how it will impact community development.

Building an online community is difficult and time-consuming, but as any successful community leader will tell you, it can be the most rewarding experience of a lifetime. The internet provides a fertile ground in which people can connect to each other despite barriers, express themselves, and create valuable relationships. Communities that are planned out, well-designed and hosted, and flexible in the face of growth prove to be the most successful and rewarding ones for both users and creators. Communities allow people to do what they do best, communicate with each other, and therefore they bring meaning and purpose to many lives.

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