"How Was Your Week?"
A Handbook for
Successfully Growing
Web Based Online Communities

Netscape Netcenter — Join Netscape Community Forums
Netscape's Online Community

Join. Discuss. Network.

Are you looking for a place to discuss industry issues, the movie you saw last night, or the latest political scandal? Welcome to Netscape Community Forums, an online community of people like you. Take a look at our lively message boards, then become a member so you can stop eavesdropping and jump into the conversation!

What's Cool:
Career Advice For the New Year

Hiring the Best: Finding the perfect candidate
Job Hunt: What job is right for you?
Skill Building: Learn more, earn more

Career Center
Find your dream job or dream candidate.
- Hiring the Best
- Job Hunt
- Skill Building

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"I tend to think that both Apple and Microsoft will be one in 100 years. Pretty soon somebody's going to pounce on the market with no legacy issues and surprise them both."

– Caleb Clark, in Issues and Ideas

(Screenshot 1/99 with the author as featured host of Netscape Inc. Forums)

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Who is this handbook for?

This handbook is intended for people hosting online community efforts using asynchronous discussion software such as Well Engaged or WebCrossing. This is not about live chat, or email lists. Familiarity with forum software and general idea of online forums is assumed.

This handbook assumes other folks are setting up the software, designing the overall online community space and running the managerial end of things.

Who's the author?

Hi, I'm Caleb. I've written this little handbook based on my experience with, and study of, online community. Here's my bio:

1. Professional host for Netscape Inc. (Pre AOL buy out) Professional Connections for a year. Hosted the "Issues and Ideas" forum from conception through beta testing and public launch.
2. Co-founded and continue to facilitate the NoEnd group in San Francisco. NoEnd's second anniversary of which was written up in Wired News.
3. Masters degree in Educational Technology from San Diego State University. Built, facilitated and studied online forums, listservs and chat rooms and taught graduate courses both on and offline for a year after.
4. Was immersed group consensus run alternative schools from 1968, until starting a public high school in 1980.

I've written this book because I wanted to pass on what I've learned, so far, about growing online communities. I hope it helps. My portfolio is at: http://www.plocktau.com

Welcome to the G.R.O.U.P.

We've got to have a catchy acronym to get things started and our minds grooving on the same subject: hosting online discussion forums.

G: Grow

Successful online communities, or any community for that matter, are grown, not built. You can build a community and wait for members to join, but to be a tight community it should grow naturally. The strongest communities, like the WELL, grew naturally from a small close group to a large close group with an even closer core group that started it. This is an environmental concept. In growing a community the leaders should be the ones that create an environment that will let a group of people moves in and grow closer. The original founders of the community need to be supported and encouraged to stay around and act like "founding fathers". New members join are welcomed by the founders, and also watched by the founders. This creates an environment of responsibility and a place with history, back-story and purpose.

R: Real

Be real. Hosts engage in a very public job so it's very easy to tell if they like their job. If you don't really like helping people get together and share experiences and information, don't do it. You don't want to go to parties with a surly and unhappy host with a plastic smile pasted to their made-up face.

O: Organize

Hosts organize things. They make all the plans that result in a great party that seem effortless. They create an environment in which a good party can happen. Think of a good party. You walk in to a party and there's usually a theme that is obvious, but not forced, music, a bar, a few of your close friends, but an interesting mix of new people as well. The host seems to be relaxed and happy, things just happen. You try and meet people at the door and introduce them to other people so they feel at home. A good host points out the bathroom and general layout of a party to newcomers. They make sure there is ice and that the music is creating the right vibe. If there's a fight, they call the police and meet them at the door. Nobody sees the week of planning that took place before.

U: Undertake

As in to assume responsibility. As host, you undertake responsibility for the gathering, whatever the outcome. However, the real power is in the people in your gathering you are really working for them. A big part of being a leader is artfully also undertaking the artful negotiation of the slopes of perception. Leaders are the people who perceive what the group as a whole and see what the group is doing before anyone individual in the group notices. Most often you job is to show the group what it's showing you. Confused, wait a few weeks and keep your eyes, and heart open and you'll understand.

P: Proceed

Hosts keep things moving, a rhythm of energy. But this is not always up to you. Groups are not machines with buttons to push. Sometimes parties quiet down for a bit and you need to let that happen, but the host is the one who senses that after a lull in energy it's time to put on a James Brown song and do some sweaty dancing.

Standard Topics

Forums are about topics. Here's some tested and approved ways of going about creating topics. These are some standard starting topics that have evolved over time.

About this form

A no-brainer. People always need basic context and this provides it. Make sure to state the purpose of the online community clearly and succinctly.

Introductions

You always need a place for people so say "Hi" as they enter your forum. Try and find out general, but not too private information, about your members. Where people are from? what they do?, and use their name when welcoming them. Example: "Hi Jim, welcome. Great to have someone involved with teaching technology in the forum. What general part of the globe are you from?" "Introductions" is also the first topic you should check into and the place you should most frequently post to.

Help

Have a place for "newbies" to go for a basic outline of using the technology. How to read back posts before jumping in, staying on topic, etc.

Topic Suggestions

A place for, well it's obvious what it's for. What may not be obvious is the need to listen to even the most outrageous topic ideas and respond with your thinking on them. If you don't listen, people tend not to talk.

Site Specific Topics

Once the general subject matter of your forum is decided you've got to lay down a foundation of topics. If you're working for a game company, these might be. "Bugs", "Play Tips", "Suggestions" a few threads about the most popular titles you sell. This is the land the members will settle on.

Be careful not to make a ghost town. You want to let demand create new topics and your users lead the growth of the community. If you start out with too many threads, users will arrive to find limited comments. If you start out with too few, you can build more according to demand and suggestions from you users.

As new issues come up you can add new topics like "release 2.0" and archive old topics that haven't had any traffic for a few days or weeks.

When to harvest a topic

Topics grow and eventually they also start to die. Unfortunately, you're the one who has to make the call as to the actual moment of death, and you're also the one who has to pull the trigger. Timing is up to you, usually a month with no traffic and it's definitely time to kill a topic, or at least archive it. It's a sad thing to do, but take heart, they'll be new topics to plant soon.

(Below screenshot taken 01-1999 of a typical day   "Issues and Ideas" forum.)

Net Search | WebMail | MyNetscape | Members | Download

u have 2 minutes to make a decision.
Vhat do you
need to know?   My Weather
Click Here!

Everything you need,
fast @ **My Netscape**
click here

>Entertainment Forums >The Web Forums > Issues and Ideas

| Help | Feedback | Member Search | Member Center | Sign Out |

View New Responses
Create Topic

Issues

active topics   hidden topics   archived topics

Total New Topics: 7

Topic Title	Last Post	New	Total
+ Education and Technology - New Learning	(01/14/99)	2	426
+ The Far Future - 100+ Years	(01/14/99)	8	537
+ The Y2K problem - Getting Computers Ready for the year 2000	(01/14/99)	6	529
+ Biotech - Cloning, Organ Growth, Engineered Humans…	(01/14/99)	2	239
+ Random Babble: The No Topic, Topic	(01/14/99)	3	729
+ Outside	(01/14/99)	5	197
+ Humanizing Technology	(01/14/99)	4	26
🔒 About This Forum	(03/08/98)	0	4
Introductions	(01/13/99)	0	395
🔒 Help!	(03/20/98)	0	2
Topic Suggestions	(01/12/99)	0	164
Working in the New World - Are We Ready?	(01/14/99)	0	458
The Internet - Where it is, Where is it Going?	(01/12/99)	0	291
How Was Your Week?	(01/12/99)	0	341
Buzzwords	(01/01/99)	0	76
Forum Tips and Tricks	(01/09/99)	0	27
Community Bulletin Board	(01/12/99)	0	92

Original topics with proven growing powers

These topics and concepts that I came up with while growing NoEnd and later hosting for Netscape Inc. These kind of tops are the most difficult and the most important to host, because this is where your community can really come together. I've seen this kind of community building work wonders in several groups on and off line. These kinds of topics are really about humanizing technology and valuing human identity and experiences. Amazing things can happen when people feel valued, unique and respected!

How was your week?

My favorite off all! Everybody has an identity, but online it's tough to establish because we are separated from our bodies, the anchor of our "real life" identities. One way I've found to get around this is to always have a space where people can express how their weeks were. Seems trivial, but it's very powerful. As soon as someone writes "This week was bad, my 10 year old got sick just as I had a big presentation at work which I botched" they've made themselves unique and invested emotions in the community. When someone writes back, "I hear you, I've got enough trouble juggling work and home life and I'm single! More power to you" then you've got a community. I started a permanent "How was your week" on Netscape's forum and it was successful enough for several other hosts to make it a permanent topic in their forums.

Random Babble

This is the steam valve for a forum, a place to release and play. As a host your job is to keep people on topic. If you're discussing bugs and people start going off on politics, you need to either create a politics topic, or gently refocus the group. But what about when you have something to say that doesn't fit into a topic. What about when you just want to say it and not think about whether you're following a topics thread? I've found success having a topic called

something like "random babble". Surprisingly the discussions can be amazing in such a topic, from silly to heartfelt. It's a place to blow off steam and be crazy, which makes it easier to stay on topic on the other forums.

Outside

A great redirector of bad energy in a forum. I came up with this forum from the bartenders saying, "Take it outside". Or, as my mother used to say when I got too rough, "Go play outside!" Well I thought why not have an "Outside" in a forum? There needs to be an outside place to go when what you are doing is bothering people. The point being that certain behavior is no appropriate for certain spaces, but that doesn't mean the person can't behave like that, just that they need to do it in the right place. Most people hate to be told what they can't do. But they are more receptive to suggestions about where and when to do something.

I came up with this forum because people sometimes get in flame wars, and rouge posters occasionally come in and just start randomly insulting people. I've found that sending an email that says, "I've deleted your posts, please take future posts Outside", or "OK, time to take this little word tussle Outside, it is not appropriate here", works much better then just telling the person they can't do something. I also found that people loved to go into the "Outside" topic and just play fight. Very interesting...

Community Bulletin Board

I was getting spammed in a forum with solicitations and, instead of emailing the solicitors, I decided to make a forum called 'Community Bulletin Board" for them to post their stuff in. After all, most communities have a place for solicitations, junk mail and the like, why not online? I emailed the offenders and suggested they repost on the bulletin board area. Surprisingly, this ended up attracting several people to the community as valuable posters who had originally just stopped by to spam an advertisement.

Growing your community

Can you build a good town with just a construction crew? No. You can build the buildings, but unless you're building prisons, it's hard to fill them by force. You need people to decide to live somewhere and over time a community will grow up around the town. You can help, you can build a fire station, church, school, but you can't build a community because a community is more then just a town with buildings, it's a group of people. I've experienced the same thing with online communities; the good ones grow in the right environment. I see online communities more like plants. Your job is to create the environment, seed it, and keep it growing. You are the farmer if you will.

Host farming duties

Hosts should check in five to six days a week, read every post, respond to all introductions and topic suggestions and post a few thoughts to active to topics. This is vital, if a spammer hits your forum, or someone posts something totally out of line, you've got to see it and take care of it quick. Depending on your pay, this should take less then an hour a day. Once a week hosts should take a long look at the forum as a whole and archive stale topics or start new ones.

Length of posts

The shorter the post, the more like a conversation it is. Long posts often leave one with the feeling of having been to lecture. Unless long posts are wonderfully written and leave openings for questions, they can be real topic killers. It seems as though a long well thought out post is almost a complete entity in itself, and one that doesn't need any additional response. Short posts, ones that have a thought or a comment, but don't necessarily explore all its possibilities leave more openings for others to chime in.

Giving

Taking is easy, but in this new information world, taking does not work like it used to. The hoarding of information now ends up leaving you with less information than people who share information and thus receive shared information from other like-minded information miners. Hosts need to share information and create a give and take environment in their forums. Hosts need to constantly think if they've read or seen something that would be of interest in one of their threads. A URL? An article? A study? And then remember to share it with the forum.

Feedback

Get it. When in doubt about archiving a topic, ask your forum. If a post seems out of place, but you're not sure, ask the forum. Wondering how you're doing as a host, ask the forum. People love leaders who listen to their constituents.

Growing Questions

Conventional wisdom and experience has shown that short posts that end in an open question insight the most responses. For example: "But what about those using older computers to access the information, what if the access time is too slow, do people think they'll wait around?"

Not posting

You've got to know when to post 'em, know when to walk away, and know when to just go outside for a bit and have fun.

Although it's tempting to post after every other post, it's not wise. Hosts can carry a slow forum for a little while, but in the long run it's the members of the community that must carry the forum. When you come upon a post that seems likely to elicit a response, leave it be for a few days.

Killing Weeds

Weeds are always a problem. In online communities, weeds are rouge insults from hit and run posters, flames, advertisements, and solicitations. One concept I've found helpful in dealing with undesirables in a forum is that weeds themselves are not bad, they are just bad when they are in a garden. In otherworlds, rouge posts, insults, solicitations, and flames are themselves not bad, just bad when in the wrong place. Hosts should have the power to "scribble", "hide", or "delete" posts. If you are using software that saves posts you hide or scribble, like WellEngaged, you don't need to save them because the software does. But if posts are truly deleted, then you need to copy and paste all posts before you delete them so you have a record. You're the judge here on what gets deleted. It's pretty obvious most of the time when commercial entity spams a topic or someone posts a sexually laden post out of context. Host etiquette says that you need to send an email to the author gently letting them know what you did and why and where their post might have a more receptive home in another forum or topic. The goal is to redirect the person's energy, not directly counter. Examples of redirection are topics like "Outside" and "Community Bulletin Board".

When to go one-on-one

The party was loud and active. Sherry walked up to Bill, took his arm and said, "Hey Bill, can I talk to you for a minute" and pulled him aside. This is an example of how much of a person's attention you can get by taking them out of a group situation and communicating to them one on one. In the online world, this is emailing forum members privately. There is great power in gently emailing members of your community directly and privately. Sometimes you may do this because you've deleted one of their posts, but even better is when you do it to answer a question that might be better answered privately to save embarrassment. The best is when you email to thank a member for their time and effort.

Frequent posters

The demographic of most forums look like this. Lots of lurkers, a group of sporadic posters, and a few frequent posters. It's like a good town has lots of citizens, a group of whom are sporadically active and outspoken, and a few volunteer citizens who are very involved and outspoken. Given this spread, it's a great idea to stay close to your frequent and active posters. These are your informal leaders and the people with the most invested in your community. You can ask them if they want a topic to informally host and sometimes they can even be hired to host forums from distance. At the very least, treat them as informal hosts and honor the time they put into your forum.

Humor

Don't forget about humor. Have fun! Know when to laugh at yourself and when to lighten up. Hosting is at its core a social and experiential thing. People need to take away positive experiences, value for time spent, and have had a little fun. And you do too.

Corporate Sponsored Communities - A Word of Caution

(Screen shot from the last months of the Netscape Forums after AOL buyout)

After over a year as a professional online host for Netscape Inc. AOL decided to buy Netscape Inc. and end the Professional Connections Forums. This was understandable in a merger, where lots of things get downsized or killed, and not always in the best ways.

The good part was that the experience showed me at least one major potential problem with the concept of corporations sponsoring online communities.

In a nutshell, the problem is this: The leaders (active members, hosts and administration) usually do not have control over the communities they lead, and the people who do have control are not part of the community.

As a host I start topics, take care of "flames" and generally keep the party moving. Surprisingly though, I am not the most active member of the community. The most active members are usually a dozen or so folks who've latched on to this community and are its heart and soul. They are the real reason it is successful. However, being spread around the world, and unaffiliated with the company supporting their community, they are completely outside of the consciousness of the people who make their community possible - the heads of the corporation.

This is one of the striking differences between the community I live in, and the one I work in online. The community I live is made of citizens, most of who try and do their small part, such as pay taxes and obey the laws. A few people are more active sitting in on city council meetings and voting often. Then there are a very few people in my community who do much more. These people are city council members, or perhaps local business leaders.

Online communities are much the same. Most members "lurk" and just read the posts. Some members post and put some time into the discussions. A few are "regulars" and would be on the city council if there were one. They, along with the hosts, are the leaders of the online community.

But in corporate sponsored online communities; such leaders usually do not have control over the community they lead. One wrong spread sheet number, one merger with a company that has different ideas and "Poof!" your

community can vanish. And it can vanish via PR statements written not by the leaders of the community, but by other departments out of touch with the very thing they are killing.

This can result in very mad members, hosts and administration personal. I saw it happen at Netscape Inc. It all stems from the fact that the control of corporate sponsored online communities rests with the corporate leaders and these leaders are almost never part of the communities they are responsible for.

This presents a dangerous situation for motivation. If one does not really have a say in the community they put time into, where is the true motivation to make it work? In order to harness the full power of online communities, corporations must find ways to give power to the leaders of the communities. This power need only be the power to speak to the community first, and honestly, and to have their say in the future plans of the community at least heard.

There's still a lot of money, brand name recognition, and general good will to be had for the price of hosting an online community. But the payment in return has to be respect for the people who are really responsible for the community put in. A foot note to this passage. When AOL bought Netscape they laid off all but six of the hosts. I was one of the one remaining. About two weeks later AOL laid off all the administration people without notice. Hosts were notified by phone, or by rumor that the community was closing in a week or so, no details were given.

The community itself was never notified of its impending death, although it knew something was up. The thousands of folks who's spent more then a year visiting the forum and having valuable and meaningful conversations found out that the forum would be closed by rumor as well. These members got angry and started many other communities and will never go back to one sponsored by AOL. AOL could have avoided this with a few hundred dollars. Just one day's pay for one administrative person could have paid for the community to be notified of what was happening and why. Instead thousands of potential customers were unnecessarily offended, in the name of saving money. In reality, money was lost.

The Last Night of the Netscape Inc. Forums

On the last night of the Netscape forums, several members rallied in one topic called "Random Babble - The No Topic Topic".

We'd been trying to reach 2000 posts in this one thread since finding out about the closing of the forums. With 24 hours left we had 1600 posts and several members started posting one word posts, silly posts, anything to get the count up to 2000. By 1:00 AM we were up to 1999 posts, and then to my surprise everybody stopped posting and let me post the 2000th post. It was a strangely moving moment for me and a victory for our community.

The End