social signal

Online conversations that connect.

Eight laws for fostering community with content

by Alexandra Samuel, CEO, and Rob Cottingham, President
Social Signal

Organizations have discovered that community-driven web sites can engage supporters, stakeholders and members of the public. The most effective community sites build critical mass quickly – and compelling content remains the easiest way to attract users. The good news is that a community-based approach gives you a wealth of options for effectively creating, shaping and organizing content.

Invest in content. Spend at least as much time and money on creating content as you do on technology. Remember, nearly every community contributor will begin as a viewer – so even if you expect your community's content to be mainly user-created, you need to seed the ground with examples of the kind of compelling content you hope they'll offer.

Wag your long tail. The bad news is, you probably can't compete head-on with MySpace or Facebook. The good news, you don't need to. Your community has distinct needs and interests; understand your niche and appeal to it. Give your community members the kind of information and material they can't find elsewhere, and they'll keep coming back.

Tear down the wall. Your community doesn't begin and end on your own domain. Bringing in tagged content, interacting with open APIs and aggregating news feeds allow you to move conversations onto and off of your site — inviting people and content into your community and broadening your reach.

If you don't know, ask. You can probably make a good guess about much of what your users want – but their guess is probably better. Keep a close eye on three separate indicators of user interests: most viewed pages; most commented-on blog posts; and most linked-to blog posts. Or ask for more direct input via surveys, quick polls and blog posts.

Vive la difference. Read what your users are saying and contributing, and build profiles for various segments that are emerging in your community (or that you'd like to see). Be sure there's something to appeal to each segment. And remember there's a lot of variation in technological skill and comfort.

Promote your users. Share editorial responsibilities – like selecting front-page stories, moderating comments, and approving blog posts – with your most loyal users. It increases their commitment and broadens the editorial perspective of your site.

Titles matter. Featured content will help build traffic to your site if you make it easy to find. Search engines like descriptive blog titles: "Top nonprofit podcasts". And people like titles that make a promise ("Raise money while your donors sleep") or include numbers ("10 ways to save the rainforest with e-mail"). Let your hair down. Don't take the site or yourself too seriously; give staff, moderators and users plenty of opportunity to express their personalities. Relaxing your grip allows the community to flourish.

Add value with structure: Net2Learn's Resource Centers

When an online community takes off, the wealth of user-generated content can quickly overtake participants' ability to find the content they need. That's what happened on NetSquared: with dozens of on-site blogers and many more people contributing via external tags, blog posts that provided crucial insights into non-profit technology often scrolled off the main page before they were widely discovered.

The solution: A new spin-off site, Net2Learn, provides a stable home for high-quality content, organized around hot topics like "Managing an online community forum" and "Nonprofit podcasting". Any registered user can create a new resource center, invite people to contribute resources, and easily add related content from the main NetSquared site and other RSS feeds.

Providing an easy way for users to identify key topics and organize resources required technical and editorial work. But the payoff, making crucial resources available to a large number of users, was well worth the investment.

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Engage audiences

*with an online presence
where your users generate the content.*

We're experts at turning site visitors into site contributors. Our practice is based on a decade of research into online participation, a decade of experience in online campaigning, and more than twenty-five years of collective wisdom on social marketing, strategy and communications.

Build trust

with a public whose interests and values are reflected on your site.

Social Signal has a proven ability to create online communities that foster a trusted relationship between your organization and your site's users. Through user-created content, a successful online community brings you closer to your audience – because it ties your identity directly to an online presence that intimately reflects your audience's interests and values.

Deepen relationships

*with a community that cares
about your mission as much as you do.*

We understand that your online community efforts are tied to real-world goals, and keep all our online efforts focused on your real-world success. An online community isn't an end in itself. Online community matters because it connects real-world people and organizations... helps us to be more effective and satisfied in our real-world work and lives... and, at its most powerful, triggers positive change in the real world.

Our principals

Alexandra Samuel, CEO

Alexandra is an online strategist whose recent projects include CompuMentor's NetSquared, The Elders' web strategy and a Facebook application and social media strategy for BC Hydro. The social network she conceived for the PLAN Institute recently received a major grant from the Robert Wood Johnston Foundation to fund a 15-month pilot.

Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University, where she researched new frontiers in online political engagement.

Rob Cottingham, President

Rob is a seasoned communications strategist and veteran speechwriter whose projects have ranged from the Confeederation.ca election blog aggregator to Vancity's Webby-nominated ChangeEverything.ca. He is a frequent speaker and workshop leader on social media, for audiences that range from the Canadian Marketing Association to NetSquared.

Rob maintains a long-running blog at robcottingham.ca and draws the popular Noise to Signal cartoon at socialsignal.com/n2s.