

COMMUNITY AS A FIRE-PIT

We now host conversations and get the hell out of the way.¹

—TYLER FONDA

The word ‘community’ gets slung around a lot in our online and offline worlds, doesn’t it? (Google it and you’ll get more than five million results.) Podcasters don’t have listeners; they have communities. Non-profit organizations don’t aspire to have thousands of followers on Twitter; they reach out to ‘peeps’ like you and me who act individually, or in consort, as a community of advisers or evangelists. Media organizations, book stores and political organizations have similar needs. They want us to bond, and speak out as a *community*.

I get that. I’m sure you do too.

While social media could sometimes feel like a fire hose, online communities powered by social media could be a fire pit. Social media has been fawning over the word community. New job titles such as ‘Social Media Community Manager’ quickly appeared. It was one of Kiplinger’s (a publisher of financial advice and business forecasts)

‘ten jobs that didn’t exist ten years ago.’ On Quora, the popular site for answers, the question was posed about how much should a Social Media Community Manager make. The answer was between \$35,000 and \$40,000 a year at minimum. Here’s how someone put it:

For larger brands with established social profiles where their social strategy is part of their brand identity (I would *think we are moving from social media manager role to a brand manager or curator*) - a role that is more about defining a brand, I could see a salary range north of \$80,000.²

But the word ‘community’ is fraught with problems. It is over-used, in the same way the word ‘strategy’ was abused in the 1990s. In a lot of discussions, you could substitute ‘communities’ for ‘audiences.’

I like to think of a community as a group of people gathered around a fire pit, swapping stories and building strong relationships, without ever needing to reach for an iPhone. Or a group of people sitting around the village water pump, informing a newcomer about where he could go to get supplies, probing him for ‘news’ about the town he came from, and checking out his credentials in a friendly way. The visitor picks up a twig and sketches on the sand an image map of his village, and his family tree. His simple ‘infographic’ draws them closer. His ‘stylus’ does not need a tablet to enable knowledge sharing. The people around get it. They thank the fellow, give him a bag of corn for his insight, and for ‘checking in’ at the pump, and go on their way. This is not to dismiss the value of technologies that give us a new kind of connective tissue, but rather to consider communities in terms of *what* gets shared, not *how*.

Building a community takes a lot more than automated invites to a Facebook fan page that takes about eight minutes to set up. I’ve

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joined, set up, run into and been invited to a few dozen of them over the past few years. Each one has a different dynamic. Some are clunky and badly designed, but have surprisingly great participation. So what is a community?

If you reach back to early academic discussions on something known as *asynchronous group interaction*,³ you'll recognize that what we have today are ongoing experiments on how people gather around different fire pits to share ideas, argue and work out solutions. We may use technology, but we are "transitive" to the Internet's communication flow. It is another way of saying that our online engagement and participation in social good is as important to the healthy workings of the Internet as it is to us.⁴ We still meet strangers at the local gathering place, but the water pump happens to be online.

CROWD-SOURCING A CURE

Pat Elliott came across one the hard way. Interpersonal communication studies explore how humans are hardwired to function as nodes through which our communication flows, and I would consider her one of these nodes. A Phoenix, Arizona-based communication professional, Elliott joined several—70 and counting, she says—online communities. As a communicator, she had run into CaringBridge, a nonprofit Web-based service that builds a community around someone facing a critical illness or undergoing treatment. But it wasn't until she was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a rare form of cancer, that she signed on.⁵ More than half a million people connect through CaringBridge every day.

These online communities are not just places where patients share small talk, and provide virtual shoulders to cry on. They are deep in conversations that are proving to be valuable to more than patients.

Researchers, for instance. MIT Media Lab set up a unit called MIT Media Medicine for just this kind of knowledge sharing. It believes that patients are the most underutilized resource within the entire healthcare system. Patients! Few people think of patients as communities. It's easy to see why Six Sigma users, recruiters, or project managers, might form online communities, but there has been a recent explosion of patient communities.

In one instance, in studying Lymphangioleiomyomatosis (known as LAM), a fatal disease affecting the lungs, kidneys and lymphatics of women in their child-bearing years, it began looking into how these patients could connect via chat rooms and social networks. The idea was to see how these conversations could be mined for potential therapies and a cure.⁶ The community site it set up, LAMsight (www.lamsight.org) enables patients to teach investigators about what researchers might be overlooking. They can ask questions of their peers and see various trends in data through pictures, graphs, and charts.

Another group, known as the Patient Safety, Pharmacovigilance

"Social media and communities are expected to continue to play a significant role in the way in which companies are interacting with employees, customers, partners and the larger business ecosystem, thereby redefining the very edge of the corporation."

—Ed Moran, *director of product innovation, Deloitte Services LPP*

and Risk Benefit Management Group, founded in 2008 on LinkedIn, has 1,850 members. A snapshot of its activity shows that discussions on drug safety are high.⁷ Even doctors and radiologists huddle together in similar communities to share

knowledge. MIT believes that these unlikely communities forged between non-clinical "experts"—anthropologists and computer scientists—would pose the unconventional questions, and elicit breakthrough answers. These questions would spur innovation in medicine.⁸

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More people think of these online chats as capable of finding cures. But beyond being another “family and friends” social network, CaringBridge has given Elliott an easy way to stay in touch and form bonds with doctors, researchers, and strangers from many parts of the world. It also lets members maintain a journal and invite people in their network to visit and stay informed. By tracking back-and-forth communication, it eliminates the need to send or respond to dozens of individual e-mails or Facebook, LinkedIn, text and Twitter messages every day. “If you suddenly find yourself having to deal with something you know nothing about—like a very rare illness—it’s highly likely that there’s support literally at your fingertips from others who’ve walked in your same shoes and will share what they’ve learned with you,” Elliott says. These people are from diverse backgrounds, with completely different world views.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Online communities come in various flavors. Digg is a commu-

SUPPORT FOR CANCER PATIENT

Pat Elliott’s illness came during the healthcare reform debate and was a topic on several blogs. The passion shown by the bloggers led her to make her own illness public. She discovered the power of community.

“The books available from my local library are out of date. The data available from the nonprofit charitable organization for my illness is out of date. The local cancer organizations don’t provide extensive information on the rare forms of cancer. Through social media I’ve connected with fellow CML survivors and healthcare professionals who specialize in treating CML and gained access to cutting edge, real time information on how CML is treated around the world.”

Social communities have another benefit, says Elliott. “My co-survivors use online groups to bring us the latest ‘news’ about CML before it even hits the healthcare professional media—and this is information that the mainstream media does not cover.”

nity for sharing and discovering content. Members of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) community share ideas on topics ranging from pet care to animal cruelty. Or consider Freecycle.org, a global community built around sharing and re-using items. Teachers and Wikipedians form communities. As for teachers, in the U.S., their town well is what's known as "communities of practice" or 'CoP,' in which peer-to-peer learning opportunities are encouraged.

The Wikipedia entry for 'communities of practice,' states clearly that this is not just some online phenomenon, populating the usual

MIT'S NEW MEDIA MEDICINE MANIFESTO

MIT's Media Medicine lab asks the bold questions central to its knowledge sharing goals, which are also pertinent to the collaboration and knowledge in online communities.

What if we could make the doctor a persistent educational presence in the patient's life, using avatars, intelligent agents and awareness systems instead of a few rushed office visits? What if we could empower ordinary people to report on outbreaks or health events in their communities, with timely information not captured by traditional health establishments?

In its New Media Medicine Manifesto it sets out three principles.

- Principle # 1: Patients are the most underutilized resource in healthcare.
- Principle # 2: The revolution must take place in our everyday lives, not in the doctor's office or the lab.
- Principle # 3: Information transparency, not information is the solution.

places such as discussion boards and newsgroups. But they are also found "in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment."⁹

Most often communities are all about empowering people through interactions, not commerce.

Social Media Community Manager positions often involve shades of brand management. When this role is engaged, there is a temptation to steer conversations by starting 'brand conversations,' because,

after all, most organizations want to check the pulse of how its community is connecting with its external communication and branding. There are terrible ways to do this, and there are smart ways. The more egregious are when an organization starts a Facebook community just to create happy talk about its marketing. It goes well until, well, someone throws a grenade into the crowd after finding out the organization is engaging in double standards.

Unilever's Dove commercial came under attack on Facebook when someone noted that the same company that promoted 'beauty from within', was creating crass, misogynist advertising for its Axe brand. The community it didn't know existed came out of the woodwork to engage with the brand. Avon, on the other hand, no stranger to social marketing, lets brand talk evolve organically. At Avon Connects, (www.avonconnects.co.uk) one of its 10 online communities for its 6.4 million independent sales reps, someone asked about "Avon Branded Trolleys—Yes or No?" It received 246 replies and suggestions.¹⁰

PEOPLE SEEK PEOPLE, NOT PLATFORMS!

Where do you start if you want to build an online community? There are a number of online venues—also known as 'platforms'—available. Ning, which is the platform behind the ASPCA community, does not require Web design experience. In fact, Ning is also the platform behind a diabetes site, Tu Diabetes (www.tudiabetes.org), run by the Diabetes Hands Foundation. One of the features on this community is TruAnalyze, an application through which patients could track, analyze, and compare their Hemoglobin A1C levels.¹¹ Big Tent, another free community building platform, is easy to set up as well, attracting groups such as nonprofits and homeschoolers.

It is important to pick a platform that suits your organization's

long-term needs, and not just be tempted to go with the look and feel of a flashy interface. I was able to set up a Ning community in less than fifteen minutes. It did not require any design or coding skills to include apps for photo sharing, a polling feature and being able to set it up for live streaming of video.

Also consider how much moderation you will need. Unlike traditional, static websites, community sites let a non-technical user take charge. But there's a flip side to this. Someone should maintain updates, and keep the site dynamic. A 2009 study by Deloitte, LLP, of more than 140 organizations involved in building online communities recommended against adopting an "if you build it, they will come" attitude.¹² Why? It needs constant maintenance and human input. Some things—human passion included—can't be fully automated.

A community after all, is more than the sum of the social media technologies you throw into the back end. In communities, as in communication (as the Deloitte report wisely noted), it's important to tap into Human 1.0. We are so enamored with the technical bells and whistles of social media that we forget that communities come together in spite of these, not because of them. The app or the device may be the onramp, but it isn't the glue that holds people together. Learning the technology of community building is a lot easier than learning people, observes Richard Millington. "Technology is an inputs-outputs process. It's easy once you know how. People aren't so robotic."¹³

It is easy to be seduced by the idea of 'instant communities.' Sometimes, as in the case of disasters or controversial issues, a spontaneous community may come together. But building a community and benefitting from a sense of community are two different things. It takes time, not apps.

In the next chapter, we will see how supplanting passion with automation is not enough.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BUILD AND NURTURE A COMMUNITY?

- **Think micro, not mass.** Mass media went after big audiences. Social media work best with niche groups. Online communities are best when they have a personal look and feel to them.
- **Empower users.** Provide the tools to let everyone—not just the admin person—steer the boat. Lay down some basic guidelines, but let users manage the service on their terms. They are up to the task, and want to chat to each other. About 32 percent of members in online communities post comments.¹⁴
- **Don't build a silo.** It's easy to turn a community into a content dump. Ning (Ning.com) and Big Tent (Bigtent.com) let you connect the dots to other areas where people interact and engage with complementary communities. CaringBridge, for example, partners with healthcare organizations, professional groups such as the National Alliance for Caregiving and several foundations.
- **Be social, not commercial.** It's tempting to promote products or an agenda, or to “monetize” the site with floating ads and pop-ups. Don't! Many community managers make the mistake of forcing ‘brand conversations.’ Focus on bonding, not branding.¹⁵
- **Be open to ideas.** The community will let you know what works and what doesn't. Be open to feedback. A community is always a work in progress.
- **Assign someone to the care and feeding of the community.** 32 percent of online communities have no full-time employees assigned to them. Be part of the 68 percent!