

Community Management Playbook

How To 10x Participation In Your Online Community

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Intro

To build a community of any scale and significance takes a boat load of time, energy and hard work. Even if you have built 2, 4, 10 or even a dozen communities in the past, the specific tactics that worked in one community you managed might not net the same results in another.

To really understand how to start and grow a community at scale is to understand and apply key elements from psychology, sociology, history, marketing and statistics. Applying key principles from each of these subject areas can help you in every stage of your community building journey from recruiting your early adopters, validating your community concept, increasing activity/participation and so on.

In this ebook, I'm going to focus on just one of these areas - activity/participation - as that's the one where I've noticed community managers make the most costly mistakes. I'll outline a dozen techniques to more than double participation in your online community.

Make the community all about your members NOT about you

One of the fastest ways to kill participation in a community is to make yourself the “de-facto king or queen bee. This isn’t the place or time to be the celebrity or all-mighty one. The minute where all your community members just respond to what you do and don’t take initiative to think and post for themselves is the exact time where you “community” becomes destined to fail.

This usually isn’t an intentional move by the community manager. It happens gradually and usually starts with the community manager being super active in the beginning starting threads and responding to everything. That’s necessary to get the community off the ground. However if the community manager stays that active for too long after the community hits critical mass, he/she risks being a “de-facto celebrity.” Everybody just ends up going to him/her to get answers or feedback instead of to the group. So, a tactic that was initially used to seed participation will backfire and cause people not to comment anymore.

Another common way this happens is in branded (usually support-oriented) communities where the brand isn’t open to hearing all viewpoints and refuses to listen and respond to constructive criticism. The worst of the worst is to delete all comments that say something “bad” about your product. The minute you start censoring all content (and not being willing to at listen to constructive criticism) is the minute your community becomes a one-sided dictatorship. There is little initiative for members to participate anymore.

Content is king

This should hopefully be a no brainer. **Your community is only as valuable as the content that is shared in there. PERIOD.**

Encourage your members to share high-quality content early and often.

Some evergreen content suggestions include:

- Welcome new members publicly to the community. Please make the posts unique and don’t have an “introduce yourself” section. In all the communities I’ve managed and participated in, I’ve never seen one that works as well as you want it to.
- Create a weekly email digest, newsletter or even just a stickied post in the forum with “highlights,” “features,” and individual member news.

- Host AMAs with prominent members in your community.
- If you have a blog, podcast, video show or even just put out regular case studies and ebooks, feature members and top content in your community. Just make sure to ask permission first.

Be a role model for the actions and behaviors that you want community members to take

As Jeff Atwood, the founder of Discourse, points out, if you want members to behave and contribute in certain ways, you, as the community manager, need to lead by example. This not only includes creating and actively enforcing your community guidelines, but showing the behaviors that you want community members to emulate.

Use purposeful design principles in your community

As Courtney Couch said [in this presentation at ForumCon](#), purposeful design enables you to clearly answer this question, “You exist to do or solve what?”

One of the best purposeful design site examples is Slack.

Sidenote, if you haven’t used Slack I strongly recommend checking it out. It’s an amazing group chat/collaboration tool. It’s also addicting (no doubt because of how it’s designed.)

You can apply these same principles to your community by clearly articulating and sharing your philosophy/vision in the design. Then, reinforcing it daily when chatting with community members.

Resist the temptation of “feature bloat”

It’s really fun and exciting to run a bunch of new experiments, add new features and try new shiny things (I can’t be the only one right?) This can add up quickly and make your once simple and clean community platform very bloated. It’s just as important to get rid of things that aren’t working so well or experiments that didn’t net the results you were hoping for.

The process of eliminating features is often much harder than adding a new one, as it forces you to be deliberate of the actions you want members to take.

I've been known to pick on Match.com (and other online dating sites) a few times on this blog. I'll use them again as most dating sites are some of the best examples of feature bloat.

On Match.com, you have a dating profile, a search feature, private messaging, a "wink feature" and twenty billion upsells that claim they can help you find your special someone even faster.

All of these features and upsells make for a pretty terrible (cluttered) online experience in my view, as you essentially have three options.

You can wink at somebody, which is pretty much the equivalent of going to a mall and giving random strangers the thumbs up sign and then immediately walking away.

Or, you can send a private message to them. That's pretty much the equivalent of cold calling. Something the vast majority of people despise. This leads people to either not message anyone they like (think fear of rejection or worst being ignored) or people to game the system with inauthentic messages. (Aka the guy who copies and pastes the same message to 100 ladies).

Or, the third option (which Match wants), you keep sending them more and more of your hard-earned money by buying all their upsells hoping that's how you find your special someone.

I've never seen actual proof of this is working. Yet, I bet the conversion rates on those upsells are crazy high since you are appealing to a core human need- relationships/connection- and the overall site UX sucks. (Needless to say, while dating sites might not be effective for finding true love, they do have a crazy profitable business model.)

Stop spending all your time trying to get "lurkers" to participate in your online community

Every community has lurkers. They usually average between 60-80% of all members. That's a significant chunk no matter how you slice it.

No matter how great of a community manager you are, you will never get even half of these lurkers to be regular, active contributors. So, why does just about every community manager (including myself) obsess at some point in time over the next tactic or full-blown strategy to convert more lurkers into active contributors. All you are doing is thwarting your community's growth by obsessing over the wrong tactics and metrics. By catering all your attention to lurkers,

you are effectively building a library. Libraries are boring, and the polar opposite of a thriving online community.

If a library is your sole intended goal, take all of the content of your community and create a Knowledgebase. Zendesk, Uservoice and Salesforce all have great KB tools.

However, as I suspect, you built a community for a variety of reasons and not just to aggregate knowledge in a static site to be searched.

Invest the most time on strategies for converting new members into active, engaged participants

Instead of catering to lurkers, you should invest all that energy and time to your newest contributors. That's where you can have the biggest impact from the get-go. Here's some tactical tips for how to do this.

- In addition to standard "login emails," send personalized welcome emails to all new members. (This is more feasible in smaller communities of say less than 5,000 people).
- Create an autoresponder email sequence with "action-oriented" tips for how they can start participating in the community.
 - Most autoresponders in a community are dry, instant snooze fests filled with community guidelines.
 - Think about it? Most people would want to read a short email with the top most popular recent posts in your community. Nobody wants to read an email labeled, "community guidelines." That lists all the rules and regulations. The latter is basically like sending them the flight safety manual.
- Respond timely to the first post from a new contributor.
 - According to Rich Millington, founder of Feverbee, if a new contributor gets a response to their first post within 5 hours, they are significantly more likely to stay active and engaged in the community.
- Optimize your response time.
 - I would recommend blocking out a 15 minute interval every three hours, to start with. This way you can do a quick surface-level glance of your newest contributors and respond in a very timely manner. You can set a reminder right in your Google Calendar. Or, you can create a Slackbot command in Slack, an awesome group chat tool, which will automatically ping you when it's time to check back into your community.

- Seed questions that have low barriers to entry.
 - It can be intimidating for a newbie to comment right away, especially in B2B communities. Make sure you are seeding questions that anyone would feel comfortable answering.
 - One really popular question is creating a welcome discussion where you introduce each new member in your community on a regular basis (i.e. weekly or monthly depending on how active the community is).
 - Some great evergreen conversation starter questions are:
 - Android or iPhone?
 - What's your favorite blog post or video that you have seen recently?
 - If you could meet one famous person (past or present), who would it be and why?
 - If you could have one superpower (and only one), what would it be?
 - If you could have dinner with 3 famous people (past or present), who would you choose and why?

Make your top contributors feel like rockstars in the community

The community isn't about "YOU." It's about your members. You should do everything in your power to make all your members feel welcome, safe and comfortable to share in your community. This is especially true if you are lucky enough to have some superfans (i.e. people who go out of their way to post frequently). Go out of your way to acknowledge and thank them. I've chatted with a lot of community managers who think the only way to engage with top contributors is to shower them with rewards and company swag. While they will probably appreciate the free stuff, I've found that most top contributors aren't participating for swag and monetary rewards. They are in it for more internal pursuits- such as increased credibility, recognition, attention, wanting to give back, etc. The most impactful things you can do are write a genuine thank you card or email or jump on an informal call every once in awhile. You know actually take an interest in them as a person (who has friends, family and a life outside of this community) instead of just a number that can help your community keep growing up and to the right on all those fancy graphs you have to make.

The more they feel like they are being heard and appreciated, the more likely they will stick around.

Gamification, giveaways and contests are not the cure-all for increasing participation

When it comes to launching a new online community or driving more engagement in an existing one, the first suggestions community managers usually bring up are gamification, giveaways and contests. It has become the default, go-to answer for many. I've seen this approach result in all kinds of headaches and problems time and time again.

Gamification can work well when it's thought through and used to highlight the culture and ethos of a community. However, the majority of communities do not use gamification in this way. They treat it as this tactic that will automatically increase engagement without thinking through the consequences. It takes a lot more than a shiny badge, a new title and flashy new swag to motivate someone to become more active in an online community. Or, at it's absolute the worst, the ridiculously expensive and elaborate sweepstake contests that many large brands have grown fond of on Facebook, Pinterest and yes even Snapchat in recent years to increase "community engagement" on their social media accounts. That's not gamification. It's simply bribery.

This creates all kinds of problems. The first and biggest being that you are essentially poisoning not only the new members you bring into the community but also existing members. You basically are sending the message that the only reason to participate anymore in the community is to get some sort of reward or incentive. This creates an engagement strategy that simply will never be scalable and effective long-term. It's no different than email marketers that get a little overzealous with giving out special discounts and promos to their subscribers. You are essentially training subscribers – i.e. the people who are generally the most loyal to your brand- to only buy from you when items go on sale.

A second problem with gamification and giveaways is the very nature of them being "quick win tactics." While you may see brief spikes in activity as people are drawn to the shiny and new, that excitement around the new swag or badge goes away as quickly as it started. That leaves you with always having to find bigger, shinier and better swag to give out, until at some point when even that isn't enough. You find that your community has turned into a branded ghost town, as all your members just "disappeared" to chase the next giveaway.

That's where gamification can go so wrong. It focuses too much on the shiny and superficial one-and-done interactions (the so-called "quick wins") and not enough on fostering the relationships that will make your community thrive in the long term. It's the relationships between community members and in many the cases the community and the brand that will make a community scale exponentially higher.

Embrace the 80:20 Principle (a.k.a Pareto's Law)

Delegation and automation are admittedly skills that I have historically sucked at. It's only in the last year or so that I have really started to embrace it. As someone who routinely used to clock 60+ hours a week in my first couple years as a community manager, working smarter and figuring out how to automate and delegate some tasks has been the answer to fend off burnout and get better results. Sure, there are still a few weeks that I burn the midnight oil and work 60+ hours, it's now very much the minority and reserved only for tight project deadlines or events.

One of the first things people think of when it comes to delegating is learning to say "NO" to all the projects that aren't HELL YEAHS! However, this isn't always possible, as there will be tasks and projects that you should work on or need to do that may not excite you 100%. For example, you probably can't tell your boss that you are going to stop running weekly or monthly reports just so you can free up an extra hour and because you hate doing them. That's probably not going to lead to a favorable outcome.

Saying no to some extra (nonessential) projects is a good first step. That's probably not going to be enough. That's where it pays to get smarter about delegating and automating all the work that you can. It's probably a lot more than you originally thought you could automate. **If there is one thing I'm learning is that you can pretty much automate or delegate anything that doesn't require directly managing relationships or interacting with community members.**

If you really want to get good at knowing when and what to delegate, spend time with a friend or mentor who is an entrepreneur or small business owner. By default, they have to be master delegators. Even if you think you are superman or superwoman (news flash, you aren't), you simply cannot do it all. **The best entrepreneurs know how to manage their time, energy and resources on the 20% of strategies and tasks that net 80% or more of the results.** This is commonly known as Pareto's Law or the 80:20 Principle.

As community managers, I think this is something that most of us can do A LOT better. It's easy to think you should do all the things and be everything to everybody. So, we take on that extra task for our coworker? Or, agreed to do that one more report? Or, put together that new presentation? Or, write 3 blog posts each week when one post from us and two from within our community would net the same or greater results.

It's all about really understanding your community and knowing your numbers. Then, going all-in on the 20% of strategies and tasks that net the biggest impact.

Embrace the 10x Mindset

If you have worked in a startup (like myself), you are probably familiar with the term, “10x.” You have probably heard senior leaders and executives say this ad nauseam. If you are not familiar with the term, it’s a way to subtly change your mindset to think bigger and prioritize initiatives with the highest potential for scaling and growth. If you think how am I going to 2x or 3x something, you typically set that goal, reach it and hover there.

I’d argue that community builders should adopt this same mindset. It’s about focusing on the big community wins. Big community wins are the things that can help you scale your community team, give you a bigger budget to work with and potentially lead to a raise or promotion. Small wins lead to coasting in your role, not growing as much as you could be and essentially doing the same thing day in and day out.

I think even some really great community managers get stuck in the small community wins sandbox. Here’s some signs that you are stuck in the small wins pool.

You are doing the same exact tasks that you were doing six months ago .The community industry is changing so flipping fast, that if you are doing the same things you have been doing for 6+ months. There’s a really good chance you are getting left behind or thinking too small.

- You haven’t had even a modest raise in the last 12 months.
- You haven’t been promoted in the last 12-18 months.
- If you have been doing community for more than 2 years and you still spending more than 50-75% of your total workweek on pure tactics, such as writing tweets, finding stock images, replying to comments, etc.
- All of your core community metrics are either growing in the single-digits or have flat-lined for an extended period of time.
- You feel like you can’t go on vacation for a few days without the community going to shit.

Make sure that you actually want to build a community

Just because you can build a community doesn’t necessarily mean that you should. David Spinks, the founder of CMX, emphasizes the need to think of communities like products. When you do so, you can apply the Lean Startup principles to building your minimum viable community. This means that it’s absolutely essential that your community solve a problem. You must solve a real problem not a fictional one created by your boss saying we need a community talking about us. Or because our competitor has one (Generally never a good reason to do anything!)?

Without a real problem or existing motivation, the community is destined to mediocrity at best- and more likely failure. Justin Isaf said a good minimum viable community test is to try and start a Twitter chat. If you don't have enough interest to hold a chat, then you probably don't have enough interest to build a community.

Final Takeaways

Building a community takes time and a lot of hard work. It's important to be very clear and communicate your end goals the community. If you are building a community for work, tie these goals back to core business objectives (ideally ones you can tie directly back to revenue). Ex: Does it increase sales or decrease support costs?

Then, check back in on your core goals often to track your progress. I recommend doing this at least once a quarter (if not monthly).

Lastly, if you have any questions or feedback about anything in this guide, feel free to email me anytime at jmalnik@gmail.com.