

# So You Want to Build an Online Community

## Define Your Objectives for Building an Online Community

Typically, companies have employed “traditional” survey techniques—direct mail, phone surveys, focus groups, and web surveys—to solicit feedback from customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders. Now, with the advent of feedback-oriented online communities, organizations have a better, more effective method of collecting feedback.

When asked the primary business objectives of building their own feedback-oriented communities, organizations cite a desire to:

- Collect actionable data faster than traditional research methods allow
- Engage customers on a deeper level by being able to field follow-up questions
- Listen to the natural dialogue of customers talking to other customers, or to the company, without being prompted

Once a decision has been made to build an online community, the first step is to reach a common understanding throughout the organization on the primary objectives of the community. This way, if functional executives disagree—an SVP of Sales that wants to use the environment as an upselling or lead generation vehicle not as a primary research tool—common ground on dissimilar objectives can be reached before the company presents a mixed message to the community members.

## What's in a name?

Branding and vision. When building a community, it is important to choose a name that will reiterate the purpose with every mention of the name. This is the invitee's first interaction with the online community. Consider avoiding the use of acronyms—Product Advisory Council as “PAC”—since words, not acronyms, harnesses the power of the community's mission statement, and provide a continual reminder of the community purpose.

## Who and How Many Members?

For the launch of an online community, striking a balance of starting small—to limit exposure—but big enough—to derive the value and network effect of the community—is a difficult, but vital element. If the number of invitees is too small, the company risks not capitalizing on the network effect, and the community will likely fail. Have you ever gone to a party, arrived an hour late, and decided the party was a dud—then turned around and left before going inside? That's the risk of inviting too few members.

On the flip side, if you invite too many people out of the gate, you run the risk of being overwhelmed with input and activity, thus not being able to service those members with meaningful engagement. Have you ever arrived at a party where the host had ran out of food, there were no more drinks, and no one enjoyed music because the planning was inadequate—so you left? That's the risk of inviting too many people.

So, it is best to start with a manageable, yet respectable community size. Consider “seeding” your community with a small, but representative cross-sample of your broader audience. Also, a best practice is to invite participants in “cohorts” so that you can manage the growth of the community to an active, healthy, but not overwhelming level. After you have gained experience managing the initial community and worked out the operational kinks, you can expand the community size to get to your eventual target size.

Another consideration is the target size. Most online advisory panels have about a 300-member minimum made up of active customers. This is generally the minimum acceptable size for enough responses on a topic to give any meaningful business direction. Of course, the fewer the responses and more biased the sample, the more companies should be wary of extending those findings to a broader, dissimilar population.

## Recruiting

When inviting participants into the online community, it's important to remember “WIIFM” (What's In It For Me?). That means that it's critical to help them understand the benefits of participating. In the case of feedback communities, some WIIFM messaging could include:

- Exclusive invitation to participate
- Emphasis on the concept of being an “insider” to help the organization make important business decisions
- Emphasis on the benefits they will have as a participant
  - They will not be surveyed more than 2x per month
  - No survey will take longer than 15 minutes to complete
  - Every survey will have a progress bar
  - Data will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared outside of the company
- Help participants understand what exclusive benefits they will enjoy
  - Private product roadmap reviews
  - Exclusive roundtable conversations with the CEO
  - Restricted access to see new products before they are generally available

It's also important to communicate the responsibilities of community members before they sign up. For example, if each participant needs to participate no less than 30 minutes per week, twice a week, it needs to be clear.

Plan invitation reminder notifications as well. Reminders should be sent to invited persons four business days after the initial invitation, and should contain the basic messages above with a gentle, not pushy, reminder. Also, be sure to note they were previously reached out to so they do not feel as though the organization isn't paying attention to past efforts.

Finally, consider the content of the welcome messaging once an invitee joins. Some typical content for welcome messages include:

- “Congratulations and thank you for choosing to participate in our online community”
- Reiteration of the WIIFM messaging
- Reminder of their responsibilities
- Reminder of how to get to the online community
- Reference to a repository of published, public policies that guide activity within the online community

## Fresh Perspectives

One of the objectives of an online community is to gain fresh perspectives from the community. Using the same member base for years on end may not achieve that objective. So, replenishment—and possibly even planned turnover—of the member base over time should be considered.

An example approach for recruiting and replenishment could be as follows:

- Cohort 1: 200 new members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 4
- Cohort 2: 200 new members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 5
- Cohort 3: 200 new members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 6
- Cohort 4: 200 members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 7
- Cohort 5: 200 new members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 8
- Cohort 6: 200 new members, term for 6 months, replaced by cohort 9
- Cohort 7... etc

Just as you can't replace all the water at once in an aquarium for fear the fish will die, you can't replace all the members of a community at once for fear the community will die. By rotating cohorts into and out of the community, you minimize the disruption as members join and leave.

As the online community develops, you will find that some members cannot meet their commitment, do not wish to continue, or no longer meet a necessary requirement—i.e. an employee community member left the company. These one-off circumstances should be replenished at the next cohort addition to keep the renewal dates synched with the scheme.

## Asking People to Leave

Even the best of hosts have to occasionally ask guests to leave their party. In an online community, members are expected to live up to their commitments and follow the policies published by the community facilitators. Members who don't meet their commitments or follow the rules—do not log in, do not respond, are not participating—should be given one or two warnings, and then be asked to leave the community to make room for another member that does intend to participate.

This “termination” message should:

- Be empathetic in nature—“we understand that this may not be your primary focus at this time”
- Be firm and refer to the stated policies
- Be positive in that the feedback from the online community will build a better product

## Incenting and Thanking Members

Though you've probably already considered the WIIFM messaging, and members understand how they can make a difference, there are more opportunities to reinforce the “what's in it for me?” message. The following actions can be taken to ensure that members feel appreciated and supported:

- Upon registration, send the member a gift as a thankyou
- Respect their time and contributions with a pre-notification of how long surveys will take to complete
- Give members immediate gratification by showing how their responses compare to other community members
- Provide a view of the aggregate results of closed-ended survey questions
- Throw an actual party—an annual panel conference at a desirable location will allow the community to interact directly with the researchers and other community members

Finally, the members of your community have contributed because they want to see your organization better meet their needs. Accordingly, you must implement the best ideas raised in the community and do it in a timely fashion—within months not years. You must then let members know about their “victories”—changes implemented by the business based on their feedback—and how their time and contributions made a positive difference.

## Communication is Key

Try to limit all communications with your members within the community platform unless it becomes necessary to take it offline. Consider the following key components to the ongoing communication strategy:

### Tone

Choose a tone that is appropriate for your community—formal or informal. The tone should add credibility to your online community's feedback mission.

## Moderation

When moderating forums, blogs, wikis, etc., remember your chosen tone and use it. You should apply your stated policy evenly, and avoid confrontation with your community members. That also means that you should keep published policies current, accurate, and clear.

## Dealing with Detractors

When moderating forums, blogs, wikis, etc., remember your chosen tone and use it. You should apply your stated policy evenly, and avoid confrontation with your community members. That also means that you should keep published policies current, accurate, and clear. Dealing with members who are vocal detractors can be tricky. How should a party host deal with unruly guests? Each type of detractor requires a different approach:

**Legitimate Complainer** – They usually need help with a product or service and want to warn others. Engage these detractors head-on by recognizing their issues as real issues, noted by the business decision makers. But, also redirect the dialogue on possible, reasonable workarounds and thank the detractor for the contribution.

**Engaged Critic** – They think they can make things better. They make suggestions—not just complaints. Consider creating a forum to encourage topic discussion and recognize good ideas publically.

**Flamer** – They like to argue with other members and tend to participate in “flame wars”. When faced with these critics, try to refocus the conversation on topic and point to the published “no flame” policy. Consider contacting this critic offline.

**Pet Project** – They hope to elevate the priority of a specific “pet project” and change the focus of multiple forum threads to a single topic in hopes of rallying opinion unnaturally. For this type of detractor, consider a phone conversation to diffuse the situation.

## Forums

Forums are a great qualitative feedback tool to allow a structured exchange of ideas and opinions within your community— in the members’ own voices. However, forums present unique challenges. In order to best manage the forums and to minimize member confusion, start with just a few forums with a flat structure—no treebranching—to keep all activity in a small handful of topic areas. Configure your forum so that facilitators have a common avatar for easy identification.

## Voice-to-Voice Dialogue Rules of Engagement

If there is a need to contact a community member voice-to-voice, the request to do so should be made in advance, via email, and set the expectation of the amount of time needed.

## Building Credibility & Energizing the Community

No one wants to feel like their feedback is falling on deaf ears. It’s essential that you communicate back to members about what actions were taken based on their feedback. This will keep them engaged and willing to continue contributing.

## Understanding the Views of Your Members

Now you have your online community assembled, and you have gained credibility by managing a professional, safe environment for everyone to share their views and provide insight. You have established the tone for your community and have developed a rapport with your members. Now, it's time to utilize the online community to take surveys so that you can gain structured, quantitative insight on the views of your members.

Consider a survey frequency that is respectful of your members. Sending more than two surveys per month—survey fatigue—and excessively long surveys—greater than 15 minutes to complete—to your members should be avoided. Respect your members by adopting practices within these boundaries. Also, surveys should be a mix between quantitative and qualitative in nature so they are not rote. Finally, surveys should seek to discern support for or against certain positions to help guide the business' direction.

## Suggestion Box

A community should have a means for members to initiate conversation with its facilitators for:

- Forum topic suggestions
- New enhancement suggestions
- Ways to improve the community experience
- Letting administrator know about posted policy violations
- Security issues

## Go Do It

While there's certainly a place and time for "traditional" research techniques to solicit market feedback from customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders, you now have feedback-oriented online communities at your disposal to collect feedback quickly, interactively, and in a more organic, natural environment. Armed with the basic skills of building a feedback community, you can learn and connect in ways you only dreamed of in the past.

### About Vovici:

*Vovici's Enterprise Feedback Management solutions represent 25 years of industry leadership, and our software is the established leader in providing a comprehensive view of customer, partner, and employee feedback. The combination of Vovici's software-as-a-service model and the most open feedback platform of any feedback tool on the market make it easy to integrate feedback processes directly into systems and applications. We deliver the enterprise-class requirements demanded by the world's largest organizations in a secure, reliable, and efficient hosted environment.*