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1. Introduction
An online community can provide incredible value for an event and for its attendees.

The organization hosting the event builds **brand recognition and loyalty**, creating a **sticky relationship** with community members, while the event attendees meet each other before they arrive (avoiding that awkward "who do I talk to?" moment at the receptions), make **meaningful and useful contacts**, and **stay in touch** afterward.

Healthy communities need nurturing

But healthy communities don't just build themselves.

This guide provides a set of **best practices** for encouraging the kind of healthy, engaged activity you want to see in an online community. While it draws on our experience managing Pathable-based communities, lessons can be applied equally to almost any **kind of online community**. Regardless which technology or technologies happens to be powering yours, we hope you will benefit from the lessons and guidance we've drawn from our experience.
2. **Set Your Goals**
This should “go without saying”, but it's surprising how often it's “said without going”. *If you don't know what you want, you're unlikely to get it.*

Before you leap into building an online community, be clear about what you're hoping to get out of it. Reasonable goals include:

- **Increase registrations** and drive **earlier registrations** by demonstrating visible excitement and momentum around your event
- **Improve conference quality** by providing a feedback channel
- **Drive attendee value** by enriching the social experiences offered
- **Raise attendee satisfaction** by providing a forum to meet and network beyond the event itself
- **Encourage brand loyalty** with your attendees
- **Develop user-generated content** by providing a forum where attendees can express themselves

Which goals you choose will have a big impact on where you focus your resources. And you must focus: try to achieve every goal equally and you're likely to achieve none well.

*Prioritize achievable goals and build your strategy around them.*
3. Assign a champion

Someone in your organization must know that it is their job to ensure the success and health of your community. If nobody feels responsible, nobody will be responsible.

*Community can’t be outsourced.*

There is a growing industry of “community managers for hire” out there. These are social media, community savvy people who offer to help you tend your community. It’s not a bad idea to hire someone like this, although it’s not strictly necessary, either. It all depends on how big your organization is and how much time you have internally to spend on it.

However, regardless whether you go that route, this shouldn’t be a substitute for having an internal champion. A third-party community manager can help with the strategy and mechanics, but only “native” community members know the personality of the community as a whole well enough to create an organic, natural relationship.

Now, don’t be scared! This doesn’t mean that suddenly someone is going to be spending 40 hours per week managing the community. It can be as little as 15 minutes per day of checking in, responding and starting conversations, but the key is that someone knows that they have been empowered with the responsibility to grow a successful community.

This also isn’t meant to imply that once one person has been assigned, everybody else can turn their backs. Your organization will benefit by its members participating in the community. Take advantage of the opportunity!

**Guidelines for choosing your champion:**

- **End the Draft!** Your social media champion should believe in the value of what they are doing and buy into it. If someone is assigned the task but doesn't understand why it's important or, worse, resents it, you're setting that person up for failure.

- **Organizational respect:** You'll be tempted to assign this to someone young, perhaps a college intern, thinking "young people get this social networking stuff, so here's a perfect fit." This isn't necessarily wrong, but it's not necessarily right, either. It's important that your social media champion has the respect of your organization and the community that they'll be participating in.

- **Organizational knowledge:** Your social media champion will be speaking on behalf of your organization. To your attendees, they will be the face of your organization. Make sure the person you pick has the knowledge (and writing skills!) to accurately and positively represent you. They're not going to get a review on each message they send on your organization's behalf. *If that worries you, you've picked the wrong person.*
4. Set aside time
One of the biggest mistakes you can make when building your strategy for tending your online community is to think that someone can do it in their "spare time".

*There is no such thing as "spare" time.*

Work abhors a vacuum and will expand to fill time.

That said, time can be prioritized. Everyone chooses how much time to spend on any given task, and can choose how much time to invest on each task. It's essential therefore, that whoever is responsible for the success of your community has explicitly set aside time for it.
5. Recruit the stars

Why do some nightclubs succeed and others fail? They're playing the same music. They're serving the same drinks. So what’s the difference?

Savvy club owners recruit high-profile notables to "be seen" in their club. The presence of the “cool people” lends a cachet to the club. This helps attract other people which, in turn, attracts more people and the success cycle has started.

You're probably already doing something similar when you choose speakers. You know that attendees choose to attend an event in part based on the line-up of speakers (notables) that will be there. It's both an attraction in itself and an indicator of the overall quality of the event.

Do the same with your online community! Identify the well-known members of the population your community comes from and recruit them early.

**When the first attendee arrives at the site for your online community, the important people should already have joined and have public profiles set up.**

This will add the perception of value and credibility to your site that will create the success cycle.

**Tips for Recruiting the Stars**

The "important" people might be: your speakers, industry gurus, bloggers, people in the conference's sponsoring organization(s), even enthusiastic customers. Microsoft, for example, has had a great deal of success by granting "MVP" status to customers who participate actively in their online discussion forums. These MVP's end up being the kindling and spark for highly engaged, interactive communities.

Important people tend to be busy people, so make sure that your stars get the value proposition of participation (and that there is one!)

Some hints:

- **Expose them**: Many people are involved with events because of the exposure it offers them. Speak at one event, for example, and you may be invited to speak at more. In your invitation messaging, make clear that involvement in the community isn't just a responsibility; it's an opportunity to be seen.

- **Offer feedback**: Speakers in particular may want to make sure their talk is well-targeted for their audience. Participating in a community with the attendees can give them direct access before the event to audience expectations and desires.

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The best leaders in any community grow into leaders. They become the leaders, they become the voices...you can’t just bestow the title of leader on someone that the community does not respect. It’s crucial that a community grow its own leaders.

- Chris Pirillo, Lockergnome
• **Offer perks**: Offer special perks to those who agree to be your ambassadors. For example, many events have had success recruiting bloggers by offering preferred seating, dedicated power outlets and hard-wired Internet access at the sessions. These same principles can be extended to the online world. Does your community software allow you to mark certain attendees as "ambassadors", for example? Can you create a badge that the special attendees can post to their own web sites, trumpeting the fact that they are stars?

• **Flatter them**: Make sure your stars "feel the love". Invite them in early because they're special and important, and make sure they know you've invited them in early because they're special and important.

• **Twist their arms**: OK, the title here is tongue-in-cheek, but when all else fails, you may choose to include requirements around participation in an online community in the contracts of speakers and other stakeholders. Remember, waving the threat of a lawsuit at someone isn't likely to encourage positive participation, but friendly reminders that it is part of the agreement they signed to can help get the lazy off their couch and onto their keyboard.
6. The Editorial Calendar Strategy

Persistence is the key to success. That means that you shouldn’t expect your community to take off of its own accord, or even when you give it a nudge. You may have to keep at it, nurturing and nudging, until it gradually picks up momentum and eventually flies on its own.

So how can you ensure that you don’t stop nurturing and nudging too early? We recommend taking a page from the magazine world’s playbook.

Most magazines employ an “editorial calendar”, a preset schedule of topical content. You can employ this same idea when planning the conversations in your community. For each time frame (e.g., one per week), identify a topic and several people that agree in advance to participate in a conversation on that topic. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Owners</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Questioner: Jane Smith Responders: John Doe, Mary Carson</td>
<td>What is the role of government subsidies in promoting the growth of the wind energy business, and how will it impact the United State’s ability to compete with China?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Questioner: Harold Sam Responders: Becky True, Wanda Morgan</td>
<td>What was the most surprising technology innovation of the past year?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this example, there are two weeks worth of topics that are pre-planned, with specific people identified and recruited to start and participate in those conversations.

Respected leaders within the community (could be staff, speakers, thought leaders, friends of the Association, etc.) are recruited in advance and agree to start the conversation.

Confederates

Don’t stop there, though! The last thing you want is to have a respected expert start a conversation, and have it fall flat. That can set the wrong tone for other people who may be thinking about starting their own conversations.

Instead, recruit additional people to agree to respond to the person who starts the conversation. By ensuring that someone responds to every conversation started, you model the behavior of participation for your members.

If someone posts a question and nobody responds, it’s disheartening for the whole community. Nobody wants to be the next person that posts a question.
that nobody responds to, so questions left unanswered can have a chilling effect on your community.

Instead, by ensuring that every topic started gets multiple participants, you encourage the rest of your membership to start their own conversations, confident that there is an active community around them that will leap in and join. Think of it like asking your friends to step out onto the dance floor to kick off the party.

Eventually, you may be able to retire the calendar and the community will keep its own momentum, but don’t be discouraged if you have to step out in front at the beginning.

You can download a Community Calendar template from Pathable’s web site:

   http://www.pathable.com/social-networking-software-resources/
7. Tips and Tricks

Lead by example

Just like different "real world" communities have different unwritten rules and expectations around involvement and behavior, so do online communities. The problem, of course, is that they're unwritten, so newcomers aren't always sure how to behave.

What do you do when you come into a new social situation? You tend to look around and see how others are behaving. Are they talking loudly and over each other, or are they quietly taking turns speaking? Are they talking about their personal lives or are they talking about their jobs? Are they poking fun at each other, or are they being careful and respectful? There are times and places when all of these are appropriate, and times when they aren't, and the only way to know which you're in is to watch and listen.

The challenge with an online community is that when it's first formed, there is usually no good example. Who starts the first conversation and establishes what are "safe" topics for conversation? Should questions be expressed as short "how do I do X?"-type queries, or are people expected to provide some context and background? Should people introduce themselves before they begin?

The best way to establish the kind of communication you want in your online community is to lead by example.

Set the tone. You be the first one to start a conversation. Ask a question, draw people out. Heck, arrange with an ally to have a dialogue, where one of you asks a question and the other one answers. Until people see what the expectations are for the online community, they will be reluctant to stick their neck out with their own questions and thoughts.

Communicate the Value

While it may come as a shock to those of us who make our living in the social media business, much of the world thinks there are better ways to spend their time then mucking around with online profiles. That means that when they receive an invitation to your online community, and if they visit it for a look-see, it's critical that the value be immediate and obvious.

Here are some ideas that we've found to resonate:

- **Mention the industry leaders** and speakers by name who have joined
- **Call out interesting conversations** that are happening within your community (and if those haven't started, start them!)

- Tracy Recondon, WestSeattleBlog.com
• **Connect the call to action to their goals**: "make sure you connect with the right people", "don't feel left out at the networking reception", and "build your connections in the industry"

**Control the Trolls**
"Troll" is the Internet term for someone who is intentionally disruptive to a community. While it certainly evokes the "troll under the bridge" image, which is appropriate, it actually comes from a fishing metaphor, where dragging your hook in the water, hoping a fish will bite, is called "trolling". The lesson is, if you "bite", you play right into their hands.

*We have never had a single instance of a troll disrupting a Pathable community.*

Before we dive too much into the details of how to deal with this problem if it happens, it's important to place this in perspective. Most of the trolling that you see on the Internet is by anonymous or semi-anonymous (e.g., screen-name only) users. Social pressure to “behave” is incredibly strong. When people feel that they are known and accountable, they are very unlikely to act out.

That’s why we think we’ve been so successful at building healthy communities with Pathable. Everyone has a name and a face next to their message, and everyone knows that at some point, they’re going to be in a room with everyone else in the community.

However, if you’re managing a community where this isn’t the case, there are some simple lessons for resolving these issues gracefully.

**Tips for dealing with troublemakers**

• **Listen**: Before you react emotionally, stop and carefully read what’s going on. Does the person have a legitimate complaint or concern that he is perhaps expressing in a poor way, or is this really just a troll trying to get a reaction? If it’s a real idea expressed poorly, try to reframe the issue in gentler terms and address in a friendly way. By taking the high road, you improve your stature in the community and by re-framing the conversation in friendly terms, you guide the participants to the path you want.

• **De-anonymize**: People frequently say things on the Internet that they would never say to someone in person. There's something disinhibiting about the anonymity that the screen provides. It's the same reason people act crazier at costume parties: there's less of a sense of personal accountability. So the more you can present yourself as a real human being, and the more you can de-anonymize the trolls,
the more likely it is they'll feel implicit social pressure to behave. This is why online communities that include photos of the participants are generally better behaved than those that are text-only (like mailing lists).

- **Remove**: At the end of the day, there's only so far working with some people will go. As a community manager, you have a responsibility to the community to keep it healthy. If that means removing someone from it, do it quickly and with as little blood as possible. Remember that your goal is the overall health of the community, not your own personal sense of vengeance. Be polite, be firm, be quick, move on.

**Cross-pollinate**
Remember AOL? For a period in the 1990s, it practically was the Internet.

Where did it go? One of the key contributors to AOL's downfall was that they tried to create a "walled garden", an online community that didn't interact with the rest of the Internet around it. But there was so much of value going on in the Internet in general (after all, people and companies all over the world were constantly building new sites and services), that people fled to services that didn't constrain their activities.

Don't try to lock your users into your private social network, squelching their activity on other services like Twitter and LinkedIn. Instead, **embrace and aggregate** those sites. Pathable provides some powerful tools for doing so, like our integrated Twitter live stream and chat, live display of RSS feeds as well as displaying "who you know" from Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

The key is to a) understand where your users are and b) go to them, rather than trying to corral them into what you want. If your population is part of the "Facebook generation" and the style of Facebook fits your brand, make sure you have a presence on Facebook through a Facebook Event page. You can use that forum to alert your attendees to activity that's going on in whatever community area you prefer (e.g., your Pathable community).

**Don't Advertise**
Let's say you've invited a friend over for dinner. Midway through the conversation, he casually asks you about your life insurance policy. Next thing you know, he's pulled out a binder and is handing you pamphlets.

If you're like us, you're going to tell him "oops, the cake's been ruined, there's no dessert, gosh it's getting late, so sorry you have to go, bye now!"

You are trying to create a sense of home in the online community. Don't ruin it by overt marketing.

Don’t worry, you can still get your message across. The key word here is "overt".

It's critical that you present this information as you would if you were talking to a friend. Let them know the news, let them know why you're excited about it, but make sure it's presented in an *educational way* and as *part of a*
dialogue. Listen, respond, let the participants guide the conversation, but don't try to force it.

The same goes for the conversations between the attendees. If a loudmouth walks into your party and starts trying to sell their product or promote themselves, everyone is going to start looking for their jackets.

**This is as critical as controlling the trolls.** If you see someone violating the spirit of community within your site, be polite, be firm, and be quick. Remove their message, explain why you did so, and, if you choose, leave a public message reminding everyone of the rules. Here's some text you can borrow:

> Reminder to all: Please do not use this online community to directly promote your products and services, as that is detrimental to the congenial atmosphere we're creating. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to ask questions, get to know each other personally, share educational information of interest to our industry, etc.

It's been great to see some of the conversations that have started thus far. I'm interested to see what else is on people's minds. Are there problems you'd like the input of your peers on? A new idea you've run across you want to share? Thanks in advance!

We've found that one or two of these reminders are enough to keep people on track.

**Know your attendees**

Online communities and social media strategy are not "one size fits all". Ask any 50-year-old blue-chip account manager who signs in to MySpace, or any 16-year-old Blink 182-loving snowboarder who creates a LinkedIn account.

**The biggest mistake you can make when assessing your attendees needs and abilities is to assume "they're just like me".**

We all tend to assume that everyone thinks the way we do. This can lead to strategic errors because, as a group, those involved in organizing events are different than those who attend events.

If you are an event planner, here are some ways in which you are probably different from your attendees:

- **Event planners are more outgoing than the general public.** Most people have a hard time making conversation in a crowd of strangers.
- If you are in the leadership of an organization, you are much more connected than everyone else. Don't assume that because you know
everybody in the room, everybody knows everybody else. There are lots of people at every event who are feeling very lost and lonely.

- **Event planners tend to be more risk averse** and are slower to adopt new technologies. This makes sense: if you're responsible for ensuring that a 20,000 person event goes smoothly, you're going to be very, very reluctant to change something that has worked previously unless you *have to*.

How do you find out what your attendees really want?

Ask them! Use a survey or a poll to see where they are spending their time online. If you find your audience is all on Facebook, make an investment in a Facebook presence. If many have LinkedIn profiles, be sure to build a LinkedIn event page and invite them to join. If they “live in e-mail”, set up a mailing list, or use Pathable’s integrated mailing features to reach them where they live.
8. Summary
If you’re feeling overwhelmed by all the instructions, let us leave you with one simple catch-all:

*Be the community you want*

Start the conversations you want people to have, use the tone you want used, be the leader you want to lead.