18 Rules of Community Engagement

A GUIDE FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTING WITH CUSTOMERS ONLINE

Angela Connor

"18 Rules of Community Engagement" Book Excerpt

A Guide for Building Relationships and Connecting With Customers Online

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HappyAbout.info

BOOK EXCERPT Table of Contents

C o n t e n t s

NOTE: This is the Table of Contents (TOC) from the book for your reference. The eBook TOC (below) differs in page count from the tradebook TOC.

Foreword by Peter Shankman

We live in a world populated by more requests for attention than at any other time in history. From the time our alarm wakes us up in the morning, until the time we go to sleep, we're assaulted by a non-stop barrage of requests for attention. Twitter this -- Facebook that -- Advertise the other thing -- Join this community, be a part of this group -- it's beyond overwhelming -- it borders on obscene. And if you're tasked with managing it all for your company...best of luck! There used to be a commercial that talked about "herding cats." That's very 2002 -- this is all about herding millions of people -- every day, and forever. How do you get them there? How do you make them "come to your side," as it were?

Back in the mid-90's, I worked for America Online -- one thing they were hardcore about was never forgetting that it's the user who drives the experience. The company makes the product, but the user has to like it -- without them, making the product is futile. That's about a million times truer now then it was back then. Now, the question is choice. If you can't find a way to engage your user, give your customer a feeling of personalization each time they shop with you, and most importantly, make them feel like they need, not just want, to come back, then you'll lose. Remember, Amazon started out as a bookstore. Are you listening? Are

you building communities and truly engaging all your interactions? If not, put this book down, and go get a Latte and the latest edition of People. But if you know you need to do it, this book might just be able to show you how.

Peter Shankman
Founder, Help A Reporter Out - HARO
http://helpareporter.com

1 If you build it will they come?

The answer, simply, is NO! Many organizations and businesses mistakenly believe that if they provide the tools for community engagement and interaction, a community will form on its own and ultimately engage and interact. Nothing could be further from the truth. Creating an online community or social network with user profiles, blogs, forums, chat rooms, image galleries, and other bells and whistles will not make it a destination for compelling conversation or encourage users to create content. Allowing comments on blogs and news stories won't make people post them, nor will opening a chat room attract large groups of people who will enter and start chatting. Along those same lines, creating a forum won't make interesting topics suddenly appear. Providing the tools is only the first step toward building and growing communities and it isn't the most important one. While providing the tools does indicate a desire to bring people together, it does nothing to actually make it happen.

It takes a different kind of investment to grow community, and a major portion of that investment is TIME. The other part is engagement. If you don't have the time or patience to engage and do so genuinely, or if you're unwilling to pay someone who can do it on your behalf, you cannot realistically expect to grow a community around any topic,

or succeed in an existing one. What you will do is waste a lot of time and set yourself or your organization up to fail. My advice to you would be: don't even bother.

Why communities fail

A study of more than 100 businesses with online communities found that 35% had less than 100 members and less than 25% had more than 1000 members. This was published in the Business and Technology section of the *Wall Street Journal's* Web site on July 16, 2008.[1] The headline was: "Why Most Online Communities Fail." According to the article, Ed Moran, the Deloitte consultant who conducted the study, indicated that most of the sites failed to attract visitors because businesses focused on the value the community could bring rather than investing in the actual community.

That was a big mistake, and most of the people who took the time to leave comments with that story agreed. A blog poster by the name of Mitch Bishop wrote: "The success of online communities is directly related to the passion of the participants, not the money invested by the underwriter." Susan Salgy of WebWise Solutions, a company that creates corporate Web sites and Web communities wrote: "We have seen this time and time again—companies want the benefits of a community without ponying up the content and attention that will deliver the core value to community members." She went on to mention that her organizations' best clients understand the scope of the commitment, and provide the necessary long-term nurturing that will make it a success.

The key phrase in that statement is long term. Success will not happen overnight, and anything short of a long-term commitment will produce mediocre results. Communities fail when no one is tasked with providing that long-term nurturing. Communities fail when they are neglected and taken for granted and when the assumption is made that it will always exist or that if you build it they will come. Communities fail when the endurance needed for success is underestimated or misunderstood.

The recommendation made by Ed Moran, the consultant with Deloitte, was dead on: "Put someone who has experience running an online

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1. http://www.tinyurl.com/5jahuy (http://blogs.wsj.com/biztech/2008/07/16/why-most-online-communities-fail/)

community in charge of the project." I'm convinced that this is the best solution. In fact, it's the only solution. Enter, the Community Manager.

What is a community manager?

What exactly is a community manager? And what does this person actually do? Well, it depends heavily on the goals of the individual, group, or organization behind the community. The goals of a company looking to grow brand recognition, connect with customers, and grow its customer base will differ slightly from an organization or individual interested in bringing together cancer survivors or music enthusiasts. A blogger working to build a video-gaming community will have a different set of goals and perhaps a different approach than a retail store like Pottery Barn, a cable giant like Comcast, or a nonprofit organization like the American Red Cross.

These differences make the role of a community manager very unique and underscore the importance of having clear goals and knowing what constitutes success. With GOLO, WRAL.com's online community, I strive to attract new members who live in or have strong ties to the Raleigh/ Durham area (North Carolina). I want them to feel that GOLO is the best local community on the Web, where they can make friends, learn from others, and voice their opinions about the things that matter most, the great majority of them being issues that are geographically relevant. The original job description for which I applied stated the following: "Energetic, community minded person needed to oversee all aspects of content creation and editing for new community based internet product. The ME will provide vision and long range planning/direction for all content areas while managing balance between staff, freelance and community generated content related to the Raleigh/Durham area."

The job also involves cultivating relationships, and with this tagline: "Go Local. Talk Local. Share Local" it's easy for me to stay in line with the day-to-day mission and long-term strategies. That tagline guides almost everything I do within the community. Without a clear-cut mission, you will find it difficult to reach your goals. General goals such as "Reach out to the community and communicate" will only get you so far. What are you reaching out to the community for? What are you communicating about? Those are the questions that have to be answered so you can gauge your success. FreshNetworks, a European firm that builds, manages, and moderates online communities for brands such as Microsoft, HSBC, and Procter & Gamble stresses the

importance of the community manager and the need to focus on the skills and strategies needed to build, grow, and manage an online community.[2]

In a call for participants for the International Online Community Management Association, German blogger Sascha Carlin describes online community management as a challenging profession that involves facilitation and moderation and refers to community managers as product managers of a special kind with a potential audience of millions. The challenge, according to Carlin, is knowing how to reach these people, what services to offer to them, and how to get them involved in our companies' business goals.[3]

Community strategist Connie Bensen characterizes the position as "broad and encompassing," with this definition: "A community manager is the voice of the company externally and the voice of the customers internally. The value lies in the community manager serving as a hub and having the ability to personally connect with the customers (humanize the company), and providing feedback to many departments internally."[4] While Bensen's definition seemingly applies to enterprise only, phrases like "personally connect" and "humanize the company" are far from corporate. They bring personality into play and that resonates across the board. The rules of engagement are the same for Ford, Comcast, and JetBlue as they are for Pottery Barn, *The New York Times*, bloggers, marketers, business professionals, and entrepreneurs. They just have to be tailored to meet individual and specific goals. Some of the 18 rules laid out in this book will be more helpful than others but each rule should be practiced at some point to determine which deliver the best results.

Beyond the "role"

More important than the role, so to speak, are the attributes of the individuals filling it. The face or voice of any community should be a committed individual who will reach out to community members, encourage them,

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2. http://www.tinyurl.com/cwlyup (http://blog.freshnetworks.com//2008/12/lets-focus-on-how-we-build-and-manage-online-communities/)
3. http://www.iocma.org/community/blog/13-iocma-call-for-participants
4. http://www.tinyurl.com/clhb5n (http://conniebensen.com/blog/2008/07/17/community-manager-job-description/)

value them, and make sure they know their presence is appreciated on a daily basis. They will troubleshoot, sympathize, empathize, and make things happen.

If there is no one actively engaging with users, and doing so with a purpose, the community will cease to exist. That said, community managers have a tall task. So what's the most important role of a community manager? I threw that very question out to my twitter network and received several interesting answers. Martin Reed, author of the blog Community Spark[5] and creator of the online community Female Forum,[6] said the role of a community manager is to facilitate, encourage, and develop relationships. Blogger and veteran copywriter Scott Hepburn said the most important role is that of host: making introductions, announcements, and fulfilling needs. Community manager Holly Seddon stressed the importance of respect. She says you must respect members but at the same time maintain an ability to keep coherent boundaries in place. Deb Ng agrees. As community manager of Blog Talk Radio[7] and cocreator of Kommein.com, a Web site focused on community building, she feels the most important job for a community manager is to keep the lines of communication open and foster relationships.

You can't force community

In a post on the blog Branding David, author David Peralty mentions very matter-of-factly four words that anyone who has attempted to bring people together online and form communities is quite familiar with and know to be gospel: *You can't force community*.[8] You can build it, foster it, cultivate it, and shape it. You can nurture it, believe in it, and support the members who make it what it is on a daily basis. But you can't force it. Keep in mind that shared interests is what brings people in a community together, and online communities can only thrive if people visit regularly and spend a good amount of time when they do visit. And given the fact that no one willingly wastes this precious commodity, it should be a major priority to create experiences that are worthy of their time and make them want to

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5. http://www.communityspark.com
6. http://www.femaleforum.com
7. http://www.blogtalkradio.com/
8. http://www.brandingdavid.com/business/you-cant-force-community/

return and give even more of it. In a nine-page document called the Online Community Manifesto, author Richard Millington writes about some of the things we need to know about communities: "We need to know what motivates people. We need to know the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. We need to know how to create communities founded on these motivations."[9] A good community manager will strive to learn those things about the community. Once learned, it's easy to take what you know and keep the community engaged. When you're running a voluntary ship where time is donated and can't be bought, you're left with only one option and that's to earn it. I want to help you do just that. In this book, I will share what I know and some of the things I've learned from others while managing the online community GOLO.com, from its infancy to its current status of more than 11,000 members with dozens joining every day.

9. http://www.tinyurl.com/c9vkop (http://richchallenge.typepad.com/files/communitybuildingmanifesto-1.pdf)

4 Stroke a few egos

Community managers must check their own egos at the door and realize that without the community, they have nothing. You need them more than they need you, and that will pretty much always be the case. There can be a fine line between stroking egos and coddling individual members and you will sometimes find that you have to do a little bit of both.

There's no harm in letting people know that you need them. In fact it gives them a sense of pride and ownership in the community that ultimately serves you very well. So even after you've doled out your daily compliments (which we'll discuss in Chapter 9), you still have to stroke a few egos. You have to let the major players know that you see them as major, and the prolific bloggers have to be told how well they write. When someone posts pictures of a wedding or a new baby, compliment them on their lovely family and breathtaking photography and tell them you want to see more.

If someone shares a bit of information that resonates with you, tell them as much. If their jokes leave you in stitches, encourage them to keep them coming. Conduct interviews with the pillars of your community and post them prominently for everyone to see. Reward your top posters, continuous

content creators, and keepers of the community. Offer them a stake in the community with additional duties if that's something you can offer. Make them feel special and let them know you're watching. If it sounds like a huge task, that's because it is. It's an important one too and should be done on a daily basis. It isn't something you have to spend hours doing, but it's wise to carve out at least 30 minutes of your day to recognize the members who keep the community afloat, and spend a good portion of their time on your site.

In case you're wondering how you can do this effectively and efficiently, here are a few suggestions:

- **Tell them you miss them.** ("Haven't seen you in a while, I hope everything is okay. We miss your humor.")
- **Send a personal e-mail.** ("Hey, you were one of our top posters last week. Just want you to know how much I appreciate your time. Keep it up!")
- **Ask for input.** ("I'm thinking of making some changes to the chat tool, and would love your thoughts.")
- **Encourage communication with other community members.** ("Johnny23 is looking for tax advice, aren't you a big time accountant? Maybe you can help.")
- **Make a promise, and keep it.** ("If you do decide to take more pictures let me know and I'll feature them on the home page. Your photography is top-notch.")

These types of exchanges may seem insignificant but they work wonders and make people feel valued and appreciated. Whenever I receive a personal e-mail from a blogger whose blog I read and comment on frequently, it makes me feel a tad bit special and I know they want me to keep participating. I also recognize it as an effective tactic to keep me engaged because I use it myself with my own community. If you produce content on the Web and participate in any type of social medium, you must give back in some way to those who consume your content and attempt to interact with you. There is no gesture too small. It can be as simple as sending a "thank you."

Get to know the community

I've found that it's easy to stroke a few egos when you have personal knowledge about community members. As the managing editor of GOLO.com, I come in contact with a lot of members both in public and in private. Many members communicate with me openly on my profile page and others e-mail me behind the scenes. I encourage both methods and respond to all inquiries. I want the members to feel comfortable and if they prefer private communication I most certainly oblige.

I am simply amazed at how much I've learned about individual members through such methods. From reading blogs, viewing image galleries, and paying close attention to the way members interact, and by following their comments, I have somehow learned a little about a whole lot of people. I can name the professions of at least thirty members, personal hobbies of others, and even first and last names for many, including those of their children. I know that we have members with children in Iraq, members who have lost children, members who are recently divorced, recovering alcoholics, fighting eating disorders, and battling cancer.

I know that one member is a chef, another owns a landscaping business, another is obsessed with "The Rock," and another has the most disgusting feet you ever want to see. This is a new level of sharing and highly valuable information that you can use to build relationships even further. When you're properly armed with valuable information and pay attention to what's going on in the community, ego stroking comes pretty easily. I find it pretty painless, and believe it or not it can be quite rewarding.

About the Author

Angela Connor is a multimedia journalist and community manager with a passion for online communities and social media. She is the Managing Editor of User-Generated Content at WRAL.com where she launched and currently manages the top-rated news organization's first online community, GOLO.com which has grown to more than 11,000 members in 18 months.

Angela's news management experience spans broadcast, print and online news at TV stations and newspapers in Cleveland, Tampa, West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale. She writes the highly-read blog, Online Community Strategist and is often requested to share her social media insight and discuss the benefits of online communities at conferences and organizational events.

Angela develops policies and best-practices for handling user-generated content and driving user engagement, and serves on the Digital Media Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists. She lives in Holly Springs, NC with her husband and two young daughters.

**Getting "18 Rules of Community Engagement"
(http://happyabout.info/community-engagement.php)**

"18 Rules of Community Engagement" can be purchased as an eBook for $14.95 or tradebook for $19.95 at http://happyabout.info/community-engagement.php or at other online and physical book stores.

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