Hi I need access to this page for a project about online communities I am working on.

Greg Brophy

Best practices for building online communities

1 Design with Potential Members in Mind

Consider your potential members’ motivations and interests as you build spaces for interaction. Don’t neglect members’ desires to express themselves and to find useful content. If members find your community uninteresting, manipulative, or difficult to navigate, they simply won’t engage—and the community will flounder.

2 Prevent Anonymity

Require people to register and log in before participating in the conversation. Anonymous posts stifle trust among members and can open the door to trolls (people who post inflammatory messages to provoke an emotional response) and flaming (posting of hostile messages).

Make It Easy to Register

Make the commitment small—don’t ask for too much personal information up-front. You can always ask for additional information later (for a limited community event, for instance). People shy away from lengthy forms, and they don’t like to divulge a lot of personal information—especially if they don’t see the immediate value of doing so.

Content, Content, Content.

I spend more time deleting emails than I want to admit – and your customers are doing the same thing. They’re faced with ever increasing amounts of data and information coming from dozens of vendors they work with, and they probably don’t have the time to address all of it, or to find the pieces that might actually help them.

If only there was some way to post all the content you’re developing for email campaigns, customer education, best practices, FAQ’s and to have people able to access it at any time, and comment and ask for more….wait, Community?

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**Membership lifecycle**[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Online_community&action=edit&section=8" \o "Edit section: Membership lifecycle)]

Amy Jo Kim's membership lifecycle states that members of online communities begin their life in a community as visitors, or [lurkers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lurker). After breaking through a barrier, people become novices and participate in community life. After contributing for a sustained period of time they become regulars. If they break through another barrier they become leaders, and once they have contributed to the community for some time they become elders. This life cycle can be applied to many virtual communities, most obviously to [bulletin board systems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_board_system), but also to [blogs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog), [mailing lists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_mailing_list) (listserve) and [wiki](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki)-based communities like [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia).

A similar model can be found in the works of Lave and Wenger, who illustrate a cycle of how users become incorporated into virtual communities using the principles of legitimate peripheral participation. They suggest five types of trajectories amongst a learning community:[[26]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-26)

1. Peripheral (i.e. Lurker) – An outside, unstructured participation
2. Inbound (i.e. Novice) – Newcomer is invested in the community and heading towards full participation
3. Insider (i.e. Regular) – Full committed community participant
4. Boundary (i.e. Leader) – A leader, sustains membership participation and brokers interactions
5. Outbound (i.e. Elder) – Process of leaving the community due to new relationships, new positions, new outlooks

The following shows the correlation between the learning trajectories and Web 2.0 community participation.

**Learning trajectory in participation**[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Online_community&action=edit&section=9" \o "Edit section: Learning trajectory in participation)]

**Example – YouTube**

**Peripheral** (Lurker) – Observing the community and viewing content. Does not add to the community content or discussion. *The user occasionally goes onto YouTube.com to check out a video that someone has directed them to.*

**Inbound** (Novice) – Just beginning to engage the community. Starts to provide content. Tentatively interacts in a few discussions. The user comments on other user’s videos. Potentially posts a video of his or her own.

**Insider** (Regular) – Consistently adds to the community discussion and content. Interacts with other users. Regularly posts videos. *Either videos they have found or made themselves. Makes a concerted effort to comment and rate other users' videos.*

**Boundary** (Leader) – Recognized as a veteran participant. Connects with regulars to make higher concepts ideas. Community grants their opinion greater consideration. *The user has become recognized as a contributor to watch. Possibly their videos are podcasts commenting on the state of YouTube and its community. The user would not consider watching another user’s videos without commenting on them. Will often correct a user in behavior the community considers inappropriate. Will reference other user’s videos in their comments as a way to cross link content.*

**Outbound** (Elders) – Leave the community. Their interests may have changed, the community may have moved in a direction that they don’t agree with or they may no longer have time to maintain a constant presence in the community.

Successful online communities motivate [online participation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_participation). Several research studies have investigated methods of motivating participation in online communities.

There are many persuasive factors that draw users into online communities. Peer-to-peer systems and social networking sites rely heavily on member contribution. Users’ underlying motivations to involve themselves in these communities have been linked to some persuasion theories of sociology.

* According to the reciprocation theory, a successful online community must provide its users with benefits that compensate for the costs of time, effort and materials members provide. People often join these communities expecting a sort of reward, whether it is physical or psychological.
* The consistency theory says that once people make a public commitment to a virtual society, they will often feel obligated to stay consistent with their commitment by continuing contributions.
* The social validation theory explains how people are more likely to join and participate in an online community if it is socially acceptable and popular.

One of the greatest attractions towards online communities is the sense of connection users build among members. Individuals are likely to join these sites in order to enhance their likability.[[28]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-28) Participation and contribution is influenced when members of an online community are aware of their global audience.[[29]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-29)

The majority of people learn by example and often follow others, especially when it comes to participation.[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-30) Individuals are reserved about contributing to an online community for many reasons including but not limited to a fear of criticism or inaccuracy. Users may withhold information that they don’t believe is particularly interesting, relevant, or truthful. In order to challenge these contribution barriers, producers of these sites are responsible for developing knowledge-based and foundation-based trust among the community.[[31]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-31)

There are two types of virtual online communities (VOC): dependent and self-sustained VOCs. The dependent VOCs are those who use the virtual community as extensions of themselves, they interact with people they know. Self-sustained VOCs are communities where relationships between participating members is formed and maintained through virtual encounters in the online community.[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-32) For all VOCs, there is the issue of creating identity and reputation in the online community. A person can create whatever identity they would like to through their virtual interactions with other members. Although limited, the most important attribute to an online member is the username. It is what other members identify you by but it says very little about the person behind it. In online communities, your name is your username.[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-33) The main features in virtual online communities that attracts people is a shared communication environment, relationships formed and nurtured virtually, a sense of belonging to a group, an internal structure of the group, common space shared by people with similar ideas and interests. The three most critical issues are belonging, identity, and interest. For an online community to flourish there needs to be consistent participation, interest, and motivation.[[34]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-34)

Research conducted by Helen Wang applied the Technology Acceptance Model to online community participation.[[35]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-35) As a result of research conducted, internet self-efficacy positively predicted perceived ease of use. Research found that participants’ belief in his or her ability to use the internet and web base tools determined how much effort was expected. Community environment positively predicted perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Intrinsic motivation positively predicted perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and actual use. For example if you are confident in your abilities online, you know how to use website tools, and enjoy the online environment, then you are more likely to participate in an online community. Technology acceptance model positively predicts an individuals likelihood to participate in an online community.

## Consumer-vendor interaction[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Online_community&action=edit&section=12)]

Establishing a relationship between the consumer and a seller has become a new science with the emergence of online communities. It is a new market to be tapped by companies and to do so, requires an understanding of the relationships built on online communities. Online communities gather people around common interests and these common interests can include brands, products, and services.[[36]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-36) Companies not only have a chance to reach a new group of consumers in online communities, but to also tap into information about the consumers. Companies have a chance to learn about the consumers in an environment that they feel a certain amount of anonymity and are thus, more open to allowing a company to see what they really want or are looking for.

In order to establish a relationship with the consumer a company must seek a way to identify with how individuals interact with the community. This is done by understanding the relationships an individual has with an online community. There are six identifiable relationship statuses: considered status, committed status, inactive status, faded status, recognized status, and unrecognized status.[[37]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-37) Unrecognized status means the consumer is unaware of the online community or has not decided the community to be useful. The recognized status is where a person is aware of the community, but is not entirely involved. A considered status is when a person begins their involvement with the site. The usage at this stage is still very sporadic. The committed status is when a relationship between a person and an online community is established and the person gets fully involved with the community. The inactive status is when an online community has not relevance to a person. The faded status is when a person has begun to fade away from a site.[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-38) It is important to be able to recognize which group or status the consumer holds, because it might help determine which approach to use.

Companies not only need to understand how a consumer functions with in an online community, but also a company “should understand the communality of an online community”[[39]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-39) This means a company must understand the dynamic and structure of the online community to be able to establish a relationship with the consumer. Online communities have cultures of their own, and to be able to establish a commercial relationship or even engage at all, one must understand the community values and proprieties. It has even been proved beneficial to treat online commercial relationships more as friendships rather than business transactions.

Through online engagement, because of the smoke screen of anonymity, it allows a person to be able to socially interact with strangers in a much more personal way [[40]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-40) This personal connection the consumer feels translates to how they want to establish relationships online. They separate what is commercial or spam and what is relational. Relational becomes what they associate with human interaction while commercial is what they associate with digital or non-human interaction. Thus the online community should not be viewed as “merely a sales channel”.[[41]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_community#cite_note-41) Instead it should be viewed as a network for establishing interpersonal communications with the consumer.

**Promise: Why someone would join a group**

The first challenge to creating an effective promise is that the claim on the users' time for a particular activity must be greater than the activity the users are already doing. A second challenge is that social tools be satisfying to the individual user. Shirky suggests three strategies for handling these challenges.

* Make joining the group easy
* Create personal value
* Subdivide the community