

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 4. DESIGNING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

LESSON 7. MARKETING YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.

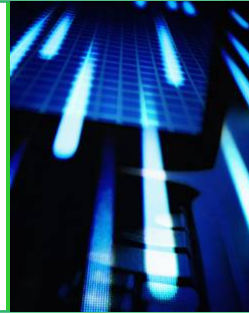


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Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- understand the importance of marketing for both promotions and outreach; and
- identify the main promotion and outreach techniques.



Why develop a marketing strategy?



Marketing is about motivating others to do something.

You may want people to buy your product, to donate to you, to take an interest in protecting the environment, etc.

In the case of an online community or network, you might want to motivate new members to join the community, existing members to participate actively, and funders to support the initiative.

Why develop a marketing strategy?

As an online community builder, there are different approaches to marketing that you can draw on:

Marketing as promotion



Using press releases, advertisements and other **one way** methods of communication to promote your community to people who don't know it exists.

Marketing as outreach



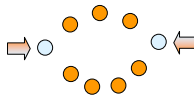
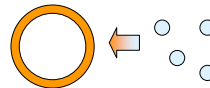
Reaching out with online events, connections to other communities and other **two way** methods to build enthusiasm amongst community members and promote your community by word of mouth.

As you will see, both methods can play an important role in marketing your online community.

Why develop a marketing strategy?

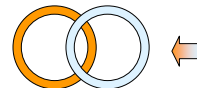
Marketing an online community successfully requires a clear understanding of **whom you are marketing to**. Typical audiences for online community marketing might include:

Potential community members who share the interests of your community but have not joined.



Existing community members who are somewhat engaged but who you would like to see participating more.

Other communities covering related topics and with members that may be interested in your community.



Funders or partners who helped you get the community off the ground but may not participate actively.

[More information on who to involve in your online community and why](#)

Why develop a marketing strategy?

Probably you will need a different communications strategy for each type of audience that you hope to reach.

For example, what techniques would you use to...

a

... reach existing community members	Providing online tutoring
... reach more distant audiences like funders or potential community members	Sending newsletter
	Publishing promotional articles on specialized journals
	Providing personal web spaces in the online community

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Click on each option, drag it and drop it in the corresponding box.
When you have finished, click on the Check Answer button.

Marketing as promotion



Traditionally, the marketing process has been treated as a one-way flow of information. Marketers have focused on **telling people about** the thing they are marketing.



You simply need to look at the most commonly used forms of marketing to see this: advertisements on television, in newspapers and magazines and on radio.

This kind of marketing is important when you want people to know about a new community that you just started.

It can also be used to update people who do not regularly participate with information about community happenings.

Marketing as promotion

Please have a look at the following...

TIPS FOR ADVERTISING YOUR COMMUNITY



Integrate promotion of your online community into all of your day-to-day communications.



Make sure that everyone who answers the phone in your organization knows the Web site address for your community as well as knowing what is on it.



If you publish an article, make sure your organization's web address appears with your name or biography.



When talking to the media, remember to mention your web address.



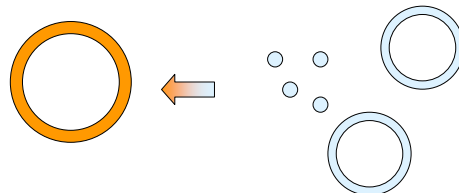
List your web address in every e-mail signature on every e-mail you send. Encourage colleagues and community members to do the same.

From promotion to involvement

As we said, a first step in marketing your community is to inform other organizations, networks and individuals of your community's existence and purpose.

In order to move forward, towards involving others in your community, you need to **go beyond informing** people about your organization; you need to **build relationships** with them and offer them specific options for becoming involved with your group.

Depending on the nature of your online community you could propose joint action, or signing up for each other's newsletters, or meeting face-to-face.



From promotion to involvement



Make connections to other communities.

Consider that your members do not just belong to your community, but to many other communities as well.

It makes sense that your community should work with other similar communities since you may share goals, outlooks, people, and resources. Further, related communities know people you want to know. You can use their word of mouth to propel your own message.

Remember, cooperation works both ways: you must also help other communities.

COMMUNITY BRIDGES

Form partnerships to combine messages in complementary ways. Make agreements to prominently link to each other's communities. Work together on promotional exercises to drive down costs and increase your potential audience. Take time to support other new related communities because a stronger sector will benefit your own community eventually.

An increasingly common internet-based form of cooperation is syndication, which is systematically including information from another community within your own.

If you publish information in a way another community can include, this will help generate more traffic and interest for your community. An example of this is offering Rich Site Summary (RSS) feeds listing new topics on your web site, made popular by blogs.

From promotion to involvement

Let's see through an example how an online community can benefit from **intercommunity networking**...



Let's consider the case of an online mailing list on organic farming, where the community is preparing a document on organic farming techniques to lobby for the regulation of organic farming.

Intercommunity networking enable the organic farming community to:

- share information more effectively;
- gain insights from groups with different perspectives;
- develop powerful strategic alliances or collaborative projects;
- get assistance from and offer assistance to other communities;
- identify potential new members for the community.



Ensure that facilitators of other online communities know you are not trying to steal away their members. By participating in two communities they may bring benefits to both.

From promotion to involvement

Share information more effectively: It can reach communities with common or overlapping interests, who can use the information produced by the list for their own purposes, e.g. other groups lobbying the government or groups promoting sustainable agriculture.

Gain insights from groups with different perspectives: It can exchange information with communities that have another take on the issue, e.g. soil associations, Chambers of Commerce or the ecological movement that is lobbying to halt the expansion of farming into forested areas.

Develop powerful strategic alliances or collaborative projects: It can seek strategic alliances with other communities providing input for the government's review of their agricultural policy. Collaboration can result in organizing a joint conference or publishing a joint statement.

Get assistance from and offer assistance to other communities: Policy review processes and other large national or international policy processes are often difficult to understand. There are many questions, such as:

- 'What is the right moment to intervene?'
- 'What does this deadline mean?'
- 'What is strategically the best moment to publish our document?'

Intercommunity networking is an important tool for participants in the policy process to support each other through the whole process.

In some cases, intercommunity networking has led to the creation of a new mailing list for exchanging information on the bureaucratic process.

Identify potential new members for your own community: For example, the organic farming community realised that it had a lack of expertise in organic pest control. Two of its members joined an online community organised around the Crop Advisory Committee in order to promote the perspective of organic farmers. A member of the Crop Advisory Committee (an expert on pest control) seemed very knowledgeable of organic pest control. She was invited to the organic farming list as a guest expert to answer questions from members. That was a successful experience for everyone involved. The pest control expert has since then become a member of the organic farming community.

From promotion to involvement


Electronic networking can only include people with good access; many others have something to contribute and can only do so if your community uses other media to reach them.



Trough **traditional offline advertising**, such as print, community radio and flyers you can:

- raise awareness of your community and its efforts;
- communicate key messages presenting your mission and vision.

Anyway, **combining** face-to-face and other **media** with online networking can increase participation.

 See interactive lesson to download document on mixing media: two examples

From promotion to involvement

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MEDIA

Imagine you facilitate an online community of food safety activists and the community has started a campaign calling for mandatory labelling of food products.

What media would you use for mobilizing support and organizing joint activities among other communities and networks?

How	Who	What
Mobile phones	Well-connected activists	Mobilisation for action (demonstration, petition)
Fax gateway	Activists who are not online	Call to support campaign
Community radio	Grassroots/community organizations	Information about the campaign, mobilisation of the community
Face-to-face meetings	Strategic partner organizations	Strategy, plan of action
Printed materials	All local organizations	Present the campaign and solicit support

From promotion to involvement

The **formats** in which you present information about your community can differ, depending on the objectives you want to achieve and on the type of audience.

For example...

Format	Objective	Audience
Press release	Get your voices heard by a wider audience.	Media and organizations
White paper	Participate in policy formulation.	Government, organizations working on the same or related issues
Brief	Influence the position of government on a certain issue.	Government, participants in a campaign working on the same issue
Conference/workshop talk	Share information, ideas and expertise.	Experts, people with related interests or needs
Brochure	Present the community.	General public off line
Radio	Present the community.	General public
Web site	Invite new members.	General public online



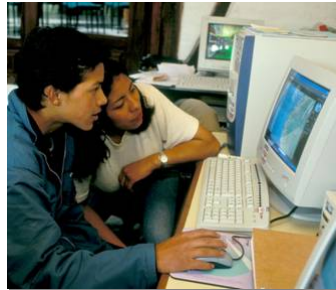
See interactive lesson to download document on choosing the right format: an example of strategy

Marketing as outreach



Many-to-many communication opens up a whole new world of "marketing".

People within an online community are constantly in the process of **motivating each other**.



They react to each other, offer opinions, share knowledge and debate.

By doing these things, they are also inadvertently promoting the community by:

- making it more exciting, so people will stay;
- feeding word of mouth, so new people will come; and
- commenting on issues that matter to members, so the purpose and value of the community is clear.

Marketing as outreach

As we have said, you will probably combine outreach (two way communication) with promotion (one way communication) strategies.

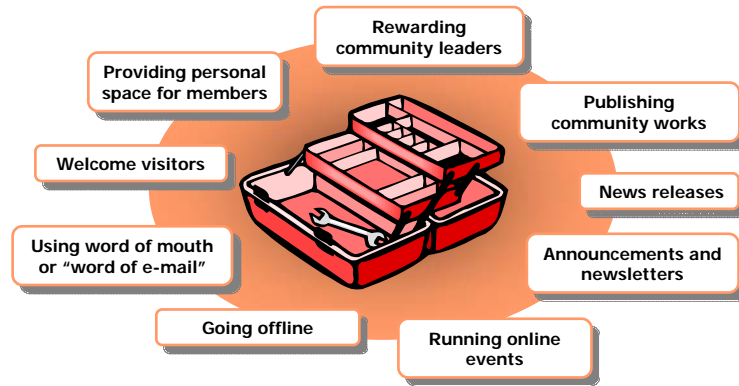
Can you indicate which of the following techniques can be considered as outreach techniques?

- Using word of mouth
- Running community events
- Send news releases
- Print promotion
- Rewarding community leaders

Please select the answers of your choice (2 or more) and press Check Answer

Promotion and outreach techniques

Important **techniques and tactics** for marketing your online community include:



[Click on the labels to learn more about each technique](#)

Promotion and outreach techniques

Using word of mouth or "word of e-mail"



The best selling point for your community is the community itself.

Focus on building internal strength.

Outsiders looking in will be attracted to an interesting, healthy, effective community.

Insiders looking out will **tell others** they know about your community. People will trust personal contacts more than they will trust an impersonal advertisement.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Welcome visitors



Welcoming is the easiest (and first) step towards member retention.
The first impression visitors have of your online community is the most important one!

Here are some tips on welcoming visitors...

- Make the community's purpose simple and clear.
- Provide simple, clear key messages that give a sense of the community
- Give the background story that led to the creation of the community.
- Ease the visitor's transition to becoming a contributor.
- Show the scope of the community by providing a grand tour.
- Visitors may not be familiar with the technology you are using: provide a guide they can follow through their first steps at contributing.
- Once they make a first contribution, give them a personal welcome by e-mail.
- Create the habit within the community of introducing yourselves.
- Help the newcomer get used to the environment.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Providing personal space for members

Potential members will be attracted to the life of your community if they can see how interesting and engaged the members are.



If appropriate for the type of community, provide personal space for community members to **express themselves**.

Creating personal spaces also encourages people to grow attached to the community: with a little bit of themselves invested in the community, they will feel a greater sense of ownership and commitment.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Rewarding community leaders

Some of your members will outshine the others. A few will be "stars" that really contribute a great deal to the community.



These people will be the strongest voices and advocates for your community.

The best way to reward exceptional contributors is to give them additional responsibilities that **increase their importance** or reputation in the community.

The more responsibility they have, the more they will feel ownership for the community and promote the community on your behalf.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Publishing community works

Publishing **works created by the community** is an excellent way to increase the profile of your community.

By providing something useful for others, they come to rely on you, returning often to see updates to your publication. Some will be attracted to join your community and actively participate.

Also, showcase outstanding achievements of your community members. This not only demonstrates to the outside world that your community is making things happen, but it encourages your members to keep investing their valuable time in the community.



Promotion and outreach techniques

News releases



When you launch the community, have a major event, or wish to communicate a message outside the community, you should send news releases to newspapers, professional publications, and relevant mailing lists.

All news releases have five elements:

- 1) **Advisory & Contact information**
 - News Release
 - For Immediate Release (or Embargoed until date)
 - Contact information
- 2) **Headline.** A short, interesting, timely, and newsworthy sentence.
- 3) **Location.** Where the story was sent from.
- 4) **Story.** What you intend to say.
- 5) **End delineation.** Three hash marks (###) to make it clear nothing is missing.

The story should be well organized. Address the six critical questions (normally in this order), Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How. Summarize the story in the first paragraph. Make it clear what the reader should do next, like providing a web address where people can join the community.

At the bottom of the release, provide additional background information. Journalists need this information to decide whether or not to follow up on your story. Remember to add your full web address to all news releases.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Announcements and newsletters



People need to be reminded to visit your community. Even if your community is an excellent online resource, most people do not have time to make visiting the site part of their daily routine.

E-mail is a good way to reach out from the community. Allow people to sign up for e-mail newsletters.

Use e-newsletters to highlight the latest information about your community, creating links from brief summaries in your newsletter to the complete information online.

Web site statistics for organizations using e-mail newsletters often show dramatic increases in traffic immediately after the newsletter is sent out.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Running online events

Events provide an opportunity for focused interaction and learning, building relationships, and promoting your community. Types of online event include:



Fixed-duration asynchronous discussions on particular topics. This type of event can run over a few days, or a few weeks, and participants can contribute as it suits them.



Synchronous (real-time) discussions and events such as facilitated chat sessions.



Celebrations! You can use your online spaces to mark important events such as birthdays, community anniversaries, or important accomplishments.

Promotion and outreach techniques

Going offline



A online community is not just a web site or a mailing list – it also a group of people. Given this, it is important to **involve them in a more direct, tangible way**, for example:

- hold meetings of online community members at real world events, such as important festivals, holidays, or newsworthy events;
- organize opportunities for members of the community to meet face-to-face; or
- create physical artifacts like stickers, posters, T-shirts, and booklets to give the community a tangible presence.

How to develop a marketing strategy

Developing a marketing strategy that works is a balancing act – balancing promotion with conversation, and the needs of one audience with the needs of another.

The best way to strike this balance is to develop a **marketing plan**. Writing a plan will force you to answer questions like:

Who are our most important audiences?
What techniques and tactics will we use to reach them?

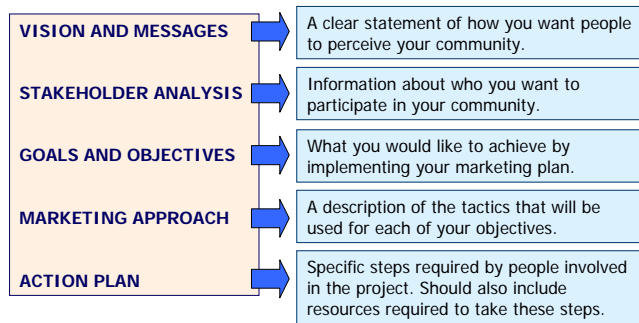
What do we hope to achieve through our marketing efforts? How will we know if we have been successful?



The answers will give you the clarity of mind to market effectively, even if the specific tools and tactics change along the way.

How to develop a marketing strategy

As with all strategic planning, a marketing plan starts with big picture vision then drills down into the details. A typical plan might include the following sections:



If the promotions and outreach effort is particularly complex, it may also include a **separate** budget section.

How to develop a marketing strategy

Vision and messages
Stakeholder analysis
Goals and objectives
Marketing approach
Action plan

Since you know your stakeholders from the analysis phase, you should know what messages will resonate most with your audiences and if there are particular issues that motivate them.

Your marketing approach is identifying one or more techniques to match your marketing objectives.

We need to recruit high profile moderators. We may hold an online event that is interesting enough to motivate key members to participate!



How to develop a marketing strategy

What approaches would you select to achieve the following results?

a We would like to inform people who do not participate directly in the community about community events.

Lately people in the community are quite passive, we should motivate them to actively participate.

A lot of people visit our Web site, but we would like more of them to register to the community.

1 Clarifying the scope and value of the online community in the home page of the community Web site.

Sending news releases to newspapers, professional publications, and relevant mailing lists.

Undertake a survey to find out what topics members are most interested in.

Click on each option, drag it and drop it in the corresponding box.

When you have finished, click on the Check Answer button.

How to develop a marketing strategy

Vision and messages
Stakeholder analysis
Goals and objectives
Marketing approach
Action plan

Your **action plan** will describe how you will accomplish the objectives.

You should provide people with:

- clear explanations of what they must do and by when; and
- enough resources to accomplish their tasks.



For example:

NAME	TASK	DUE BY	BUDGET
Alice	Research and contact potential moderators	March 31	A telephone line, \$xx for phone bills

Of course, many types of online community marketing are **ongoing** in nature, especially for conversation-based marketing. These items don't lend themselves to being listed in an action plan.

However, it is possible to include action plan items that allow you to **check in** on these more open ended approaches. For example, you might have "hold monthly meeting of online moderators to discuss participation and engagement".

How to develop a marketing strategy

As you are planning your marketing strategy, it is important to keep your organization's or community's **existing marketing communications resources** in mind.

Alfa radio has a successful Web site. We can ask them to collaborate in designing our home page...



Some useful tips in this regard include:

- [Take stock of your current promotional resources](#)
- [Identify opportunities for strategic partnerships](#)
- [Identify your current Internet presence](#)

Leveraging existing organizational resources and creating partnerships can create a great deal of marketing impact for very little money.

After the promotions and outreach plan has been implemented, it is also a good idea to [evaluate your results](#) against your vision.

How to develop a marketing strategy

Take stock of your current promotional resources

Create a checklist of resources available to you, taking budget, staff, and any inter-departmental as well as external partnerships into account. Consider your communications materials such as newsletters, business cards, letterhead, print publications and brochures.

Identify opportunities for strategic partnerships.

Your marketing resources might be limited, but this is all the more reason to develop strategic partnerships with those who can help you spread the word.

Identify your current internet presence.

Your organization and community members are probably already involved in online communities. Seeking support where you already possess a credible online presence will help to attract the audiences you are looking for. Look at online directories of online resources to see where you can develop new relationships.

MARKETING EVALUATION

In order to measure the success of your promotions and outreach strategy, you should consider not only how well your community is doing overall, but also **how much of this success is due to your promotions and outreach activities.**

To do this, you will focus on:

- Track change against particular promotions and outreach initiatives. If you keep an ongoing **record of community statistics**, you can see which activities result in change. For example, if visits to your Web site increase when you send out your community newsletter, or the number of list subscribers doubles after a well-publicized online event.
- Asking your users **how they feel about your promotions and outreach activities**, by using mailing lists and discussion boards, online questionnaires and being open to and actively seek feedback and comments about your marketing activities.

Summary

Marketing an online community means motivating new members to join the community, existing members to participate actively, and funders to support the initiative.

Marketing can be approached as promotion (one way communication strategy) and outreach (two way communication strategy), depending on the audience and purposes of the communication.

In general, it's important to communicate a simple, clear purpose and simple, clear key messages.

Intercommunity networking is an important marketing strategy.

Developing a marketing plan consists of developing a vision, messages, goals, objectives, strategy, action plan, and evaluation.

The best selling point for your community is the community itself: build a strong community first, and then make that visible.

Online resources

Cravens, J. Basic Press Outreach for Not-for-Profit and Public Sector Organizations
<http://www.coyotecomunications.com/outreach/promote2.html>

Tenby, S. 2003. Hosting Online Events.
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=533&cq=searchterms&sg=marketing>

TechSoup. 2003. Online Events Checklist
<http://techsoup.org/products/downdetails.cfm?downloadid=162>

Full Circle Associates. Online Events Assessment Tool
<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/onlineeventplanner.htm>

DotOrg Media
<http://www.dotorgmedia.org/>