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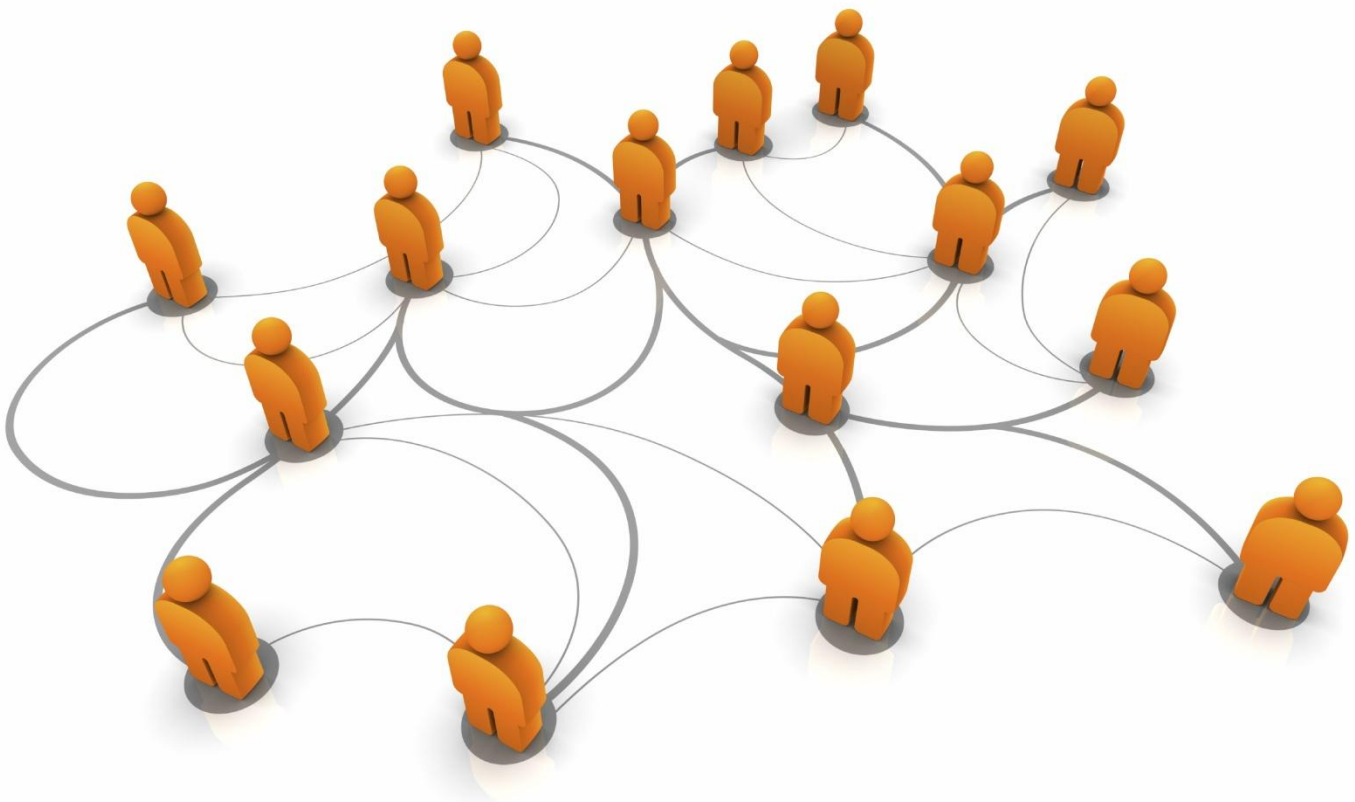
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White paper: Communities of Purpose

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Communities of Purpose

A guide for Brands and Community Managers

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Introduction

As the online world matures, social communities are splintering into groups, with consumers becoming smarter about how and where they spend their time. Shared interest communities and communities of purpose – those with a single aim, or goal – offer brands a great way to target previously hard-to-reach consumers with a very specific demographic profile, need, or interest.

This paper, co-authored by eModeration's CEO, **Tamara Littleton**, and Head of Community **Ashley Cooksley**, focuses on communities of purpose: what they are and who is using them (and how); questions brands should answer before setting up a specialist community; the issues facing community managers; and – importantly – how to overcome those issues, and manage a community of purpose effectively.

We spoke to a number of experts both from outside and within our own organisation, who gave valuable insight into managing different kinds of communities. This paper answers the biggest questions of managing a community of purpose, and later we'll address some of the other, more specific topics we discussed over on **our blog**.

Our particular thanks go to: Leah Williams, Community & Social Media Manager at **Breast Cancer Care**; Patrick O'Keefe, owner of **iFroggy Network** and author of '**Managing Online Forums**'; **Alison Michalk**, Director of **Quiip** and ex-community manager for **Essential Baby** at Fairfax Digital Australia; **Blaise Grimes-Viort**, Head of Communities & Social Media at National Magazine Company and Hearst Digital and **Vanessa DiMauro**, CEO of **LeaderNetworks**.



What is a community of purpose?

First, let's define what we're talking about here. For the purposes of this paper, we're defining a community of purpose as an online community of people with a common, clear, defined goal. That could be a community that helps you give up smoking, supports students through university, or aims to raise money (or awareness) for a particular cause. It could be a Twitter group (we've started our own list of interesting communities of purpose [Tweeters here](#)), a Facebook community, or – increasingly – an online community created by a brand for a specific purpose, to be achieved over any given period of time.

What we're **not** talking about, to be really clear, are communities built around a shared interest, but with no single defined goal (like Mumsnet or iVillage – although of course, there may be purpose elements within these sites, such as a pregnancy section within iVillage).

Roughly speaking, communities of purpose divide into two main groups:

1. Those that offer **support** to achieve a goal, in the medium to long term. Examples of 'support' communities would be **Weightwatchers**; **Open University** (which has a student community that supports students while they are studying); or Essential Baby, which supports mums through their pregnancy and the early years of their child's life.
2. Those that are created around an **event** or **campaign**, with a short-term goal. For example, listeners to BBC's 6 Music staged a campaign to save the radio station as it was threatened with closure, setting up the '**Save 6 Music**' campaign: this has a very clear, single, short-term goal.



The rise of single-goal or single-purpose communities

In the real world, small communities have always sprung up around specific goal-based activities (from going to a slimming group to taking part in a street protest). Social media allows much wider access into these communities. **David Cushman**, in his blog post '**Communities of purpose are the business units of the 21st century**' refers to the ease with which groups with a shared goal can create interest groups on Facebook, reaching out to a larger audience than would have been possible previously; and yet he points out that Facebook inhibits the ability for real communities to form, beyond basic forum discussion on group sites. So, brands are starting their own communities that sit within their own home territory (rather than just on Facebook or MySpace), and to great effect.

Single-issue campaigning is a defining characteristic of our times. The Hansard Society's latest '**Audit of Political Engagement**' (2009) charts the increase in recent years of single issue political campaigning, and polling shows that young voters in particular are more likely to lend their support to a party on the basis of a single issue. In our own white paper, '**How to moderate teens and tweens**' we examined the impact that cause marketing can have on a young audience.

It is no surprise, then, that brand marketers – including those from third sector organisations - are capitalising on this and creating their own single issue communities. **Pampers Village** is a great example of a community with a very clear commercial purpose: to create a support network for mothers at very specific points of their lives - i.e. during pregnancy and the early childhood years. Of course, the reason for doing this is commercial – Pampers is creating a community that has value to its target audience to encourage them to buy Pampers' products – but, done well, consumers will happily play ball.



Creating a community of purpose: defining a community's goals and values

Any community should be clear in its purpose, and in defining the time it will take to achieve that purpose. In **Anthony Mayfield's words**: "...those purposes might last a few hours or a few decades. That purpose might be the marketer's fantasy of grouping around the purpose of buying a product, celebrating a scrap of content, or a politician's nightmare of an organised populace come to dictate terms on a piece of legislation."

Here is our list of things a brand should consider when creating a community of purpose:

Create the 'burning imperative'. A successful community must have a clear purpose: a reason for people to join it, whether that be a communal goal such 'Vote for this Political Party', 'Raise money for that Charity' or an individual one, such as losing weight, stopping smoking, getting pregnant. This will define how you treat, incentivise and reward members.

Vanessa DiMauro, an expert on creating B2B communities, sets out the need for a 'burning imperative':

"The key requirement that surrounds the formation of any professional or business-to-business community is that there needs to be a burning imperative—a driving need—for people to share information. You need to ask "Who are these people? What are their needs? How do they like to interact?" Break your constituencies into different groups of personas to predict some of their requirements, both informational and social. For example, "How much moderation do they need? How much handholding? Are they a self-sufficient group that can look up how to do things in a technical wiki? Or do they need more interpersonal interactions with the community builders? How do they like information? Are they deeply interactive and going to do more volunteering?"

Bring value. Understand what value your community brings members and potential members. If you're struggling with why consumers should come to your site, chances are they will struggle, too. Value can be many things – it could be exclusive content, or offers, or the chance to connect with other people who share the same aim or purpose, or access to information that's hard to find elsewhere. Or a combination of all the above. Check that what you're offering isn't available anywhere else.

Richard Millington, the online community builder, says on his **Feverbee blog** that the one statement brands should complete is this one: "People will participate in this community because..." Millington allows you 12 words, and this should be the site's mission statement. It's a great way to define the community's purpose. "The more specific, the better [...]. One more crucial rule, it has to improve the life of the member. No-one's going to participate because it boosts the company's quarterly earnings."

He gives some examples:

People will participate in this community because they want great advice from recovering alcoholics.

People will participate in this community because they want to build their reputation as a great gamer.

People will participate in this community because they might find a perfect partner.

People will participate in this community because it helps them get a dream job.

"Washing machines don't bring people together". A great quote, again from Richard Millington, who makes the point that **having a good product is not a good enough reason to create a community**, and this is why so many branded communities fail – they haven't got the value bit right. If they get this right, even a product that has seemingly no community appeal can form part of a successful community. **Staples' Facebook Page** is a great example of this.

Stay relevant to your brand. To be credible, a community should have relevance to your brand. It would not be credible, for example, for a chocolate brand to set up a community for slimmers, even though the two issues may be targeting a similar audience demographic.

Agree the timeframe for the community. Be clear from the outset how long you expect people to participate within the community. Few goal-focused communities will have lifetime value for a consumer (unless its objective is the lifetime management of a health condition, for example). If the community has a definitive timeframe, create your 'exit strategy' at the outset. Determine how this will be communicated to your members, and when. More information about this will follow at the end of this document.

Set goalposts, to motivate users. Understand when a user is flagging in their resolve or motivation, and carry them with you, to avoid losing them. Community builder, Nancy White, talks about '**heartbeats**' that make up stages of a community – small goals and achievements that people can reach and that keep them motivated within the community. For example: achieving your first week of exercise (the motivation might be what that week means in terms of improved fitness); achieving your first weight loss goal; or reaching the community's first target for donations. As Chris Brogan puts it: "**Success is made of little victories.**"

You can reward little victories by having the Community Manager and Power Users ensure that these successes are shared and celebrated by posting messages within the community. This can also be done graphically through an integrated badge system that automatically rewards members for reaching pre-determined milestones. For example, 'DawnF' has posted 100 times within the community / has lost 10 pounds of weight / has run a marathon / has received a 5-star rating on a message board post.

Set clear guidelines. Patrick O Keefe talked to us about the importance of clear guidelines in a community, to set out the vision, style and tone of the site:

"Community guidelines, for me, are a vision statement. They talk about who you are and who you want to be.

"My guidelines not only detail what you can and cannot do, but in doing so, they also illustrate who we are in plain language. Once in a while, you get someone who feels like they need to be able to use vulgar terms or say that this or that is stupid. And then I have to tell them that that isn't what we're about and that they may need to look elsewhere. Your guidelines, your publicly available vision statement, allow you to say such a thing with confidence. They always give you something to point to, that everyone has access to."

Blaise Grimes-Viort makes sure that the terms and aims of the site are disseminated throughout it:

"I create a page outlining the site or community's mission statement in friendly language, and link to it from the Terms & Conditions page and Community Guidelines pages. I then try to spread little reminders throughout the tools, particularly on the content submission sections, to encourage members to follow these aims when contributing."



Managing a community of purpose: addressing the issues facing brands

Engaging versus informing

There are some great information-based branded sites out there (**Bupa** is a good example of a site that provides thorough information on health issues to Bupa members). Information sites are useful in positioning a brand as an expert in a particular area, and have a valuable role to play, if informing is your strategy. But if getting people to act is your goal (donate money, share experiences, lobby government, buy health products and so on), then a community should engage audiences.

Of course, engagement is a much-overused term in social media circles. What it means in practical terms is including content with which people can interact; tools that let them share information; discussion forums and the ability to personalise content. Nancy White advises us to ask questions because:

"...if you say everything you know, then people go: "OK, that's good. I'm done." But questions are a natural way for humans to interact. And this is whether you are face-to-face or whether you are online. You ask me a question, you engage me. I want to answer, I want to respond."

If the purpose of the community is information-based, ask your members questions that you think someone can provide valuable answers to ("What are the best home remedies for clearing a clogged kitchen sink?"). If your community is support-based, ask questions about their experiences – encourage them to tell their stories and to share on an emotional level ("How did you talk to your children about a loved one passing away?").

Leah Williams says how important it is to understand what community users want from their experience. She told us:

"People do want clear, accurate information, and our website provides that. But when they come to the forum, they want to talk to other people who understand what they are going through. Whether it's people who have been diagnosed at the same time, or with the same type of cancer, or who live in the same area, or who have the same type of family set-up, people want to give and get support, share experiences, talk about current issues and get practical tips. That's what brings people back day after day."

"However, in common with most communities, we have a lot of people who browse, read and take away information but don't post. Some of them use the private messaging function instead, and we're also looking at introducing smaller steps to contributing to get over people's initial fears."

She also talked about creating the right kind of environment to help people get involved:

"Maintaining a friendly, open, welcoming and supportive atmosphere on the forum is also extremely important, and this is something we put quite a lot of energy into. At a time when people are feeling quite vulnerable, they really don't want to step into the middle of a brawl."

Patrick O'Keefe emphasises the importance of explaining what a community member will gain from interaction:

"Everyone is different. They are the ones that have to decide if the kind of assistance your community can offer will be beneficial to them. And then, if they do, they must also decide how much they wish to share of themselves since these can be sensitive, personal matters."

"The best thing you can do is make them aware of the possibility of interaction and the perceived benefits of doing so and provide them with the opportunity. Perhaps most importantly, maintain a safe, friendly and supportive environment where [each] one can feel free to share of themselves without fear of being ostracized."

In talking about the value to community members of sharing experiences with other similar people, rather than just taking expert advice from a site, **Alison Michalk** says:

"Research has shown that Mums in particular value the opinion and experience of other mothers. This has been vital to the success of our community as members value the varied, multiple responses rather than reading an expert or professional piece. They also want to be able to ask more questions so even articles written by Mums don't provide the same level of engagement that members' seek."

Vanessa DiMauro explained her approach to identifying the levels of engagement that a community member might be prepared to make, and how to overcome the feeling of 'risk'. By 'risk', she means the feeling of exposure, of potential embarrassment, of putting your head over the parapet which participation can bring. In her experience, getting a member to do something 'low risk', such as taking a poll, rating content or suggesting a resource, acts as a "gateway activity to greater participation."

She says:

"It is important to create opportunities for member participation for all people in the member lifecycle – from newbies to experienced members. This includes creating a portfolio of engagement opportunities that combine low risk and higher risk activities. By low risk I mean, engagement activities that do not require a large leap of faith to participate but enable a member to make themselves visible on the community. It is focused on providing activities that allow the member to DO something online."

Once this is achieved, the member may go on to engage in 'mid-risk' activity, such as participating in a forum on a topic "with no right or wrong answer", before engaging at a 'higher risk' level:

"By higher risk engagement, I mean an activity that requires the member to expose a detail of their practice or share something about themselves – an idea or a point of view. This is focused on supporting members' ability to think online."

Having a Community Manager encouraging all levels of participation is a great way to mitigate the 'risk' by creating a friendly and welcoming community so that, in particular, new members will not feel intimidated or threatened by the perception of an existing clique.

DiMauro also tells her clients how important it is to reward members, to keep them motivated and engaged:

"Reinforce community-enhancing behaviors by thanking members, featuring members, sending "knowledge-gifts" or [by giving them] access to special events."

Encouraging community users to share experiences and help each other

Shared experience is a strong basis for any kind of community. Even when a site encourages users to focus on an individual goal, that is defined by and personal to them, it is some strand of common experience (the 'social characteristic') that will bind them together in the community.

But it may matter if users share misinformation within a community, and the community manager has to tread the fine line between wading in with corrections (and risking stopping a discussion completely) and providing the correct information. Nowhere is this more important to get right than on communities like Breast Cancer Care. From **Leah Williams**:

"There is a difficult balance to be struck between making sure people are sharing accurate information and shutting down open discussions. If, for example, people are sharing information about treatments or diet, and we wade in and post Breast Cancer Care's position, that could have the effect of shutting down the whole discussion. If there is a discussion that we have concerns about, we refer it to our clinical team at Breast Cancer Care, to assess whether we need to intervene. Usually other users will join in the discussion and often post what we would have posted so

people are getting a balanced view without us needing to intervene. If we do need to, a member of the clinical team will draft a response and we will post it on their behalf, so people know it has come from our team of nurses."

Having access to authoritative information on a community like this is important. **Leah Williams** says:

"Because the forum sits within our broader Breast Cancer Care website, people have easy access to the information we produce about relevant issues, and it is easy to refer people to the accurate information we have already produced."

Often, community users will be self-motivated to help others on the community, and identifying and appreciating those users is important. **Patrick O'Keefe** said to us:

"Appreciation is a powerful thing. The people that do help others, do your best to make sure they are appreciated. If someone makes a great post, but no one has replied, you can thank them for making it and for sharing that information. People who are truly appreciated will be more likely to stay on your community. That sounds like it should be evident, but it is very powerful."

If you can identify and encourage these members from the outset, they could potentially become your most dedicated users ('Power Users'), and help you to motivate and support their fellow community members.

Can you extend the lifespan of the community past its initial goals?

What happens within a community once the members within have met their individual targets: can you persuade them to stay? For example, can you create value in being a member of a 'stop smoking' site once a member has given up? How can you keep them engaged (so they can recommend the site to others trying to stop smoking, and provide encouragement within the site)?

Or what if the short-term community has achieved its group goal: do you leave it alone and let your members just drift off of their own accord? Invent a new purpose? Close it down?

According to **O'Keefe**:

"The overriding principle is that, generally speaking, your community is more than its purpose. Having a purpose is great, but people build relationships that go beyond that purpose. They bond, they discuss other things and they engage with people on different levels. So, even though they may have accomplished their goal, the friendships they made on that road have a strong possibility of being special to them. They still want to talk with these people in the same venue they always have."

Blaise Grimes-Viort puts it:

"Members often enjoy going over their old contributions and being able to follow the process they have followed to reach their goal, such as planning a wedding. Opening more generalist areas for members to remain in touch can help keep them engaged and provide help and support to new members. Concentrating on side effects to their lifestyle, such as exercise and healthy eating in the case of your smoking cessation example, can also extend their community lifecycle."

Some members will want to stay on the community to share their experiences with others, to give something back to a community that has helped them achieve a goal, or just to be part of something that's important to them. By continuing to involve these people, brands can create community ambassadors who will, in turn, bring other members and experiences into the community, which allow it to evolve and thrive.

But other members won't want to stay. Accepting this, and understanding why members leave, is all part of a thriving community, says Martin Reed, on his community building blog,

Community Spark:

"Sometimes, your online community may simply no longer be relevant to some of your members. Your community may be based around conception methods. You might lose some members once they fall pregnant. Your challenge is to make your community relevant to members after their original objectives have been met. Encourage that member to remain and offer advice – give them some status and authority."

But if they don't? The community has succeeded, and helped the individual reach their goal. Let them go, and move on.



What should you do if the decision has been made to close a community?

Unfortunately, decisions are often made to close a community of purpose. There are many reasons why communities will end; some include problems with ongoing funding once a campaign or product launch has ended. It could also be that someone has determined that the community has come to a natural end with few interactions and low traffic spelling its demise.

If traffic and the lack of interaction is a problem, there are solutions that should be investigated to prevent closing the community. Has a dedicated Community Manager been in the community to interact with its members, engage them on their profiles and within other community forums, and to welcome all of the new members? Have the 'Power Users' been identified, encouraged and provided with incentives to keep the community engaged? Is the content fresh and engaging? If a forum is part of a larger site, has it been properly integrated and signposted from the rest of the site? Has the marketing team promoted the community externally? Have you Tweeted, Facebooked and, generally, shouted about your community? If not, perhaps this could resolve your traffic woes.

If, however, closing a community is inevitable, consider taking the next two key steps to ensure you don't leave a bad taste in your community members' mouths. After all, they have invested their time, energy and wisdom with you. By not providing any information or warning about the impending closure, you potentially create community-wary members who will think twice before engaging elsewhere.

Let your community members know that you are planning on closing the community, and when. Ideally you would be able to give them enough advance notice so they can make arrangements to go elsewhere. By alerting them to the upcoming change, this will give them a chance to say their "goodbyes" and to also ensure that they have a way of continuing to connect with the friends they've made. This message can be posted throughout the community by your Community Manager, posted on the front page of the community, and/or sent via a newsletter to all of your registered community members.

If you have the time, it would be helpful to provide your community members with suggestions of similar communities where they can move to. For example, if you run a parenting community, find other parenting communities that you can post the links to so that your members may find a new "home" to continue their discussions.

And finally...

We hope we've provided some valuable insights into the particular challenges and rewards of managing a Community of Purpose. Our thanks once again to all those who contributed to this white paper for their wisdom, so much of which we have had to omit for reasons of space, but which will shortly be published on our blog instead.

If you have any comments about this white paper, would like to speak to us about Community Management or just keep an eye on what we're doing, here are some ways you can do that:

Twitter: @emoderation

Website: www.emoderation.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/eModeration>

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Resources / further reading

- David Cushman, FasterFuture.blogspot.com, 'Communities of purpose are the business units of the 21st century'
- The Hansard Society, 'Audit of Political Engagement'
- Antony Mayfield, www.antonymayfield.com, 'Communities of purpose'
- Vanessa DiMauro, www.leadernetworks.com
- Richard Millington, www.feverbee.com, 'People will participate in this community because...'
- www.sciencedaily.com, 'The life and death of online communities'
- Nancy White, www.masternewmedia.org, 'Online community building strategy: Good advice from Nancy White'
- Chris Brogan, www.chrisbrogan.com, 'Success is made of little victories'
- Patrick O'Keefe, www.ifroggy.com, 'Managing Online Forums'
- Blaise Grimes-Viort, [The National Magazine Company](http://www.thenationalmagazine.com)
- Leah Williams, [Breast Cancer Care](http://www.breastcancer.org)
- Martin Reed, www.communityspark.com, 'When members want to leave your online community'
- Alison Michalk, <http://www.quiip.com.au/blog/>
- [The Community Roundtable](http://www.thecommunityroundtable.com) and their report 'The State of Community Management'
- Other good community sources can be found on our blog roll at <http://blog.emoderation.com>



About eModeration

Founded in 2002, eModeration Limited is an international, specialist user-generated content moderation company. It provides multilingual community management and content moderation to clients in the entertainment and digital publishing industry and major corporate clients hosting online communities and consumer-driven ad campaigns.

eModeration's team of moderators and staff are the key to eModeration's success and excellent client list. eModeration draws on the expertise of carefully recruited and trained moderators located mainly in the US and Europe with specialist editorial and community moderation skills, which are matched uniquely to the client. The company can moderate 24/7 and provides cover for over 40 languages. All its moderators are managed online from eModeration's headquarters in London, United Kingdom.