How to Run an Effective Online Community

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Preface:

Ping Gadget was designed so you can be involved as little or as much as you would like with conversations now made possible on your website. It is possible to install Ping Gadget and then do nothing, just set back and let your online community and conversations evolve without any intervention on your part. Ping Gadget can operate all by itself automatically.

On the other hand, Ping Gadget provides the tools to manage your online community to the maximum extent that you may want. The rest of this white paper tells you the things you need to know to run an effective online community. You may choose to use and implement all, some, or none of the following suggestions. It's up to you to decide.

So if you are interested in learning how you can manage your online community to the maximum extent possible, let's get started.

Introduction:

Welcome to starting your own online community for your organization. This paper "How to Run an Effective Online Community Program" will give you the tools to make it an success. Look over the table of contents. Each chapter is important to grasp in order to make you an success. So let's get started.

Involvement & Commitment:

So you have just installed the Ping Gadget Community Management program on your website. Now all you have to do is set back and let the conversation begin. That statement is about as far from the truth as it can get.

Instead, it is the long term building, nurturing, and interaction with your online community that will determine the degree of your success. If you do little, that's what you might get, little. If you spend the time and resources in building and nurturing your community, you will reap the rewards of your endeavors.

This paper "How to Run an Effective Online Community Program" will give you the tools you need to be a success. Your commitment is the only other thing you need.

Define Your Goals:

It is important to know where you want to go before you get started. First look at the type of organization that you are. Are you a company that wants to build brand loyalty, maybe you are a cancer survivor group, or maybe a rock band, or maybe a video game group. Don't you think that each of these groups might have totally different goals and strategies.

Look at your organization and ask yourself, what kind of organization am I and what is its goals. Only you can answer these kinds of questions because each organization is so different.

However, a good general checklist to help you think about your goals are the many of the benefits shown in the document/video "What Is an Online Community and What it can do for You". They are:

1. *Create a Positive Brand Experience* - It creates a positive brand experience which is valuable and differentiates you from your competitors.

2. *Create Loyal Customer/Members* - Once your customer/members begin to interact as part of your online community they engage and begin to bond to brand/cause. The greater the interaction, the greater loyalty that ensues.

3. *Get your Message Across without Advertising* - People today turn a deaf ear to advertising and most the time it's not heard and if is heard it's not very credible. However, if done properly you can get your message out with far more amplification and believability with an Online Community.

4. *Find New Prospects (Viral)* - By using viral aspects of your Online Community your customer/members can reach out to their network of friends and contacts to bring them into the community or at least introduce them to the image of your brand.

5. *Control your Message* - Your customer/members are talking about you whether you like it or not. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. You might as well listen in. You now have the opportunity to correct negative comments. It might be change something in your organization or explain an misconception.

6. *Get Customer Testimonials* - An Online Community is a great place to pick up testimonials for use in your marketing programs.

7. *Customer Help Desk* - When your customer/member asks for help in your Online Community you can quickly and easily respond. Others listening may have the same issue and you help them to.

8. *Increase Website Traffic* - Now there is a reason for customer/members to keep coming back to your website so they can continue their conversations. This really increases your website traffic.

9. *Optimizes for Search Engines* - Search engines are looking for volume of use of a website and key words. With significantly increased website traffic and the abundance of key words used by your Online Community your search engine ranking will greatly improve.

10. *Product Development* - You can use your Online Community to bounce ideas off of about new products that you are considering. Or even better yet, ask them what they want.

11. *Product Testing* - An Online Community is a great place to test. You can send samples out and get feedback back. You can run survey's, run focus groups, and have your customer/members chat about the thing you are wanting to test.

12. *Data Mining* - You can collect data about your customer/members. You can have them fill out information on their profile pages or ask them to complete a questionnaire about themselves.

13. *Spend Less on Marketing, Saves Money* - Your community can become evangelists for your company/non-profit. Through viral and word of mouth aspects, they take on some of the load for marketing in your organization.

Community Manager - Appointment, Duties, Effort:

Appointment - Appointing someone in your organization to become the Online Community Manager is an important duty. In some ways you may make or break your program with this decision. What are some of the criteria in making that choice. They are:

1. *Reflects the Culture of your Online Community* - This is an extremely important criteria. To illustrate think about having an older cancer survivor be the community manager of a cancer

support group. Another example is to have a marketing person become the person building brand loyalty, Another might be an opera enthusiasts be the community manager of an opera.

2. *Enjoys People and Conversation* - For the most part this is what a community manager will do each day. They will be posting and responding to conversations with people. If one doesn't enjoy it, they won't be an effective community manager.

3. *Comfortable with the Internet & Social Networking* - This one is pretty obvious, if the person hardly knows how to turn on a commuter it will be difficult to operate an on line community.

4. *Is a Good Employee Even before they Become a Community Manager* - There are many other general aspects of being a good and productive employee. They should be there before you appoint them to become your community manager.

Duties - The community manager has many duties which include customer/member recruitment, engaging the community with , posts, comments, e-mails (day to day engagement is probably the most important for success), policing for unwanted content, measuring success, and other varied activities. The next several chapters will describe these community manager activities in considerably more detail.

Effort - Each online community will vary to the extent of time commitment required to manage your community. However, for most organizations starting an online community it will only require a part time person. As a rough guideline it has been said that one full time community manager can manage up to a 50,000 population community. Another chapter titled "Management Helpers" can reduce the amount of effort and still get great results.

Customer/Member Recruitment:

Now that you know your goals and know how to appoint a community manager it is time to start recruiting customers/members to your online community. The following is checklist of various ways you may want to recruit.

1. *Recruit from your Corporate Website* - By using the Ping Gadget "join the Conversation" on your corporate websites you will be inviting your customer/members to join in the conversation.

2. *Recruit from your E-mail and/or Direct Mail Customer/Member Lists* - A great way to introduce your new online community service is to invite your current customers/members to come to your website and join in the conversation. Some good rules to follow in making your invitation are:
   a. Don't look spammy.
   b. Make it personal

      c.   Keep it simple

      d.   Include a call to action

      e.   Be aware of the line where scrolling is required

3. *Buy/Rent a E-mail List* - You can purchase opted in e-mailing lists selected for demographics that fit the type of potential customers/members you want to attract. Invite them to check out your website and join in the conversation.

4. *Online Advertising* - You can negotiate co-registration agreements with other websites. Users of the other website can click on your ad and to join your online community. Payment is usually made by PPI (pay per impression), PPC (pay per click), or CPA (cost per action).

5. *Recruit with Search Engine Marketing* - Google, Yahoo, Bing and Others - You select key words that potential customers/members might search on. Once a potential customer searches on the key words selected they can find you in two possible ways.

   The first way is for you to optimize the search engine so your ad will show at least on the first page of the search. This method is free but hard to do and cost a lot always chasing it. The other method is to pay per click on your advertisement. Although sometimes expensive it is far easier to accomplish.

6. *Promote with Your Current Sales Literature & Programs* - Advertise Your Ping Gadget conversation program in all your current sales literature and promotional programs and materials.

Engaging Your Community:

The primary purpose of Ping Gadget is to facilitate simulating and engaging conversations within your community of customers/members. That is why you are here.

This section is the most important section of this paper. This is where the rubber meets the road. Unless your community customer/members are drawn into the conversation, enjoy it, and benefit from it, your community will lag and possibly even dissipate. By engaging and stimulating your community you can find that you develop healthy stimulating and enjoyable conversations bringing your customers/members back time after time again.

This section will help you understand and give you the tools to engage and stimulate your community in order to have growing and enduring conversations among your customer/members.

These conversation tools and tips are classified into the following three major sections.

- General Tips

- Get Them Involved
- Tips for Engaging Conversations
- Prodding When They Slow Down/Stop

General Tips

The following are general tips to be used as you begin to enter the conversation.

Find Your Voice & Be Authentic - Let your unique personality shine through. Many of us have interesting ways of expressing our real selves. Be yourself.

Don't Play it Safe - Be a Little Daring - Be willing to say something that feels a little daring. Perfectly appropriate conversation is not always engaging but don't cross the line.

Ping Often but Don't Overdue - You will find your own rhythm as to how often to Ping depending on the flow of the conversation. Remember you are there to stimulate your customer/members conversations, not make it for them.

Comment & Re-Ping - Conversations are two way activities. Watch what others are saying and respond with them with Comments, Re-Pings, and new Pings. Sometimes a hot topic can create a number of Pings, Comments, and Re-Pings before its time to move on.

Go with the Flow - Some topics are of far more interest than others. When a conversation topic begins to get traction increase the tempo. When it starts to peter out, let it go.

Get Them Involved

There are a number of ways to motivate your customer/members. They are:

Grab them When they are Fresh - New members are generally highly motivated and are eager to begin to participate. New registrants should get an immediate e-mail of welcome. They should be given something to do. Examples are as follows:

1. Food Company - Ask for their favorite recipe
2. Cancer Support Group - Share how long they have survived
3. Travel Club - Share their favorite place of travel

You probably get the idea. Always ask them to do something to get them started. It should be easy to do and enjoyable for them to respond. Give them instant gratification like an e-mail back, comment, or Ping back that recognizes their accomplishment.

Ping Gadget was Designed to be Sticky - Many features were designed into Ping Gadget to make it more sticky. Examples are the ability to make comments and vote useful or not useful.

Contests - Run a contest, When you challenge your customer/members they become more active and participate more.

Rally's - Sponsor a rally. An example might be a camp out rally for owners of a brand of recreational vehicles (RV's).

Come up with new and fresh programs from time to time. Don't overload people but keep it fresh.

Tips for Engaging Conversations

Your goal as a community manager is draw out conversation and/or stimulate conversations among members of your community. It is not to be the conversation, your members should be the preponderance of it but you are there to get it started and help it along. The following are tips on how you can better accomplish that goal.

Spit Out What You are Pondering - Our minds are always wondering why things are the way they are or why people do what they do. Many keep these thoughts in their head but when they come out, the conversation takes new twists and turns. Sometimes the weirder the better.

Ask Provocative Questions - Provocative questions are a great way to start a conversation. People naturally want to respond to a question. Now the conversation begins. THIS IS ONE OF OUR BEST TIPS

Challenge a Statement or Belief - Challenging another person in a friendly and open way opens up mind exploding conversations. The key is not to debate or be aggressive. You are simply curious about what else is possible.

Share Something Funny or Heartwarming - Sharing funny or heartwarming sayings, pictures, videos are a great way to engage others. Many appreciate the little lift they get for the day.

Report a News Event - In your hot topic or location when you see something new and of interest Ping it. Set up RSS feeds to get new information and/or just use publications and media you are already plugged into for material.

Compliment Often and Poor it On - Read the conversation Pings by your community members. Respond to many of them with compliments. There is nothing like "Thanks for sharing" that warms your members heart.

Let Leaders Know They are Important to the Community - After you have done your daily handing out compliments let some of your major players know from time to time how important they are to the community. Give them recognition with a simple Ping, comment, or e-mail. Of course now is a good time to give out some rewards.

Get to Know Your Community and its Culture - As you interact daily with community you will get to know them. You will soon find that it is developing a culture of its own and the personality of the members.

Don't Push Your Agenda - If your members feels that you are selling they will spot it in a flash and soon you will not have a community. They will all leave. So don't push your agenda or start selling. Be more like one of them. THIS IS IMPORTANT

Provide Really Useful Information - Ask yourself the question, what information would be of real interest to my community. Then deliver it in bite size digestible chunks.

Encourage Something you See - When you are reading the daily conversation and you see something that is worth jumping on, jump on it. This may be something as simple a person in a cancer support group just got word that his cancer is active again. Reach out to your community to give this person some support.

Complain About Something - If something is happening that you know your community will dislike, complain about it. As an example if your community is older retired people and they are suggesting cutting Social Security benefits, complain about it. Remember the old saying, "Misery loves company". It's human nature to complain so Ping it and let your community run with it.

Make it Personal - Sharing something about your personal life with your community shows that you are human and more approachable. If you let your personality shine through it lets your community know that you are one of them.

Seek Advice & Opinions - Virtually everyone has an opinion on most everything. Ask your community for advice or opinion on something and you will usually get a good response.

Ask for Help - Another trait of human behavior is to help when asked. Ask yourself, what can I ask my community to help me with. As an example, our research department is pondering whether to have only an on/off switch but maybe also have to ability to have a time delay switch to. Ask your community what they think.

Make Some Small Talk - Isn't small talk a normal part of conversation. Use some in writing your Pings for the day and you will make yourself more human.

Acknowledge Good Work - When someone posts some really good content, let them know that it was really appreciated. This can be done with a comment, another Ping, or consider sending a personal e-mail.

Don't Try & Please Everyone - No matter what you do you cannot please everyone. Manage expectations the best you can using all the Tips here in engaging conversations but you can't be everything to everybody. Maximize your affectedness and then let it go.

Realize that Your Work is Never Done - You must engage with the conversation with your community every day. If you say I will do it for three months and then the community will run on its own, you will end up in failure. Your community will slowly wither away. So buck up and enjoy your daily engagement with your community.

Policing:

So what do you do when you have unwanted content on your online community site. So what kinds of unwanted content might you receive. There are two types of unwanted content. The first type is abusive content which has no place on your online community website. The second is criticism that can be damaging but is not abusive. Each will be dealt with as follows.

Abusive Content - Abusive is content that most members of your community find distasteful and do not want to see if they are to continue to be a member of your online community. Abusive content is normally reported quickly by the community.

COMMON TYPES OF ABUSIVE CONTENT

Offensive content: racist or pornographic material, for example

Spam: example is authorized advertising

Nonsense: for example, a member types "ipe8ml;3rt" over and over and publishes it all over your online community site.

Aggressive content: members publish attacks on other members

Copyright violations: members use others materials without consent.

Off-topic content: example might be dirt bike riding on an opera community site

Libel & defamation: content that might leave your company open to lawsuit

Dealing with this type of content is fairly easy and straight forward. The Administration section of Ping Gadget gives the site administrator the tools to simply delete such content. Action should be taken immediately to do so.

A warning e-mail can be sent to let the person know that this type of activity is unacceptable and any further violations will result in being banned as a member of the community. If this type of activity persists from that offending member, you as the Administrator can go to the Administration section and ban him (her).

Criticism but Not Abusive - So what do you do when your organization receives criticism damaging to your organization but it is not abusive. Your first reaction might be to censor it by deleting it. However, many community members believe they have the right to free speech and transparency. Anything seen as an attempt to suppress, control, or censor website conversations can backfire with terrible consequences. You might find that unwanted conversations showing up on blogs, social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and even in traditional media. This time it won't be pretty.

It is far better to take the criticism on head on. Research and find the true facts. If the members criticism is justified take action to correct the issue, apologize, and state when and how the issue is to be

resolved. If it is not justified but the member has a misconception, explain the misconception and move on.

By taking criticism on head on and defusing it you get to play on your playing field where you can control it. If you censure it, you may find it out of your control and running wild.

Administration & Measuring Success:

Ping Gadget has an Administration section which allows you to have complete control of Ping Gadget installed on your website. There are measurements available for you to review.

Conclusion:

You are now ready to be a Community Manager. So now begin. It is easy to forget all the tools that you just leaned in this paper "How to Run an Effective Online Community Program". Refer back to it often until you feel you have mastered the ropes of it. Good luck and we wish you well.