



18 Ways to Engage Users Online

A Guide for Community Managers



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“One of the most important aspects of a community manager’s job is cultivating a relationship with users. I’ve learned that it’s only as tough as you make it and that you can connect with people online in many ways. Often it’s just by sharing a blurb about your own life or even asking a simple question about theirs. When it comes to connecting with users, don’t “over-think it.” Start a conversation, and sit back and watch it grow. Consider the community a huge group of your friends, and act accordingly.”

-Angela Connor





If you build it, will they come?

The answer simply, is NO!

Many organizations and businesses mistakenly believe that if they provide the tools for community engagement and interaction, the community will ultimately engage and interact. That might happen for a short period of time, but it will not last. It takes investment to grow a community and a large part of that investment, is time. Enter, the Community Manager.

Community Managers have a tall task, and if you're reading this e-book you are likely already aware of that fact. The goal here is to give you new ideas, reignite your passion and keep you on the road of active community engagement.

Here, I offer 18 tips for community engagement.

The importance of feedback

If there's one thing members of your online community want from you, it's feedback. Positive feedback, or not-so positive feedback, they want to hear from you. As in most group settings, the squeaky wheels tend to get most of the attention, but if this is where you are focusing your efforts, it's time to stop. Yes, you have to deal with troublemakers to keep the community in tip-top shape, but you can't neglect your top posters, continuous content creators and pillars of the community. If it sounds like a huge task, that's because it is. It's an important one too and should be done on a daily basis. It isn't something you have to spend hours doing, but it's wise to carve out at least 30 minutes of your day to recognize the members who keep the community afloat, and spend a good portion of their time on your site.

So how can you do this effectively and efficiently? Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Comment on blogs or forums and be sure to compliment the author publicly.** (*"This is a great conversation piece. Good topic."*)
2. **Make a helpful suggestion. This indicates that you value their content.** (*"Great post. You might want to add a link to your last blog since it's related."*)
3. **Make a direct request.** (*Loved the pictures from your garden. When can we expect to see more?"*)
4. **Ask a question about their content.** (*That recipe looks awesome, was it passed down to you?"*)
5. **Suggest a blog topic.** (*I see you're passionate about drunk driving, you should consider writing a blog."*)

6. **Ask for their opinion based on what you know about them.** (*"I'm heading out your way this weekend, any good barbecue spots in Sanford?"*)
7. **Encourage communication with other community members.** (*"Johnny23 is looking for tax advice, aren't you an accountant? Maybe you can help"*)
8. **Make a promise, and keep it.** (*If you do decide to take more pictures let me know and I'll highlight them on the home page."*)
9. **Tell them you miss them.** (*"Haven't seen you in a while, I hope everything is okay. We miss your humor."*)
10. **Send a personal e-mail..** (*Hey, you were one of our top posters last week. Just want you to know how much I appreciate your time. Keep it up!"*)

Easy enough? Why not get started today? Pick a number between 10 and 20 and decide to issue that many or more compliments to your users on a daily basis. It will show them you care and that you value their time. It will pay off as they become more loyal and you'll ultimately see the fruits of your labor.

Acknowledge good work

As a community manager, it is important to make your members feel valued and appreciated. When you come across a great blog, interesting comment or great photo, send your compliments to the author, and do it publicly on their profile page or directly on the content. Remember, you're the community leader and your opinion matters a great deal. So don't be stingy with it. Positive reinforcement goes a long way, and it will make that member feel valued and vested. Once that happens, they're in for the long haul.

Tap into the human condition

When you feel as though you're running out of ideas or interesting ways to engage your online community, allow me to offer this: Fall back on the human condition. If there's one thing I've learned over the past year, since launching and managing GOLO.com is that there are many ways to connect with others simply based on the fact that we're all human beings. We may not share the same hobbies, live in the same neighborhoods or share the same passions, but we are all living and breathing, and most of us want to keep it that way. So if you're at a loss for content, hone in on the things that affect us all and center conversations on that. Most members of local online communities have shared interests, therefore water-cooler topics abound and there's often plenty to work with. But those one-size-fits-all issues certainly don't emerge on a daily basis and even if

they do, the interest level ebbs and flows and you can never be too sure how much traction any conversation will pick up. Ask yourself a few questions and you'll be sitting on a ton of ideas. What are people angry about? What am I angry about? Who's upset, and why? The answers to any of those three questions can start one heck of a conversation if asked the right way.

Use your influence

As community managers we often get so caught up in our tasks that we forget we have a very influential position. And from time-to-time, it should be exploited for what it is. Ask a cyclist to blog about safety while biking. If you see someone discussing books, ask them to create a group for book lovers if your site offers that feature. The clues are all around you just open your eyes and see them for what they are.

Spread some trinket love

Let's face it, everyone likes a good trinket. I've made a habit of waiting for the final day of the numerous journalism conventions I attend, to swoop in like a vulture and confiscate every little rubber ball, musical dice, crooked pen and furry pencil I can find. Heck, I sometimes start sooner, depending on the quality of the trinket and the chances that they'll be gone before the last day.

So what's this all about? I'm suggesting that you spread some trinket-love to your community members? Just think of a reason. Any reason will do. Identify the top posters of the month or the people with the most pictures in their image galleries and tell them they've won a prize. Just make something up.

It's easy to get caught up in development or managing and growing the community and then suddenly realize that you haven't been very engaging, or that your core audience hasn't heard from you in a while. This happened to me a while back. So, I delved into some stats, identified twenty people who met a certain criteria and sent them e-mails requesting their addresses. All 20 received free mouse pads. A small chore, but the result will be a grateful group of people who feel valued and know that their participation isn't taken for granted. So, if you don't have any trinkets lying around, get some.

Ask open-ended questions

What do you do when you realize user-submissions are getting low, or your community members seem to be slacking in the photo uploading department? What about when the quality of blogs seems to be tanking and decent

conversations are nowhere to be found? You could complain about it, pour over last months stats and simply hope that things will get better, or drown your sorrows in a series of diet cokes or another beverage of your choice while staring at your monitor. Or, you can ramp up and move into overdrive. As the community manager it is your job to engage users, so engage. Keep in mind that people love to talk about themselves and share their opinions. They also like to tell what they know, so why not ask them to do all three? I'll give you the beginning of several questions and you fill in the blanks based on what's happening in your community, what people are talking about or anything you find interesting.

What's your favorite _____?

What do you think of _____?

Have you seen the new movie, _____?

Do you plan to visit _____?

How much money do you spend on _____?

And if its photos you're after, be specific. The holidays are coming so ask for holiday photos. Draw out the competitive spirit and ask for pictures of holiday decorations. Put on a contest if you want to get things moving quickly and offer a cool prize. It can be tough when you depend on others to produce content, but if you make it worth their while and make sure they know how much you value the time they take to do it, things begin to look up fast.

Ask for help

As the person responsible for the well-being and growth of the community, it's easy to feel and operate like an island, putting all of that work on your own shoulders. But as the community grows, so does the number of stakeholders. Use them to your advantage. Contact your top posters and most involved members and ask them to greet and reach out to new members. Ask them to work on a community-driven FAQ. Tell them what kind of content you'd like to see more of and ask them to help you build it. Not everyone will jump right in, but you may be pleasantly surprised by the level of response.

Get to know the community

As the [Managing Editor of GOLO](#), I come in contact with a lot of users both in public and in private. Many members communicate with me openly on my profile page and others e-mail me behind the scenes. I encourage both methods and respond to all inquiries. I want the members to feel comfortable and if they prefer private communication I most certainly oblige.

I am simply amazed at how much I know about the community. I don't mean as a whole, but on individual levels.

From reading blogs, viewing image galleries and paying close attention to the way members interact, I have somehow learned a little about a whole lot of people. I can name the professions of at least 20 members, personal hobbies of others and even first and last names of a select few. I know that we have members with children in Iraq, members who have lost a child, members who are recently divorced, recovering alcoholics, fighting eating disorders and battling cancer.

I know that one member is a chef, another owns a landscaping business, another is obsessed with "The Rock," and another has the most disgusting feet you ever want to see.

This is a new level of sharing and highly valuable information. It is also why I think there is a lot to be said about smaller online communities that provide a different experience than the majors. Sure they have millions of members, but does anyone "really" know anyone else?

Know when to walk away

Community management is a tough job and there are days when it can be extremely stressful. From trolls running rampant to direct abuse from visitors and an overflowing inbox filled with pettiness, sometimes it can really take its toll. When you find yourself feeling like your head is going to explode or as though you've reached the end of your rope, get up and walk away. Or better yet, log off the site and just take a deep breath. Find a message board for community managers and vent with like-minded souls familiar with your plight. And remember, there's always tomorrow.

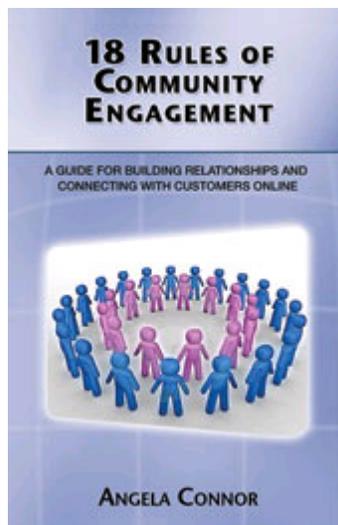
What's Next?

Please share this wherever you'd like. If you choose to blog about it, please point people to where they can get their own copy.

If you're passionate about online communities and enjoyed the content of this book, consider purchasing my new book: "*18 Rules of Community Engagement*" (*Happy About, 2009*)

<http://www.happyabout.info/community-engagement.php>

Visit the book website <http://GrowingSuccessfulOnlineCommunities.com> to join the mailing list and receive a free sample chapter.



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