

1. **Building online social communities: Helping your members cross the observer / participant barrier**

In this article, we'll discuss what you need to do to foster and promote the necessary user behaviours within online communities to create a sustainable active community.

We build on our 'Observer / participant barrier' model from our earlier paper to show you how to successfully manage your members as they start the process of engaging with your online community. We use strong social psychology models as a basis for the recommendations on how to work with your community and include a checklist of dos and don'ts.

1.1. **Introduction**

The phenomenon of a 'long time listener, first time caller' is common in both talkback radio and online forums. So, what are people's motives behind deciding to go from passively observing to actively participating and what can we do to help more people make that step in a community?

The psychology of member contribution to an online community can help us to understand these motives. In our other paper 'Long time listener, first time caller – why people do and don't engage in a community', we outline the psychological principles describing the decision processes people go through when choosing to engage with an online community. Using this information, we can take our knowledge of the psychology of members and use it to develop practical suggestions for how organisations can approach their online communities and make them more engaging for the user.

Many organisations recognise the value of social media to increase brand awareness, market share, and overall performance. Quite a few of them have quickly developed environments that support and promote an online community, without necessarily understanding the dynamics of how these communities really work. Unfortunately, a large proportion of online communities designed for this purpose don't grow to a level where the benefits can be realised.

Why do some of these communities falter? Essentially, although the platforms and tools needed to communicate are there, and technically work well, the organisations creating these communities, ironically, don't take into consideration what drives the real success behind a strong community – the people. Because of this, social media platforms neglect to provide incentives and rewards that encourage users to revisit, contribute knowledge, and thus grow the strength and relevance of the online community (Ma & Agarwal, 2007).

The process an individual follows when moving from a non-member to an actively participating member in an online community is summarised in the following diagram, known as the 'Observer / Participant Barrier' model:



1.2. Creating a community where people want to participate

We'll now take you through each of the six stages and illustrate the things you need to do to encourage members to stay in your community and transition as many as possible towards active engagement.

1.2.1. Non-member

Starting with the 'Non-member' who is interested in becoming part of a community, it's best to make sure the information within your community is easy to search and find.

You should ensure that:

- ◀ The community is easily discovered through search engine optimisation
- ◀ Key terms used in the website SEO clearly reflect the strategic intent of the community
- ◀ The homepage features key words reflecting the strategic intent and nature of the community
- ◀ Community subject-matter information and member information is exposed on the website

Adding these features increases the chance that the community can be found, and the information about the community easily identified by potential members so they can determine if this is the community they're looking for and should start to engage with.

1.2.2. Observer

To meet the needs of the 'Observer', it's important to help them learn that other members in the community can be trusted, would provide help and would benefit from information the 'Observer' holds.

To meet the needs of people in this stage, organisations can structure the community so that:

- ◀ Information and subjects discussed are well organised and easily accessible from the homepage
- ◀ Hot / popular posts and most active threads are promoted on the homepage showing the kind of activity taking place and its frequency
- ◀ Members can develop detailed and individualised profiles, which are accessible to non-members, preferably with photos
- ◀ Key members are featured on the website homepage, such as 'member of the week' or 'most helpful comment', helping prospective members identify with existing members

Exposing this information will make it easier for the potential member to both decide if the intent of the community is right for them, and if they like the members of the community. They can quickly answer questions such as 'is this community like me?', 'do they share my values?' and 'will I be accepted?'

1.2.3. Regular observer

Individuals at this stage are likely to begin developing a sense of belonging to the community, as they visit more frequently and access valuable information provided by members.

Drawing these users across the observer/participant barrier to the next stage in the process involves encouraging users to reinforce their feelings of belonging to the community by identifying themselves actively as a member.

During this stage, it is also important to emphasise the uniqueness of the information the regular observers have to contribute, by supporting the individual's need for both acknowledgement and self-verification.

The following features will promote this process:

- ◀ Expose the existence of 'member only' sections or features of the community, such as an ability to rate the usefulness of member feedback
- ◀ Show threads and topics that have not yet been answered, or answered well, to encourage members who haven't responded to do so
- ◀ Feature members who have made significant and unique contributions to the community on the website homepage, for example;
 - Member of the week or most significant comment / response of the week
 - Most active members
 - Members with the most votes for making a strong contribution (e.g., with the most 'Like' votes)
 - Nominated 'Guru' members to ask about specific topics
 - Profile super-users / leaders and contribution and speciality

These features will encourage users at this stage to become a member and to begin contributing knowledge to the community by emphasising social recognition and reward for contributing knowledge.

1.2.4. Occasional participating member

Once individuals have registered as a member, they move from observing to occasionally contributing to the community crossing the 'Observer/participant Barrier'.

You can encourage the frequency of these contributions by:

- ◀ Supporting a facility for members to acknowledge the value of each other's contributions by rating member contributions on 'usefulness', such as a rating out of five
- ◀ Customisable member profiles emphasising speciality / expertise
- ◀ Inviting members with a specific expertise to contribute, especially to topics / threads with minimal or no responses / contributions
- ◀ Member 'status' levels dependent upon frequency and (member-rated) quality of contributions, where achieving a higher 'status' is tied to more features, recognition, trust and responsibility within the community
- ◀ Feedback about a member's individual contribution within the community compared with other members (i.e., quality and frequency of comments compared with similar members)

Applying these features will help in addressing user needs for identity and acknowledgement within the community, while maintaining and promoting a sense of reward and recognition for the contributions they make.

1.2.5. Managing participating members into the future

It is important that, when maintaining members and promoting users to higher member 'levels' towards the Leader / Super user, other needs such as their sense of attachment, belonging and identity must still be met.

Continuing to reward all members within the community (rather than focusing upon one member 'level') for their contributions will ensure the ongoing maintenance of users at all levels of membership. This recognition and reward, in turn, will likely ensure the development of a strong and enduring social community.

To maintain this process, you should:

- ◀ Recognise users at all member levels to foster a drive for continuous improvement in contribution
- ◀ Review member-level benefits regularly to ensure what is provided meets user needs
- ◀ Monitor member feedback to ensure status ratings (dependent upon community feedback) are fair and equitable
- ◀ Moderate community posts to ensure members interact with each other in an appropriate and civil manner
- ◀ Review customisable profile features regularly to ensure available profile information reflects information members in the community would have an interest in knowing
- ◀ Reward top / super users by requesting their advice on any proposed changes to the community

1.3. The Dos and Don'ts of building a successful active online community

We've collected here the best (and worst) design decisions you can make when building and hosting a successful online community.

Dos	Don'ts
Make the community easily findable through search engine optimisation	Include uncommon terms to describe the content of the community
Expose community subject-matter information on the homepage	Bury subjects and information discussed by the community under several navigation levels within the webpage
Ensure key terms on the website reflect the strategic intent of the community	Depict conflicting or multiple intents for the community
Organise information and subjects discussed in an intuitive and clear manner that is easily accessible from the homepage	Organise information under broad category headings with endless subject headings
Ensure discussions are easily searchable within the website by encouraging users to identify keywords associated with each discussion thread	Provide limited search options that only explore the subject heading or entire content of threads
Expose member information for members and non-members to view	Block access to member information to non-users
Promote hot / popular and most active threads on the homepage	Provide limited information about threads on the homepage or generic information about what 'is usually' discussed within the community
Enable detailed member profiles, such as photos, description of interests, and contributions made to the community	Provide limited member profiles with minimal information about the individual or their interaction within the community
Feature key members on the website homepage, such as 'member of the week' or 'most helpful member'	Provide limited information about members and/or member contributions to the community
Provide 'member only' sections or features of the community to encourage users to register as a member	Provide equal levels of accessibility and privileges to members and non-members
Include a quality-management system, such as enabling members to rate the value of each other's contributions	Monitor quality externally or not at all
Ensure member 'status' is dependent upon frequency and quality of contributions to the community	Make member 'status' dependent upon the length of time an individual has been a member of the community

1.4. References

Ma, M., & Agarwal, R. (2007). Through a glass darkly: information technology design, identity verification, and knowledge contribution in online communities. *Information Systems Research*, 18(1), 42-67.

2. About the Author

Craig Errey is the Managing Director and founder of Solve Group (T/A PTG Global). Solve is a leading business technology consultancy that designs and delivers IT solutions that work the right way, first time.

Craig has nearly 20 years in user experience, user interface design and change management.

He has been the primary architect behind the business-critical services and transactions essential to many of Australia's most popular websites including CBA, Virgin Blue and ASIC, and also works on cutting-edge technologies such as touch, medical and special-purpose applications.

Craig manages Solve's R&D function and has produced a number of world-firsts, including XPDesign – the first systematic methodology for user interface design – and Certified Usable – the first guarantee for usability and user experience.

Craig is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the APS College of Organisational Psychologists. He holds a Masters in organisational psychology from the University of NSW and is also an Associate of the UNSW and Macquarie University.

As a registered psychologist, he understands the way people think and creates user interfaces that are simple, user-friendly and effective. His expert insight into technology and how it is used has been called on by media outlets including The Australian, SMH, ZUE and the ABC.



Contact Craig on:

Email: craige@ptg-global.com
Web: www.ptg-global.com
Blog: www.ptg-global.com/craigsblog/
Mobile: +61 (0) 416 266 216
Phone: +61 (0) 2 9251 4200
Address: Level 16, 207 Kent St, Sydney, NSW, 2000, Australia

In preparing this paper, Craig was assisted by Christina Li and Cara De Ferranti.