

# Low Hassle Web Community Building

by Joe Pulizzi, [Junta42](#)

When “online community” is brought up in marketing circles, very smart people start talking about forums, Facebook, widgets and all sorts of other pieces of cool technology that can enable communities. Let’s stop right there and realize one thing: building an online community is all about people. Online community is about your customers, prospects, users or readers interacting with you and your other customers, prospects or members around a common interest. From this interaction, relationships are developed, and the opportunity for business presents itself.

Communities started with the dawn of time. Because of the proliferation of technology, those “face-to-face” communities started to develop and grow online. In some cases, online communities can develop faster online because inhibitions are often lower on the web, which leads to, in some cases, relationships building more quickly than they normally could in an in-person community.

This article is not about the benefits of building an online community. If you’ve spent any time on the web at all, you understand that engagement is key to driving any business. Creating a community online is all about engagement between you and your customers. In simple terms, this could easily be considered a marketplace where you are bringing buyers and sellers together. That said, to create online community, it doesn’t mean you have to immediately expend large amounts of human resources to create an online forum, social networking site or a discussion group. But it does mean you have to have a clear understanding of what you are trying to accomplish. Before you launch anything that can help enable community online, you need to be aware of these six basics:

1. **Objectives First.** Like any other marketing initiative, starting an online community has to be backed by a corporate goal. Make sure you have one, whether it’s for research purposes, product development or customer service goals. Focus on the end corporate objective and what success truly means. Then, and only then, can you prepare an effectiveness and measurement plan.
2. **Control Freaks Not Allowed.** If executives in your organization want to keep complete control over employee and customer conversations, an online community effort is not for you. Online community programs of any kind will not be successful without complete corporate openness and transparency.
3. **You Either Have it or You Don’t.** Some traditional businesses look to create an online community program and have never been involved in significant face-to-face customer relationships. In many ways, your online business persona is a magnification of your off-line persona. If your organization isn’t active in the community now, it’s challenging to enter the online fray.
4. **Stop Thinking Like a Marketer. Think Like a Publisher.** Traditionally, marketing communications speak is all about selling things. This won’t fly in a community. To drive customer interest, you have to think like a publisher. It’s all about the informational needs of the reader - your customer. If you keep your

efforts completely focused on your customers' informational needs and challenges, customers will have that much more reason to get involved.

5. **Spend Time on the Research.** Whether it's an online survey or customer meetings, make sure you have a clear understanding of what makes your target group tick before launching any online community effort. Remember, community building is all about your customers or members, not about you or your company.
6. **Find the Preacher.** Someone needs to own your community plan. Make sure to give a person in your organization the power to be the evangelist for this effort. It should be someone who truly puts the customer first. Once you decide to advance your online community plan, this person should be the spearhead.

If you can pass these six key measures, you can now explore some simple ideas and concepts to get your customers more involved with your brand and your people. Here are a few.

**Create Great Content.** Most online communities are formed around content that meets the customer's informational needs, so start there. Look at hiring a journalist or corporate editorial team that understands your customer's needs and start providing solutions in the form of articles, blog postings, podcasts and video. Try this: create one article per week and invite customers to comment on it.

**Start Light and Think Small.** If you are just getting started and want to launch a full community site, start simple. From your research, focus on a few key features that make the most sense for your customers. If you launch a discussion board (like vBulletin), don't be tempted to activate all the features. Same with a Ning social media site. Try to do one or two things well and forget the rest for now. If you aren't sure about the focus topic, go as niche as possible at the start. Once those areas are successful, you can go for more. Try this: think of the most important challenge facing your customers and break it out into its smallest components.

**Open Up Feedback Channels.** You can't have any community without giving your customers a voice. Provide areas on your online articles and blog posts where customers or members can offer feedback. This seems like a no-brainer, but it's amazing how many corporations and even media sites don't allow users to get involved. Try this: answer every question, comment or post, even if it's just a thank you.

**Don't Create a Community, Borrow One.** Depending on your objectives, you may have no good reason to start your online community from scratch. If your customer or member group congregates around LinkedIn, Facebook, or MySpace, consider starting one there. Try this: launch a Facebook fan page and invite all your customers to check it out.

**Create an Advocacy Team.** Success of whatever you decide to launch will depend heavily on your core customers getting involved. Find those people, tell them what you are trying to do, and find ways to reward them that are meaningful to them. Your customers will be ultimately responsible for getting more people involved in this, so be

honest with them and tell them exactly what they can get out of it through their involvement. Try this: make your advocates feel special, including certificates, awards, premium content access and even exclusive in-person meetings.

Creating an online community doesn't have to mean a complicated online effort, but to do it right, it has to be for the right reasons, for both your organization and your customer.

**About the Author:** Joe Pulizzi is founder of [Junta42](#), an online resource/bookmarking community dedicated to content marketing and custom publishing. [Junta42's Match](#) product matches up marketers that have content projects with qualified publishers. The service is free for marketers. You can read more of Joe at his blog at <http://blog.junta42.com>.