



Building Sustainable Communities for Business

Richard Iams, Senior Analyst
Project Performance Corporation

Introduction

To be successful in business, employees and collaborators must successfully share knowledge and exchange information about common interests, duties, and job functions. Online communities offer an excellent platform for individuals to easily share, reuse, and adapt information across normal organizational boundaries.

Online workspaces are often created with little insight into how typical users will find, use, and support the communities and the knowledge they contain. They are often created with few guidelines or capability for classifying information. Information is frequently migrated into generic site designs without a clear understanding of users' business needs. Rules to help a community grow efficiently are often not established or consistently followed. As a result, users find the community difficult to use, it does not save them time, and their expectation of finding information or expert help when they need it left unmet. Poor design and management of online communities diminishes benefits and wastes resources.

However, successful and sustainable communities can be achieved through strategic and operational planning in three key areas, prior to implementation. These areas are goal, design, and governance.

Key to Success: Goal

Successful online communities have a clearly defined goal. Frequently, communities may advertise a mission 'to provide superior customer service' or 'to be the best' at a specific function. While these may be worthy goals, they offer no measurable objective and provide little insight into what may be achieved from using the community. Successful and active communities have identified a goal that supports a 'call to action' for the community members and that aligns with business objectives. This goal drives the exchange of information, ideas, and solutions about a shared theme. A strong goal statement will correlate to a primary function or service the community provides to its members. In addition, a clearly defined goal provides direction for determining performance indicators that will measure the community's level of success.

Communities that lack a clearly defined goal may become disorganized. Content may be stored and displayed based on the content owner's convenience or point of view rather than on a methodology easily understood by others. This creates problems for the typical user who wants to find information quickly and easily. In some cases, duplicate information may be created in communities providing similar services. The business impact is poor utilization of these communities and their resources.

Documenting the community's goal in the form of a charter is an important task for success. First, the charter provides a reference for describing the community. The descriptions are important for attracting new members. Second, the charter provides a baseline for later evaluation of the community's success. Communities follow a lifecycle, and at some point, the success or inactivity of a community may need to be examined to support future growth and sustainability. For a large and active community, reviewing the original charter at defined intervals may reveal that a new community is needed to support an emerging theme. In the case of an inactive community, reviewing the charter may indicate that the original purpose has been met or is no longer relevant to members or the business.

Communities must connect people who share attributes or interests in order to fulfill their purposes. Properly defining the audience is critical to developing the community and its content. Communities may be intended for staff, customers, or both. Audiences may also be defined more narrowly, targeting users with combinations of specific roles and functions. Providing useful content to the targeted audience is



crucial to meeting user expectations and developing an active membership. Identifying and documenting the audience in the community charter will guide content providers as they select relevant information for users. Understanding the target audience is also critical to developing a communication strategy to promote the community. Finally, the defined audience may be used to simplify user access and management by linking to existing security groups.

Key to Success: Design

The design of a community plays an important role in its success. Years of internet use has created expectations among users about the appearance of standard features, such as navigation, and content on their screen. Designers may be tempted to add extra animation and graphics to enhance a site's look and feel, but these elements may add little functional value for users. Business users have little time or patience to learn unfamiliar site designs when they need information quickly. Applying set designs and functionality among related communities, and within a community's pages, improves the overall usability and increases user satisfaction. Furthermore, the use of set design simplifies community administration, reserving more time for supporting new content and requiring less for managing the layout.

Successful communities provide a functional benefit to their members, supporting helping, sharing, or innovating. When designing a community, the function should align with the purpose of the community and the specific features included in the community must benefit its members. Templates, commonplace in applications that support online communities, offer predefined features- such as calendars, file libraries, and discussion forums- installed into the layout. However, not all of these features are needed by users and may only distract them from finding information. Determining the actions typical users will perform in the community should guide the identification of specific feature requirements, such as blogs, wikis, or document repositories, that are most beneficial and support the tasks to be accomplished in the community.

Defining the community function assists in identifying keywords and metadata useful for organizing and classifying site content. Familiar terms related to the community's purpose help users easily browse and find information they need. Additional benefits are gained when a business taxonomy, which uses simple user-driven metadata to organize and classify content, is applied to the community. Applied correctly, the metadata provides users an easy means to search for content across communities. The business taxonomy also provides a simple method to describe and organize the communities, which may be named using unfamiliar jargon, and used to display them in a sitemap or directory.

Key to Success: Governance

Communities require maintenance to remain effective. Expecting team members and users to routinely add content, monitor the site for quality, and update functionality, is a risk to the community. Successful communities require specific roles, policies, and procedures to fulfill the documented charter. Governance provides the necessary oversight needed to effectively support the community. Without it, the community design, content, and organization will likely stray from the original format or become outdated. In either case, the community will become less useful to users over time.

Supporting a successful community requires the investment of adequate time to manage the amount of content, number of users, and level of activity. Therefore, the following roles should be identified at the outset of forming the community.

- **A Sponsor** who will sanction time for the individual community leaders to build and support the community. The sponsor ensures that appropriate resources and level of effort are assigned to support the community.
- **A Leader** who executes the primary vision and direction for the community and its members.



- **A Content Manager** who ensures information is properly classified and is findable within the community. The content manager will execute the defined policies for adding and removing content as necessary.
- **Contributors, or Subject Matter Experts** who will regularly submit appropriate, useful, and relevant information; review new content for accuracy prior to publication; or provide answers to user questions.

The individuals in these roles must have the time, commitment, and management support to fulfilling these responsibilities.

In addition, successful communities identify these roles clearly and inform who is a community member. Without this information, meaningful collaboration and exchange among members is difficult. While it is common for a community to list a shared email address for communication, this tactic fails to convey a sense of community. As a result, community members may not adequately engage in meaningful information and knowledge exchange. Identifying the people within the community will strengthen it by building trust among members.

Policies are essential to ensuring the community adheres to its mission, maintains the design and functionality that supports its mission and users, and offers relevant and appropriate content to its users. Successful communities specify procedures for adding or deleting classification terms that are critical to maintaining overall site design and content findability. The use of simple familiar terms is vital to ensuring that occasional users find the site as easy to use as frequent users.

Furthermore, policies must address issues related to editing or reviewing content. Users typically require the most recent and accurate information from the community. Therefore, approval procedures may be necessary to ensure published content meets established criteria for accuracy, usability, and accessibility. In addition, procedures must be established to review existing content. At some point, information must either be updated or archived in order for the community to remain accurate, relevant, and useful. Stale content will frustrate users and discourage them from returning to the site.

Conclusion

Successful communities enhance business performance by providing users a place to find and share mission-useful information at the time it is needed. They enable users to collaborate on business activities as virtual teams, and they help overcome departmental information silos. Proper planning provides community leaders the opportunity to run effective sites, providing useful information and value to its users. Defining a community's goal, design, and governance are strategic first steps to building sustainable communities. Communities should be created using the selected technologies only after these steps are completed, which will simplify content migration into the new site.

Embedding these steps as part of the community deployment and support process provides indirect business benefits. Through collaboration and informal learning, successful communities increase the number of users capable of providing knowledge-based decisions at the time they are needed. Successful communities save costs by improving information access and awareness by members. This saves time in finding solutions and solving problems, which ultimately helps drive value and positive outcomes for customers.

PPC combines unmatched expertise in collaborative technologies and associated information management systems with proven methodologies and best practices regarding change management, information governance, and user-centered design.



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About the Author

Mr. Richard Iams is a Senior Analyst in PPC's internationally known Knowledge Management Practice. He specializes in processes and solutions that improve organizational collaboration and knowledge sharing, including business taxonomy design, portal technologies, and communities of practice. Mr. Iams applies his experience in a variety of integrated software and hardware environments to provide best practice solutions to government, commercial and not-for-profit organizations. He has a Master of Science degree in Information and Telecommunication Systems from Johns Hopkins University.

For more information contact:

Richard Iams
Project Performance Corporation
1760 Old Meadow Rd., McLean, Virginia 22102
p: 703.748.7116
e: richard.iams@ppc.com