



# **Building Better Communities of Interest**

## *A Best Practices Guide*

**CommunityXPerts Team**

The Last Mile Group LLC  
San Mateo, CA  
(650) 378-8590



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## Introduction

The Internet is changing the way we do business again. Web 2.0 technologies are taking center stage. They're providing new and innovative ways for people to come together by enabling communities of interest where people can collaborate and communicate online. This phenomenon started only a few years ago, and has been growing exponentially in the consumer sector with the likes of MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and countless other social networking sites that are springing up daily.

This hasn't gone unnoticed in the commercial sector, where organizations are taking the concepts of social networks and transforming them into large scale commercial networks. Organizations are building their own communities and developing social media strategies to engage with their constituents in meaningful ways that weren't feasible before. They are building internal communities employing the new collaboration paradigm for team spaces, process automation, and enterprise-wide intranets, as well as building external communities that reach out to customers, partners, and the general marketplace to gather and share information across their value network.

Why is this happening? Because of the many benefits that organizations are realizing by building communities. Following are some of the benefits that are driving organizations to embrace the concept of communities of interest as part of their overall business strategy.

- Creating stronger relationships and brand recognition with their customers. Communities are a new form of marketing that can provide broad coverage in the marketplace in a cost efficient manner.
- Generating new product ideas and feedback on existing products and services by engaging customers and eliciting their insights.
- Empowering employees, customers, and partners to help one another solve problems, resulting in lower costs.
- Generating a wealth of shared knowledge, which might otherwise be inaccessible because it remains locked in people's heads or on their PC hard drives.

Certainly the younger generation entering the workforce is also having an impact. They've grown up in a "connected" world at the personal level, and in turn, expect this in the business world. The "Net Generation" brings a heightened awareness and comfort with Web 2.0 technologies and the community experience, and serves as agents for change in how business is being conducted. According to a BusinessWeek.com article "Eighty million young people are entering the U.S. workforce. Are today's senior managers ready?"<sup>1</sup>

Are you thinking of launching a community within your organization or in your marketplace with your customers and partners? This paper outlines a set of best practices that will help you achieve success in building or improving your community. There are many things to consider. Like anything else, there are some things that work and some that don't. We hope that you find this information helpful.

## Guiding Principles

A successful community should be organized around a set of “First Principles” that will guide your decision making about the site. People join communities because they have a passion for the content and the conversation on a community site. Remember the member’s point of view and base your plan on the “4 R’s”:

- **Resources:** Provide fresh, relevant, informative content and conversation. Encourage bottom up content creation. This will provide stickiness to the community site and keep members coming back.
- **Recruiting:** Implement methods/processes for attracting members, partners, and subject matter experts to the site who will contribute content on a regular basis.
- **Recognition:** Encourage members to contribute by recognizing them for their contributions to the site and through other programs.
- **Respect:** Encourage members to respect one another by providing guidelines for engaging with others and moderating the activity in the community.

## Best Practices

This section outlines a set of best practices for building a successful community in a business environment. They are based on research and experience in helping organizations build successful communities with highly active and growing memberships. The following diagram highlights the process involved. Each of the phases in the process is discussed in detail in the following sections of the white paper.



## Visioning

Vision building is an important first step in the process to building a community. Identify key stakeholders and ask the following questions to establish a foundation on how to proceed.

- **Why are you building a community and for whom are you building it?** Organizations are implementing community sites for different reasons. Some of the more popular ones include:
  - **New Product Development and Marketing:** Organizations are testing new product ideas with users to get their feedback on product concepts and design. Marketing is using communities to sharpen the business conversation and gain a better understanding of what the market thinks about the value of product offerings.
  - **Self-service Help and Support:** Organizations are implementing community knowledge bases enabling users to solve product and customer service issues on their own. Content is contributed by company experts, as well as the user base which possesses extensive product or application experience in solving similar problems. In addition, forums enable users to directly help one another. This improves the quality of support and helps to reduce support costs incurred by the company
  - **Knowledge Sharing and Process Management:** Organizations are implementing community knowledge bases that create smarter, more informed customers and users. Content can be authored by both internal and external resources providing a rich source of information relating to the company's products and services. This improves the company's brand recognition and stickiness of its products.
  - **Collaboration:** Organizations are communicating and collaborating internally and with their vendors and partners by sharing information that is useful to both parties. This helps to create strong relationships between the parties.
- **What is your level of readiness for building a community?** Successful communities by nature are based on openness, sharing, and transparency. It is important to understand the culture of your organization and its support of collaboration, sharing, and innovation.
- **What value do you provide as the host?** Hosting a community carries responsibilities with it. A community needs good management and thought leaders who contribute fresh, dynamic content that keeps members' eyes coming back to the site. These responsibilities typically fall to the host, at least until the community members step up and become the drivers. To achieve this inflection point takes time and effort on the part of the host. The old myth of "build it and they will come" does not apply to B2B communities.
- **How are you going to manage it?** As the host, you will need to assign a resource(s) to manage the community. Some key management activities include promoting the community to increase membership, moderating the community to ensure content is fresh and dynamic, analyzing metrics to measure and report on the success of the community to management, recruiting active members to assume leadership roles, etc. This may be a part-time or full-time effort depending on the amount of activity and rate at which members sign up.
- **Who is going to build and maintain it?** Like any other software application, communities require expertise to design, develop, implement, and maintain a community site. Depending on the

availability of resources within your organization with the requisite skills, you may choose to hire a consultant with the expertise to build and maintain your community site.

## Planning

The next step is to complete the planning phase by defining major characteristics of the community site.

- **Define the level of user interaction on the site.** User interaction can range from simply posting comments to content on your site, to authoring content, to participating in user chat/IM with other members, etc. The level of user interaction supported on the site can have a direct impact on the level of user participation. Higher levels of interaction can produce fresh, dynamic content that keeps members coming back for more.
- **Define the level of governance on the site.** A major question that needs to be addressed when building a community site is “How much control will be exercised over content entered on your site?” There is a trend toward exercising some degree of control, even on public social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, etc. A site management function that includes monitoring the site and removing inappropriate content is recommended to maintain standards set by your organization.
- **Define the functionality to be supported on the community site.** Functionality can be segmented into three categories:
  - **Core Management.** Provides the underlying functionality to run the community. Examples include member management and access control, site management with monitoring and reporting capabilities, and search.
  - **Media Types.** These tools enable users to create content and hold conversations. Examples include Blogs, Forums, Wiki authoring, and Videos. Web conferencing and chat/IM can be deployed to support real time communication and collaboration.
  - **Capabilities.** These tools enhance the user experience and interactivity. Examples include user tagging and rating of content, RSS feeds, notification when changes to content occur, access to experts and personalization, and creating project work groups and social groups.
  - **Define software platform characteristics.** Prior to getting started, some thought should be given to the type of software platform upon which to build your community site. This can depend on the types of functionality and level of user interactivity and control you plan to support on the site. The platform options to consider include 1) wiki-based platforms, 2) content management systems (CMS), and 3) community-based platforms with built-in support for specific functionality such as blogs, forums, wiki authoring, etc. In addition, the configurability and programmability supported by the platform should also be considered. The level of IT support and customization required will help to make this determination.

## Design

The key steps in designing your community site are outlined below. Note the design phase is not intended to produce a lengthy design document, but a set of descriptive and visual aids that can be used by a developer to build the site.

- Prepare a straw man that defines the information architecture identifying both type and organization of the content, as well the site navigation model. It is critical that members be able to access desired content easily on your community site without having to do a deep dive to find it. Define a taxonomy for content categorization and a page hierarchy scheme to ensure a positive user experience when navigating the site.
- Create user stories describing how users and admin personnel will interact with the site. Review the user stories with management and the project team to get their feedback and approval on the proposed functionality.
- Create a set of wireframe diagrams showing page layouts and user navigation. Review the wireframes with management and the project team to get their feedback and approval.
- Design the look and feel of the site. The design will depend on your target audience. If your site is for internal use only, such as a knowledge base, a basic interface without extensive graphics may be sufficient. However, if your site will be open to external members such as the public, customers, and partners, a more brand consistent interface, similar to a well-designed Website, may be required. The site should be appealing to external visitors on their first visit that makes them want to come back.
- Select the appropriate software platform for building the community site. Based on the platform characteristics defined in the Planning phase and the level of desired customization to meet look and feel requirements, evaluate and select the appropriate software platform. Because the functionality and flexibility supported varies considerably across platforms, it may be necessary to do “mash-ups” and/or integrate multiple applications together to build a site that delivers the required functionality. Easy to use, well-documented APIs supported by the software platform selected are required if you are going to do “mash-ups” and/or customization when building the site.

## Development

Depending on the software platform selected for building your community site, you may be able to complete much of the development effort using the configuration capabilities of the platform. Additional programming and customization may be required to meet the requirements defined in the wireframes and user interface design, as well as integration with other sites that may require functionality such as Single Sign On. An agile programming method, which involves frequent interaction with user representatives, is recommended for doing customizations. This method supports breaking the development effort into segments that can be programmed in short durations (such as daily/weekly), tested individually, and then delivered for final user acceptance testing.

Another step in the development phase is creating the static content that will be displayed such as introductory text on the home page, an FAQ, contact information, etc., and incorporating it onto the site pages.

## Launch

It is important to build awareness and momentum quickly when the community site is first launched. There are several activities involved in completing a successful launch of your community site.

- Complete launch planning activities. This activity includes defining the adoption strategy for launching and growing your community site. The goal is to make the site visible to your target community and generate traffic as quickly as possible after the initial launch occurs. For internal communities, it is recommended to identify a target pilot group in the organization to start with initially that has a need and is open to change the way they communicate and collaborate. Initial success is critical to the remainder of the rollout. There are several questions to consider in conjunction with launch planning.
  - What content is needed to seed your site at launch time? When users visit the site the first time, it is critical it presents well and is pre-filled with relevant content that will attract the interest of visitors and encourage them to register if membership is required.
  - What are ways to generate immediate awareness and interest in the site when it is first launched? Get Marketing involved. Some ways to do this include 1) advertising the launch on your organization's Website, 2) launching the site in conjunction with an event you or a partner is hosting, 3) initiating an email campaign to notify existing members, customers, potential customers, etc. of the pending launch, and 4) issuing press releases through your PR representative.
  - What are methods for growing membership and participation after the initial launch? This is where all four guiding principles (resources, recruiting, recognition, and respect) come into play and must be reinforced on an on-going basis.
- Define the metrics for measuring the success of the community site. There are many different metrics that can be tracked and reported. Some examples include:
  - # Registered Members
  - # Logins
  - # Blogs Created
  - # Discussions Created
  - # Page Views
  - # Comments Entered
  - # Questions Asked
  - # Questions Answered
  - # Members in each Contributor Category
  - # Downloads
  - % Participation Among Members
- Seed the site with content. The site should provide value to visitors on their first visit. This can include existing content migrated from another site, as well as new content developed specifically for launching the site.
- Recruit subject matter experts and facilitators who will author articles and blogs, generate and respond to forum topics, etc. This gives the appearance of an active site from the first day forward.
- Recruit partners to support and participate on the site. An option is to place partner ads on the site that provide the image of an extended community.
- Migrate members from an existing site supported by your company to the new site if applicable. This makes the transition seamless for your existing members when they log on to the new site.

- Organize an email campaign to notify your customers, partners, etc. of the pending launch in advance. Create a strong buzz around the upcoming launch of the site.
- Launch the site in conjunction with a scheduled event to gain visibility and media attention.

## On-Going Support

After your community site is launched, it will need continual monitoring to ensure it is meeting your stated goals. Failure to do so can result in lost membership and traffic. A site coordinator/administrator should be assigned to manage and monitor the overall activity in the community. Some key support and site management activities are listed below.

- Identify and cultivate “movers and shakers” in the community who demonstrate a strong passion and take an active role in contributing interesting and relevant content.
- Recognize members for their contributions to the community. Accumulating member points, posting the names of top contributors on the home page, and providing awards are some of the methods commonly used to recognize and reward outstanding members.
- Monitor the content on the site to ensure it is appropriate for members to view. Inappropriate comments to blog posts and responses to forum topics should be removed from the site quickly and a warning or termination issued to the responsible member. This does not include suppressing legitimate, negative comments entered about your organization or products. The best way to counteract these situations is to respond quickly and turn the conversation around in a positive manner. This demonstrates you are paying attention to what members are saying and will take action in an appropriate manner.
- Identify pages on the site where traffic is light. Make sure the content is fresh. Recruit members to author new articles, create forum topics, and create blog posts more frequently, etc. to generate traffic to those pages.
- Report metrics and progress to management on a regular basis to build internal support for the site.

## Conclusion

Community sites are becoming a strategic tool in business environments. Organizations are building communities not only for internal use, but also communities that span their value network. Web 2.0 tools are replacing older software products to enable collaboration, communication, and content creation and management. The community model addresses the need for knowledge creation and knowledge sharing that is essential in today's business environment. Communities offer the promise of improved productivity, better customer service and a more informed understanding of the market.

Developing and launching a successful community site is not a given. We like to say “Communities are made, not born.” Although community sites can evolve in the post-launch phase, there are numerous things that need to be considered in the planning through launch phases to enable success. It takes much more than deploying technology to ensure the target audience will come, and more importantly, stay.

The guiding principles of Resources, Recruiting, Recognition, and Respect play a critical role in building successful communities. Adherence to these principles will help to attract users to the site, and more importantly, keep them coming back.

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*CommunityXPerts is a business unit of The Last Mile Group, which focuses on building online communities of interest for its clients. We offer a full set of services in assisting our clients through the entire process from visioning and planning their community to launch and on-going support. Our sole objective is to deliver vibrant, successful communities of interest for our clients and their members. For more information on CommunityXPerts, please visit our Website at [www.communityxperts.com](http://www.communityxperts.com) or contact us directly at 650-378-8590.*

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