



FPG Child Development Institute
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB #8180, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8180
919.966.2622
www.fpg.unc.edu

Virtual Communities for Communication and Interaction

by Jonathan Green
December 2007

Introduction

At a minimum level, the information we provide should meet the information needs of our community (fill gaps, transfer knowledge). To go a step further and build communities, our electronic communications would need to facilitate interaction between us and our audience (within), as well as interaction amongst community members themselves (between).

Something most often overlooked is, the opportunity of treating a web site as a community's home; a place to do interaction. Web sites can become our communities' geographic homes and we can use the web sites as a way to encourage more interaction in our communities. This, however, takes a non-traditional approach to content creation and communications.

Successful networking and community web sites typically abandon the traditional, static, print-based communication perspective. For social networking and community development, the more modern perspective is to view the web as participatory, collaborative, dynamic and a responsive extension of (not replacement for) traditional communications. Human resources are applied to facilitating and moderating electronic content with an emphasis on two-way flow communication. One major web communications fallacy stemming from the by-gone print paradigm is, interaction has to be in real-time and/or mostly one way. Web sites are places that can and do offer relevant content and dynamic experiences, as well as meeting places to facilitate two-way (interaction)...in real-time, or not.

Home is where the community is

To flourish communities need a home; a forum, a place to come together. One major component of community development* is this social interaction. Yet, one true irony is, despite all of our electronic gadgets, somehow in our 24/7 information economy most of us have less and less time to interact in real time. One major web fallacy is, interaction has to be in real-time. The most important facet to recognize and embrace is, *the web can facilitate asynchronous (non-real time) interaction very well*. Web sites more and more are serving as communities' geographic, interactive homes. The web is the perfect forum to interact, at our own pace, in our own setting, on our clock.

At the program level, most programs/projects want to build a social network, then a community. Restated, there is the desire to first build a network of individuals to communicate and interact with, with the intention/hope a community will emerge. This process, the act of doing this, is community development. But how many web sites directly contribute to interaction?

The difference between Interaction and Interactivity

It is important to highlight, there is a big difference between interaction and interactivity. Interactive websites have been the buzz for years. Examples of interactive web features include the ability to fill out a survey, provide or update data, or customize a sites appearance. These are activities \ site features. Some of these activities serve to enhance usability (make sites more useable), share documents, provide member lists and keep member data current as well as to even entertain site visitors. Few sites, however, encourage or facilitate interaction.

Interaction is two-way communication, discourse, dialogue, rapport, refinement, elaboration with an effect (e.g. group formation, knowledge formation). Most web sites do little to facilitate dialogue or rapport. Some sites, if

somewhat progressive, have activities (interactivity), but few have a two-way communication flow (interaction) or have a purposeful, plan full effect.

Tools and Techniques

Virtual Communities (VCs) are emerging as *the* way to do web interaction. VCs use a variety of tools and techniques to facilitate interaction. Some examples include:

Tools that enable interaction

- Webinars - where community members are able to dialogue (not just be talked to or be given simple Q&A time).
- Blogs - or other content where persons are able to post subject matter and add comments to existing subject matter.
- Wikis - where the community is able to build collaborative content
- Other technologies - that encourage a two-way flow of communication.

Techniques that facilitate interaction

- Tagging - assigning keywords, indexing to site content.
- Social Bookmarking – facilitating shared bookmarks.
- Document management - enabling document storage, search and retrieval on the site.
- Knowledge management – instilling a creation, capture, retention and access process.
- Integration – providing easy ways for persons to subscribe and interact with site content via email.
- Versioning and Repurposing – writing once, using anywhere.
- Alerts – informing when new content is posted or old content is updated.
- Directories – enabling live editing of personal information.
- Feeds – enabling subscription and un-subscription.
- Content Rating – enabling user comments and ratings.

Not only, do VCs employ novel tools and techniques, but the communication process itself is reconfigured. Emphasis is placed on creating content on various platforms (email, web, phone, print, presentations) that is not only complimentary but drives traffic to the community. Every message is approached with the questions: How is this going to bring people to the forum? What then do we want to happen?

So the web in the traditional sense is a place to park web versions of content; repurposed content on a different channel. In a VC sense, the web is the place to do interaction, not just read.

Now, the obvious question here is, how in the world would we get people to participate in interaction-type things? None of us have time, and with so many emerging technologies who has the time to keep up? How do we manage resources (e.g. development time) and risks (e.g. little or no participation)?

The Way Forward

Fact: About 90% of the web information I have ever deployed on any web site has been unresponsive, untargeted and in the "about us" category (the project, it's people, it's activity in the singular). Very little has ever facilitated any interaction or whatsoever.

To move forward, to engage network members and build community, projects need to think more "about them" and "about us" in the plural. To do Virtual Community development, all electronic content creation must be realigned to a community perspective; emphasis must be placed on facilitating interaction. Thought must be given to how communications tactics (different mediums, different timings) overlap and can all be working to facilitate interaction (two-way flow) between the project and the project community, as well as between community members themselves. For example: Is there a way to use the web to continue dialogue from a meeting? Is there a way to enable community persons to use the project web in their own discussion?

There are literally hundreds of web interactivities to deploy, but very few that actually facilitate interaction. Why? Interaction is people, not technology, and managing interaction requires dedicated people.

Virtual Community Roles

Regardless of whether fulltime people are devoted to managing a Virtual Community, an understanding of various community roles is necessary to do/facilitate electronic interaction and build online communities.

Experts

Experts are the *knowledge entrepreneurs*. They are persons who spend most of their time analyzing, synthesizing, reflecting, and expanding on data, information and group communication. They have no preferred communication media because knowledge can be created anywhere. Their tech savvyness may or may not be limited, but their number one constraint is time (based on the demands of the knowledge creation process itself). They work closely with *Content Creators* to communicate their messages.

Due to the elongated process of knowledge creation, experts are typically slow to adopt new tools.

Content Creators

Content Creators are persons who assimilate, filter, analyze and interpret information (e.g. “*mash up*” or “*synthesize*”) as well as create and transmit communications. This is not restricted to creating web content. Their most valuable role is the ability to *repurpose* content; create email, web, presentation, print, and other versions of content and ensure are all complimentary. *Content Creators* work with content contributors and experts to interpret and write messages that can be received, read and understood by all community members.

Content Creators and are typically quick to adopt tools that speed their interpreting and production steps.

Content Contributors

Content Contributors are persons who contribute content (data, information, feedback) but are not tasked with versioning and/or distributing it. They are usually not interested in formally creating content. They merely want to talk, either provide information and/or feedback. They are very important to providing the critical mass that leads to broad discussion and idea creation in a Virtual Community.

Content Contributors will adopt a new tool only if it is very easy to use and integrates with exiting behavior.

Lurkers

Lurkers are persons that visit online communities and rarely, if ever, participate in any dialog or exchange. *Lurkers* typically make up the largest portion of online communities and their active browsing\visitation\membership though inactive participation has various motivations (Hester: 2006). Motivating them is key to knowledge formation. Even though they are not visibly active, their role in reading/observing community activity is valuable in to the dissemination and knowledge transfer process.

Lurkers use tools to gain visibility to community activity and content. Tools typically do not motivate lurkers to actually participate in VCs as their motivations for participation vary.

IT Programmers/Developers

IT Programmer\Developers work with the community to enable interaction via technology. They develop, deploy and manage tools that facilitate the *Content Creator* and *Contributor*, tasks. They work closely with the *Community Developer* to understand existing and emergent group behavior and automate routines to facilitate group activity and interaction.

IT Programmers develop and deploy tools, but typically do not create content or monitor use.

Community Developer

The role of the web community developer is nothing new. AOL has been developing online communities (e.g. health) and had persons managing them since the advent of the web browser. In mainstream web terms however, the role of online community developer is an emerging one. Web community developers are not just the persons who manage content, but persons whom manage and facilitate online interaction. This role is a complete drift from traditional IT developers\managers (tech orientation) and communications staff (information and communications

orientation). At a strategic level, the *Community Developer* promotes the web site (virtual community) as the project's home and redirects content creation and communication efforts toward making the web site as THE place to do interaction. Community developers motivate the activity and interaction of members.

Community Developers are responsible for facilitating and managing/monitoring interaction, including usage of virtual community content, tools and techniques and making recommendations for enhancements.

Moderator

At a tactical level, the *moderator* ensures that the web site remains a place that is participatory, collaborative, dynamic and most of all, responsive; timely responding to discussion posts, information requests and feedback as well as working with content creators to synthesize group interaction into virtual community content. Moderators build trust. Trust takes time. Sharing typically does not occur until trust is established. Along with community developers, moderators motivate the activity and interaction of members. They also participate in the activity and interaction.

Moderators are responsible for using tools and encouraging tool use on a day to day basis.

Closing Remarks

If our goal is to do community development, then after gauging our audience (their availability, capability, interests, information gaps, etc.), and considering the difference between interactivity and interaction, all our content creation efforts should be more focused on facilitating more web interaction. Why this is not done more is a carry over from the print paradigm; a paradigm where interaction with a piece of paper is either not possible or is not timely.

As we allocate resources to creating content for the coming months and years, we need to look beyond simple interactivity and focus on interaction; steadily and purposefully building that steady flow of up- and down- stream web communication; a message, a response, a follow-up response, etc. The web is a responsive media. We can leverage technologies and use them to facilitate more electronic interaction; but at its root, interaction is between people, not technology.

Our human resources should be reallocated to creating and managing web content that facilitates more interaction. All media should be seen and used as complimentary, with the web serving as the project's home and a place to do interaction.

Closing Quotes

"Whether face-to-face or virtual, a community of like-minded people creates belonging, trust, passion, learning and relationships all of which fuel performance, motivation and ingenuity. In the knowledge workplace, community gains momentum as people gravitate toward work, ideas and informal groups that enrich them intellectually, hasten their learning and keep them sharp. Equally important, as knowledge workers move wherever their brainpower takes them, they will seek identity, purpose and belonging not from corporate logos or organizational alignment but rather from communities of meaning."

- Diane Morello, Gartner

"The value chains of information that flow through multiple organizations create communities, groups of common interest that may or may not cross (organizational) boundaries, but need to share information and knowledge."

- John Ladley, Meta Group, Stanford

References and Readings

- Drakos, N. (2006). *A Blend of Wikis, Blogs and Discussion Forums Can Support Collaborative Business Activities*. Gartner. G00143670.
- Eid, T., Drakos, N. (July 23 2007). *The Emerging Enterprise Social Software Marketplace*. Gartner. G00149899.
- Gordon, R. (2006). *Online communities can build engagement, but require a plan*. Readership Institute. Available at: <http://www.readership.org/blog2/2006/10/online-communities-can-build.html>
- Morello, D. (July 6 2001). *Make No Mistake: Communities Are About People*. Gartner. SPA-14-0191.
- Hanna-Kaisa, E., Kosonen, M., Henttonen, K. (2007). *The Development of a Sense of Virtual Community*. International Journal of Web Based Communities. Vol. 3, No.1 pp. 114 – 130.
- Harris, K. (1999). *The Knowledge Community: KM Success Waiting to Happen*. Gartner. G-08-3402.
- Madanmohan, T.R., Navelkar, S. (2004). *Roles and Knowledge Management in Online Technology Communities: An Ethnography Study*. International Journal of Web Based Communities. Vol. 1, No.1 pp. 71 – 89.
- Inmon, W. H., Imhoff C., Sousa, R. (2000). *The Corporate Information Factory*. Wiley. 2nd Edition. ISBN 0471399612.
- McHarg, J., McLachlan, J. C. (2006). *Can Forming a Virtual Learning Community Enhance Learning on a Face-to-Face Learning Programme?* International Journal of Web Based Communities. Vol. 2, No.4 pp. 447 – 45.
- Sampson, D. (2006). *Enhancing Educational Portals Through Capturing Collective Knowledge of Web-based Learning Communities*. International Journal of Web Based Communities. Vol. 2, No.3 pp. 260 – 272.
- Wikipedia. (2007, September). *Community*. Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community>

This paper was initially prepared in September 2007 to facilitate discussion about Virtual Communities, Knowledge Management and Portals. It is work in progress and your comments are invited. The most recent version as well as discussion can be found at:

<http://www1.fpg.unc.edu/community/knowledge-mobilization/>

Jonathan Green
ITS Web Services
FPG Child Development Institute
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB # 8185
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8185

phone: (919) 843-8743

email: jonathan_green@unc.edu