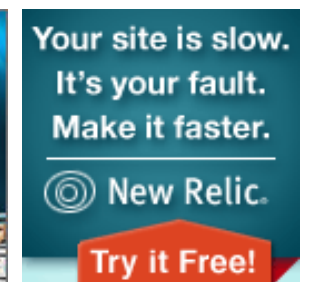


How to Grow a Community: Insights from Experts

May 19 2010 by **Andrew Follett** | [23 Comments](#) | [Stumble](#) [Bookmark](#)





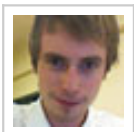
Growing a large, active community is hard work. I know from experience. When I launched my startup, [Concept Feedback](#) (a website feedback community for designers and developers) less than a year ago, I wish I had the insights that these veterans shared with me while doing these interviews.

If you're **developing a website**, trying to **attract customers** or **building a community**, I hope the wisdom offered here helps you get where you're trying to go just a little bit faster.

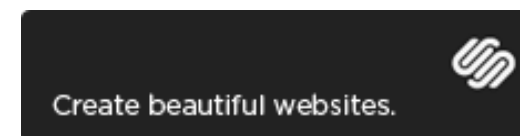
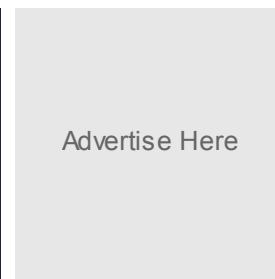
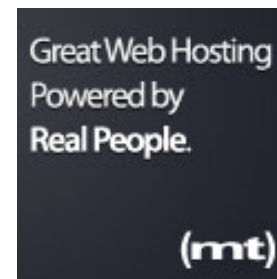
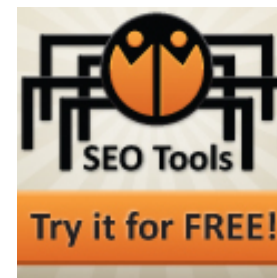
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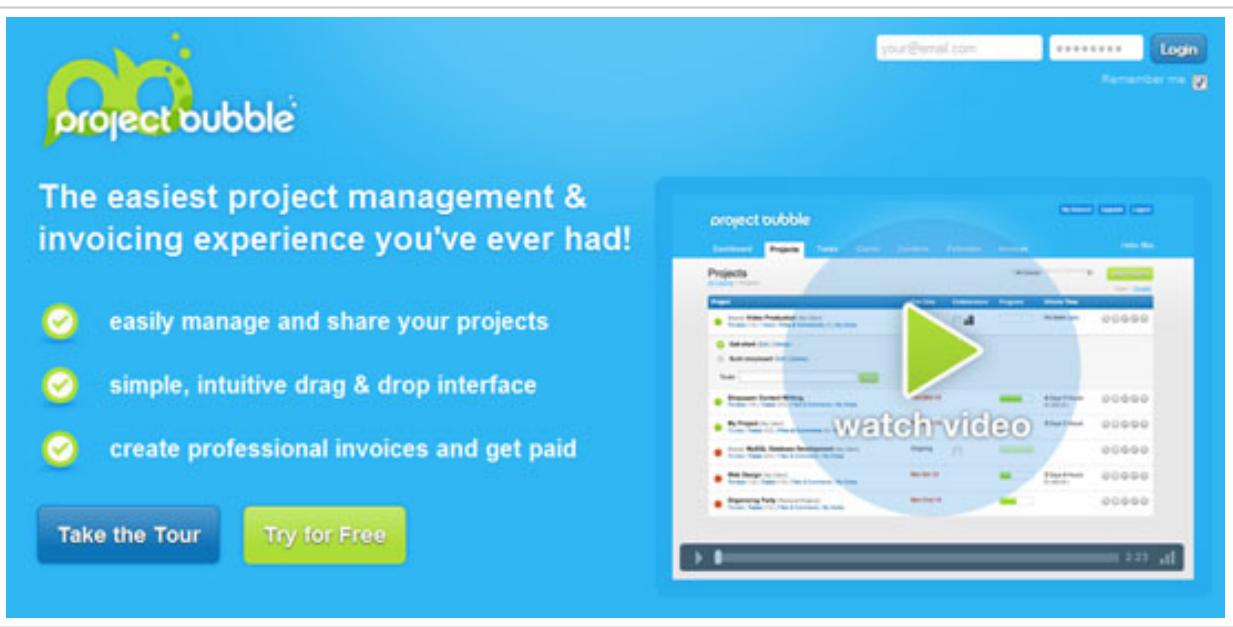
We asked five people who are known to have grown a strong online community through their projects.

Stu Green (SG)



Stu is a web developer and entrepreneur out of the UK. He has developed several popular project management and invoicing tools for freelancers including [Project Bubble](#) and [Invoice Bubble](#).





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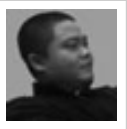
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Jacob Gube (JG)



Jacob (who you all may know) is a web developer/designer and founder of [Six Revisions](#) , an industry leading blog for web designers and developers with over 50,000 readers and 1.5 million unique visitors each month.

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Voices That Matter: Web Design Conference – Win a Free Pass

May 10th, 2010 by Jacob Gube | 11 Comments



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New Riders' [Voices That Matter: Web Design Conference](#), now in its fourth consecutive year, will take place **June 28–29, 2010** in **San Francisco, CA** and the timing couldn't be better!

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Alex Krug (AK)



Alex is the VP of Platform at Behance, a company that "designs products and services that empower the creative world to make ideas happen." Behance also runs the leading online platform for creative professionals, [behance.net](#).

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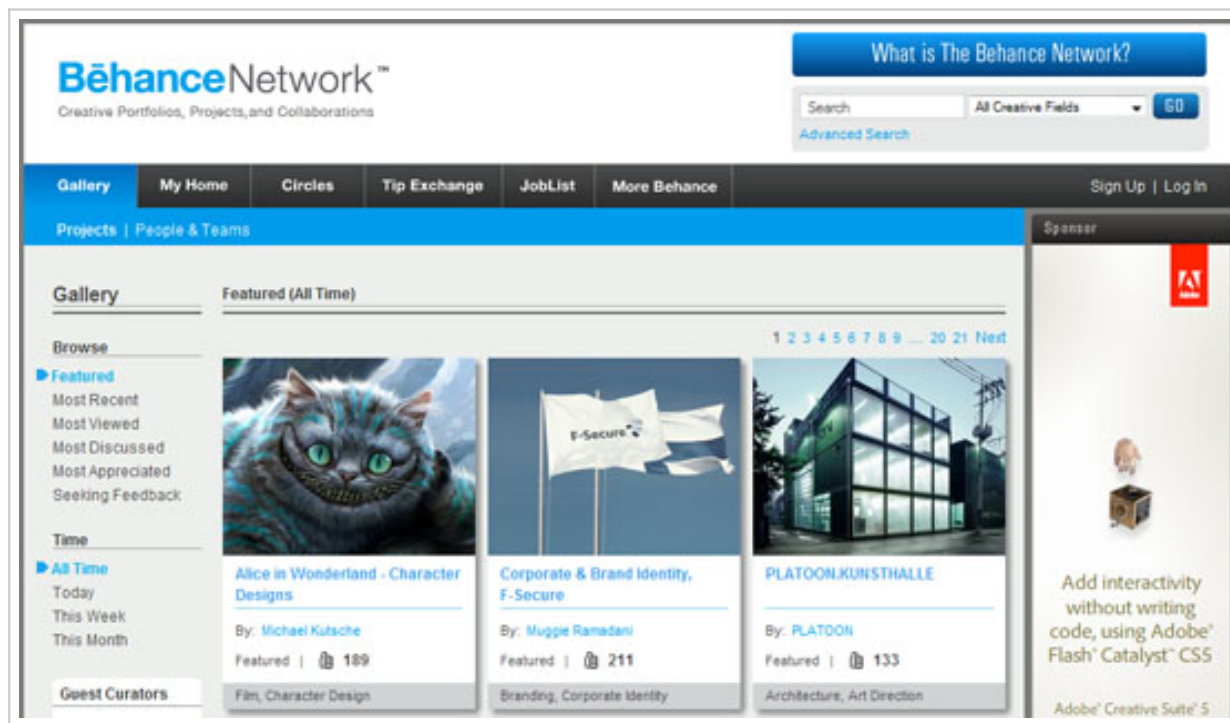
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Nate Kontny (NK)



Nate is the CTO for [Inkling Markets](#), a software platform for collaboratively collecting predictions and opinions about current and future events and topics. Inkling has been named one of "America's Most Promising Startups" by BusinessWeek.

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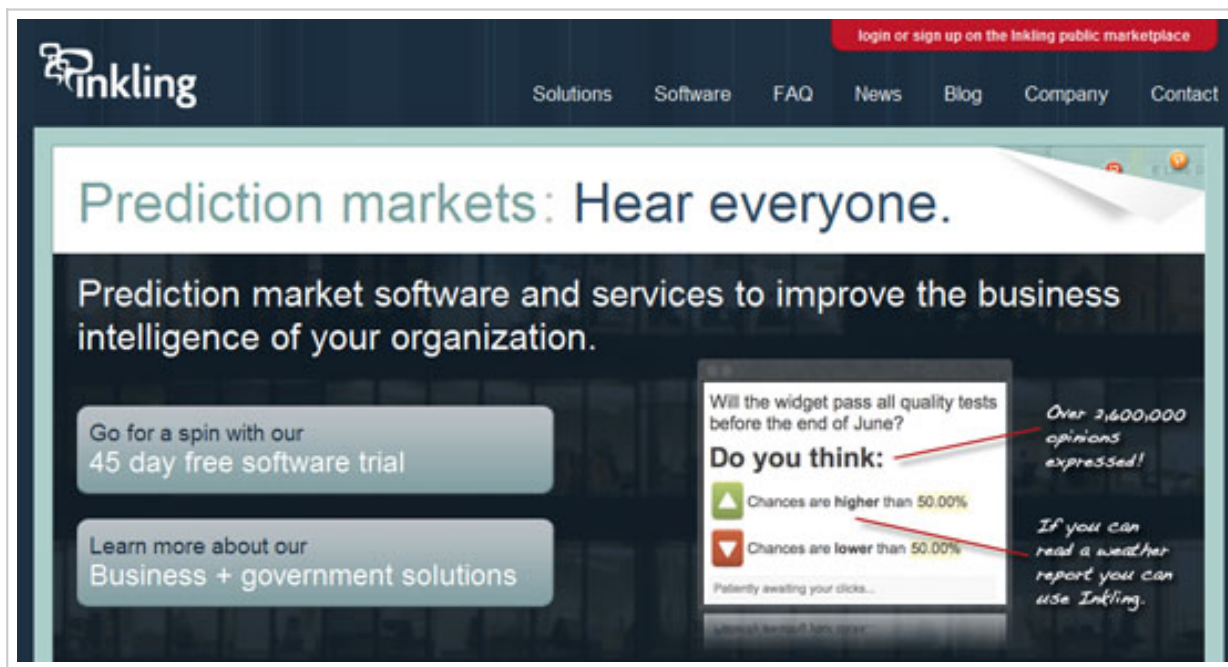
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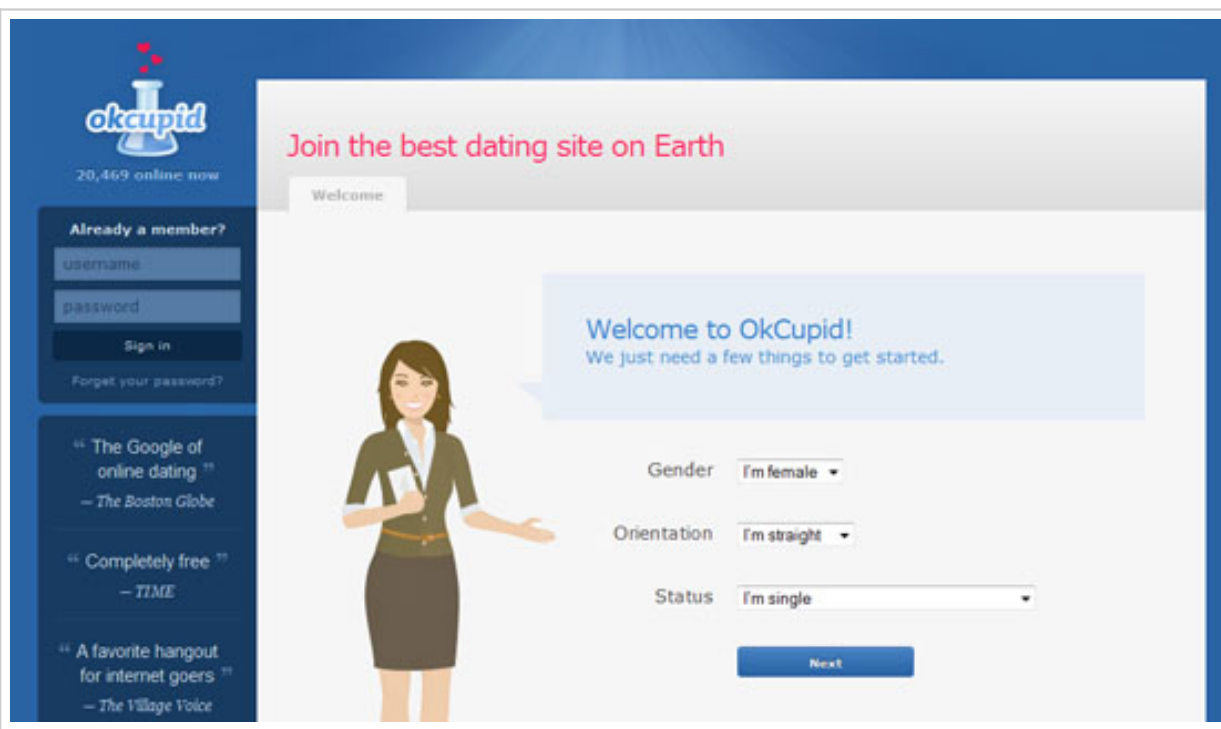
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Sam Yagan (SY)



Sam is co-founder and CEO at [OkCupid.com](#), the fastest growing free online dating site with over a million users around the world. Sam has been an entrepreneur for six years, starting and running several successful web startups.



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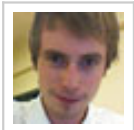
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What are some successful methods you use to grow your community?



SG: I have found the most successful method for growing community is to **get your users to talk about you**. If people feel that you are offering something that is new, fresh, updated often and actually engages its users in realtime (through instant communication services like Twitter) then they will no doubt talk about you. Word of mouth is probably the best way to get people to your website, because personal recommendation always comes out on top.



JG: Social media is a great aid for growing a community. Social networks like Twitter allow you to get groups of people that are like-minded and connected to each other, to come over to your site.



AK: The [Behance Network](#) was and is built by word of mouth.



NK: We made our content embeddable where the community wants. We've stripped out all the stuff from this sometimes complicated concept of "prediction markets", and turned it into just a widget that looks like a poll. People have really grown this community by sticking these things on their own blogs. We've also spent a little time on search engine optimization to make sure that over time, people can find content that's being made over at [Inkling](#).

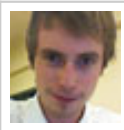


SY: When OkCupid launched, the community wasn't large enough to generate transactions (connections or dates) for every user, so we started providing non-transactional value on the site, like [personality tests](#). The tests were indirectly related to dating, and provided enough value to keep users engaged while the site grew. We also made a point to build OkCupid in to something worth talking about. The term viral is often misunderstood – **it isn't pixie dust you buy at the store**. It needs to be at the core of your product, and if it is, people are going to talk about it. [The blog](#) has also been a source of growth and another thing that gets people talking about us.

Takeaway

Grow your community by building something that's worth talking about, being active in your community every day, leveraging social media to connect with your audience and providing ways for your community to get involved.

What are a few strategies you use to engage your community, encourage participation and keep them coming back?



SG: There are many tools for encouraging user engagement on your website. I have found with my web applications that you can really **engage with your users by asking them** what they think and what they want. I often set up polls to quiz users on what feature they want next, or what they thought about a recent development. It could be something as simple as opening up a discussion on your blog posts by posing a question after your post. By listening to your users and engaging them in that way, they will feel really valued and will likely subscribe to your service and come back often.

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JG: This might sound cliché, but just writing great content will engage the community, encourage participation, and keep them coming back. When you offer an alternative viewpoint, **take a stance on a hotly debated issue**, or if you provide innovative ideas about your subject area, it encourages the community to participate in discussions.



AK: Provide your community with **a service that is useful**. The Behance Network allows creative professionals to showcase their work, and gain exposure to millions (get hired, media coverage, collaboration) in comparison to static portfolio sites on the web. Behance.net also allows creatives from around the world to connect with one another (work together, share tips, get feedback, etc).



NK: Game mechanics – For us, we're lucky in a way that our community has formed around what pretty much looks like a game or competition. So before "game mechanics" was the new black, we had a leaderboard and people competing to outdo each other in terms of how well they can predict the future. Email – I'm a big believer that email is still a killer app that's overlooked in all the effort to do real time web based communication. We've spent some good time making sure people in our community can interact with our software without even going to a website. Offering their opinion is as easy as clicking a link in one of their emails.



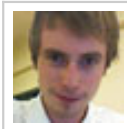
SY: We **customize the user experience as much as possible**, by providing a matching algorithm that works really well and engaging with our users on a personal level. The product works, and it's personal, which keeps people coming back for more.

Takeaway

Engage your community by initiating discussion and feedback, providing great content with a message, creating something that is useful and adding practical features like game mechanics and actionable emails.

What advice do you have for people just starting out and trying to

develop an active community?



SG: I think that fresh content (user generated or otherwise) is a big draw for new communities. It will likely require a lot of time from the administrator to get the community going and they will have to spend many hours creating discussions, responding to users at a personal level and investing a lot of time in the features of the website. Another tip is to **make things really simple** to use and give your users no excuse not to follow you on Twitter, subscribe to your feed or to sign up to your service. One personal note on this: I find it really frustrating when sign up forms for websites (forums or web applications) have more than 4-5 input fields, it can be a real turn off. Make sure your sign up form is really, really simple.



JG: Build something that a community will want to engage with, whether it's a blog, forums, or a web app. Put a heavy emphasis on adding site features that enriches user participation and **throw out anything the inhibits the user's ability to engage.**



AK: The internet is saturated with online communities, so make sure **you're offering something different** than what is currently out there. What's going to make your community unique to what already exists is an important question to answer when exploring the idea of starting a community.



NK: You need to commit. We've started other projects at Inking that involved communities around stock picking or picking designs, but we didn't ever want to commit fully to these efforts. And they just died. You don't want to dabble. You might not have to spend 40 hours a week on the project, but expect that in order to grow and keep a decent community around something, **you better be in it for the long haul** even if it's just a little time every week. A great book on the subject of commitment, and succeeding is [Mastery by George Leonard](#) .



SY: **Figure out what your community stands for** from the start and make it your brand. If your users can identify with your community, it makes it easier for them to talk about you. Be authentic. Offer something that's novel and different.

Takeaway

Get started by making something simple, different and easy to engage and identify with. Before you take the first step, make sure it's something you're passionate about, because in order to succeed, you need to commit for the long haul.

More about the Experts

Stu Green is the founder and developer of [Project Bubble](#) and [Invoice Bubble](#) : two web apps that make project management and invoicing really simple and affordable.

Jacob Gube is the Founder and Chief Editor of [Six Revisions](#) . He's also a web developer/designer who specializes in front-end development.

Alex Krug is the Vice President of Platform at Behance, where he is responsible for overseeing media strategy, partnerships, and fully leveraging Behance's platform for leading brands & organizations around the world. [Behance.net](#) is the leading online platform for creative professionals.

Nate Kontny serves as CTO, leads application development at Inkling, and blogs quite a bit at [blog.inklingmarkets.com](#). One of his products, [Inkling Prediction Markets](#) has been listed on the Ruby on Rails site as one of the "most prolific", a spot shared with Twitter and Hulu.

Sam Yagan is the Co-founder and CEO of [OkCupid.com](#). He has spent six years as an entrepreneur, first as Co-founder and CEO of TheSpark.com, Inc., maker of SparkNotes, the world's leading brand of educational study aids. More recently, he has served as President of MetaMachine, Inc., developer and distributor of the world's leading P2P file-sharing application, eDonkey.

Do the insights offered ring true with your own experiences? Do you have other philosophies or practical techniques for building and engaging a community? If so, please share them with us!

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About the Author



Andrew Follett is the founder and CEO of [Concept Feedback](#), a website feedback community for designers, developers and marketers. Follow Andrew and Concept Feedback on [Twitter](#).

23 Comments



Adam | FunWithSon.com

May 19th, 2010

Andrew,

This is a great collection of insights. Thanks to these experts for taking the time and thank you for pulling this together. This will be very helpful on my newly launched blog. I'm like most bloggers wherein having "community" is the difference between providing value and talking to yourself. I'll be testing these suggestions along my journey.

Best,

Adam



ddeja

May 19th, 2010

Interesting stuff. Right now I'm trying to run my own startup, and my biggest concern is stable, growing community. So that kind of information is very useful for me. Thank you.



Heather Villa

May 19th, 2010

What a great idea to really connect the audience with each of the contributors of the site. I am new "er" to following sixrevisions.com and I must say the quality and level of professionalism each of its bloggers puts into a post is amazing!

The advice and information you shared today is sure to be helpful to many newbie bloggers out there!



Armin C.

May 19th, 2010

Always good to learn from experts in any field. Great article!



Tom Castle

May 19th, 2010

An excellent article with some very sound advice. In particular to hear them all mention the same strategy for growth – word of mouth, which really is the best form of promotion. Thanks for an interesting read.



Sarah

May 19th, 2010

This is a fantastic collection of insight from some credible sources. I love entrepreneurs and believe their insight is invaluable whether their company is a success or not. I especially loved Nate's comment about fully committing to a product. I've experienced this several times and if you're not fully committed (and passionate) then it is almost inevitable your products will fail.



Cat

May 19th, 2010

This is a great article, but I feel the need to point out the fact that this article lacks a female perspective. Surely there must be some highly successful female community managers who want to share their insight...



esranull

May 19th, 2010

very good article thanks a lot



inspirationfeed

May 19th, 2010

Very influential! I really like the points these guys made, i totally agree with all/



Brad Clark

May 19th, 2010

This is a great article! We are 2 years in with apmasphere.com (a community and resource site for property managers) and have learnt the long hard way, how to engage with our users and database.

Some real valid tips here, for our next venture which is in the works. Thanks very much!!



Paul C

May 20th, 2010

Great info here, thank you!



Divyang

May 20th, 2010

These interviews and insights are immensely useful to nascent entrepreneurs as well as bloggers.

Cheers,
Divyang



Rosti The Snowman

May 20th, 2010

Thanks for the input guys

I launched my blog on Monday so growing my community is the number one priority at the moment!



Niubi

May 20th, 2010

Brilliant article, thanks for sharing your insights with us! I think dubli has been using these tips without even knowing it.



Helmut's

May 20th, 2010

+1 everything is about the great content

+ would like to add – if there are respected people in your community – others will hold to your project as vinny pooh to honey (it is important not to loose your members as well)



Will Jones

May 20th, 2010

Nice article!

There are some very good points in this article. I must rethink a few things. Your website has to be useful for whatever purpose it serves.

Simplicity is the key to standing out in the crowd.



John

May 21st, 2010

I normally don't comment, however this post is worthy of a big "job well done"! Very good work SixRevisions!



Matt Wilborne

May 23rd, 2010

Great article Andrew!

I recently just finished a social networking website for a client of mine in Chicago. After completion they came back to hire me for marketing/seo and I think you asked some excellent questions I had!

One thing I found that worked well; was to pick related keyword phrases like 'gaming community' and try to get a bunch of link backs for that phrase to my client's social networking site. This boosted Google results and has become a method for getting organic users.

However, this method only provides some of the work because the word of mouth advertising is priceless. I've found its hard to make people want to sign-up for a social networking site unless they are confident they will need the account to communicate with their friends who are already on the site. That is why I thought the responses about keeping customers on the site while growing by using polls/matching was an excellent read!

Any more more ideas on these polls/matches to keep people on the site while the network grows? And if you want to check out my client's social networking site I made its at [www \(dot\) GamerPhiGamer \(. \) com](http://www.GamerPhiGamer.com)

Thanks for the article 6Rev!

~Matt in Chicago



Scott

May 24th, 2010

Good article. It might be important (sometimes) to distinguish between a community and an audience. And a market.



Mosey

May 24th, 2010

Thanks for the great article!

A question for the experts: I have built a fansite for a very small niche community. It's never going to be huge and it certainly doesn't make me any money, but the love of the 'insert name here' kept me going for two or three years updating the site and being very active in our mini community.

However, in the past few months I can't seem to find the energy or enthusiasm to do all that anymore, and I'm not sure how best to get back into the 'groove' so to speak, as I feel I'm really letting the community down as a result.

Thanks



Kat Skinner

June 6th, 2010

This was a very interesting feed, thank you Andrew Follett for researching and writing this. I know for a fact that research can take an incredible amount of time for a post, depending upon its quality and the experience you have in that field. For example, my website contains university and higher quality tutorials and inspiration for budding novelists and authors (among others interested in just writing), and as a result I do ALOT of research in psychology (which is not my principle field of study/career). However, this research, despite long hours spent doing it, has been rewarding for many of my community members as it gives them knowledge that they claim just can't be found elsewhere (the same reason I wanted to start my site). I agree with many of the points within this article, you have to be prepared for countless hours spent working on websites, networking and in general just hard work. But if you

can pull through those hours (preferably because you enjoy what you do) it is totally worth it.

A tip to anyone who is trying to come up with that "unique" idea to create their own community. You don't need to necessarily have something absolutely new and fresh, just something that is slightly different enough to attract attention and that is marketed against your competitors – I know this from Marketing at Uni.

Thanks for the article again Andrew, it was a pleasure to read.



John Shepard

June 27th, 2010

Another short cut for generating transactions for every user is to target users regionally. Start local and push towards global. Great point from SY though, that's definitely a great way to get them to stick.



Craig

September 18th, 2010

Really greatd post and insight from successful people that have grown a community/communities, and great points that you need to be in it for the long haul and that it will be hard work, Thanks!

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