Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 4. DESIGNING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

LESSON 9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

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.

Objectives

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

- understand why ongoing evaluation is critical to the success of an online community;
- describe techniques and approaches for monitoring and evaluating your online community;
- understand how to use a logical model for evaluation and monitoring;
- understand how to use various tools for collecting evaluation data;
- understand how to communicate the results of an evaluation; and
- describe ROI method for evaluation.

What can evaluation do for your online community?

Evaluation is a valuable tool, useful to **identify and correct possible problems** of your online community.

Basically, evaluation helps you to verify that you're doing what you think you're doing.

Typically, plans about how to deliver online services end up changing as those plans are implemented. Evaluation can **verify if the online community is really running as originally planned**.

An online community can be difficult to control.
Because of its organic nature, not running exactly according to plan isn't necessarily a negative thing, if purpose and results are being met.

What can evaluation do for your online community?

In particular, evaluation helps you to:

- understand how to deliver services to support your online community effort that are more efficient and/or less costly;
- identify online community strengths and weaknesses based on information collected from or about your online community members;
- stimulate thinking and discussion from key stakeholders about what the online community is all about, including its goals, how it meets its goals and how it will know if it has met its goals or not;
- produce data or verify results that can be used for public relations and promoting services outside of those served by the online community and reporting to funders; and
- fully examine and describe effective practices for duplication in other online communities.

What can evaluation do for your online community?

Evaluation means asking good, critical questions about your online community that will help improve it and help it being accountable for the wise use of resources.

Questions related to impact

Concerning the results you are expecting your community's members to achieve through participation in the community and how to find out if you are accomplishing what you intended or not.

What are you trying to achieve?
- What do you want your online community members to know or be able to do as a result of their participation?
- What will the online community change for them?

How will you know whether or not you have achieved what you intended?
- What evidence will convince you?
- What evidence will convince your staff, stakeholders, or funders?

Questions related to process

Concerning the effectiveness of the process in terms of: level of participation, knowledge sharing, adequacy of technology, validity of content, staffing capacity, technical capacity, use of online technology.

What can evaluation do for your online community?

Questions related to process

- **What information or knowledge is being shared by online community members?**
- **What is the level of participation for individual online community members?**
  – How comfortable are they in participating and using the tools?
  – If not, what are the barriers? What are the motivations?
  – What can we do to increase participation if needed? (More training, better relationship building, more technical support, etc.)
- **How effective are moderators in stimulating discussion?**
  – What needs to be improved?
- **How effective is the technology?**
  – Are there stability or usability issues that we can resolve?
  – How?
- **If our online community is connected to a Web site, are we providing content that is of value to users?**
  – Are we effectively synthesizing information from the discussions?
  – Are people using the content on the Web site?
  – How?
  – What needs to be improved?
  – What is the process for keeping the information on the Web site up to date and relevant?
- **What staffing capacity is needed to support and maintain the online activities of the community?**
  – How have staffing and staff roles/job descriptions changed as a result of implementing the community?
  – Is staffing adequate?
- **How have community members changed the way they work in order to be able to use online technology more robustly?**
- **How has our organization changed the nature of its offline presence to support its online presence?**
- **Is our existing technical capacity – both hardware/software, Internet access, and skills/knowledge – sufficient to support our online community project?**
  – How does it need to change to support the continued or full implementation of the project?

Participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation is people-centered.

Online community **stakeholders** and **beneficiaries** are the key participants in the collective examination and review of the data collected from the evaluation of the online community and not the mere objectives of study for the evaluation.

When stakeholders are involved in the identification of purposes and results, indicators, and collection of data, there is an **investment in continuous learning and improvement** of the online community.

Participatory evaluation is reflective, action-oriented and seeks to build capacity by:

- providing stakeholders and beneficiaries with the opportunity to express their respective interests and opinions and reflect on a project's progress and obstacles;
- generating knowledge that results in the application of lessons learned and leads to corrective action and/or improvements; and
- providing beneficiaries and stakeholders with the tools to transform their environment.

Participatory evaluation

Characteristics of participatory evaluation

- Draws on local resources and capacities.
- Recognizes the innate wisdom and knowledge of end users.
- Demonstrates that end users are creative and knowledgeable about their environment.
- Ensures that stakeholders are part of the decision-making process.
- Uses facilitators who act as catalysts and who assist stakeholders in asking key questions – stakeholders are the questioners, not an outsider.

Identifying measurable indicators

Evaluation is a stage of the **ongoing community building process**.

At the evaluation stage of the building process, your attention should focus on the results, in order to **identify measurable indicators** to measure the tangible outcomes and outputs you intended your community members to achieve.

See interactive lesson to look at the results in an example of online community project

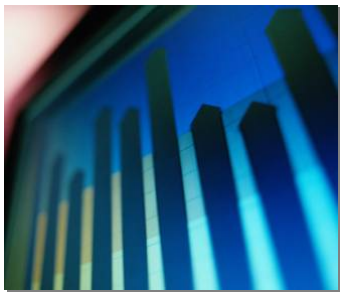
Identifying measurable indicators

To verify if results have been achieved, we need **objectively verifiable indicators** that provide the basis for designing an appropriate monitoring system.

For each result, you will specify what **observable measures** will suggest that you are achieving that result with your online community.

INDICATORS -> Evidence that results are being attained.

Indicators are the direct products of activities and usually are **measured in terms of the volume of work accomplished** (such as numbers of clicks on a web page, new members signed on, or documents collaborated on by staff).



See interactive lesson to view and print the Online Community Indicators form

Identifying measurable indicators

Indicators of good health of Online Community

Data collected	Indicators of "good health" of Online Community
List of membership at the end of the month	Increase or stability depending on stage of community development (new or mature)
Number of new members during the month	A steady or increasing number of new members indicates good health
Number of members who have left (and reasons if known)	Generally lower than the new members and for reasons of natural attrition rather than dissatisfaction
Number of messages posted	More is not necessarily better! Over time an optimum level of traffic became apparent. This would not necessarily be the same for all communities. Some people become intolerant of too much traffic
Number of individuals posting messages (raw number and as percentage of membership)	Ideally there will be contributions from a range of people
Number of individuals posting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or more messages	Multiple postings may indicate ongoing active engagement (desirable) but too may indicate an overly dominant member.
Number of messages posted by list facilitator (raw number and as percentage of total number of messages)	The facilitator ought not to be overly dominant. However, there may be a level of direct stimulus needed to sustain quality activity.
Deepest thread – topic and number of messages	Generally, the deeper the thread, the higher the quality of debate and engagement
Most popular topics	This often informed the choice of structured activities as a response to self identified needs
Top 10 posters	Ideally not always the same 10 people!

Source: Building Online Communities for Professional Networks, Janine Bowes
http://www.educationau.edu.au/events/globalsummit/papers/jbowes.htm

Identifying measurable indicators

It is important to choose the indicators carefully. What you are looking for is the evidence that shows your purposes and results being attained (or not).

Examples of measurable indicators for an online community are the following:

- number and characteristics of active community participants;
- quantity and quality of knowledge/posts contributed by participants;
- quantity of summarized content generated by the community;
- quality of summarized content generated by the community where quality can mean accurate complete, up-to-date, and other criteria identified by stakeholders;
- attitudes/behaviours/skills related to project purpose and results; and
- technical performance of the system/software, training sessions, partners, relationship building, etc.

Identifying measurable indicators

In your opinion which of the following are bad or good indicators?

	Suitable indicator	Unsuitable indicator
At least X number of community members have accessed information on care for their domestic animals and have reported that it helped them with a problem they were having with their own or a neighbor's animal.		
More people in our community have access to information on care for their domestic animals that they can use on their own		
Knowledge about traditional farming practices known by older community members is shared more frequently with the rest of the community.		
At least X number of older community members, have shared at least X traditional farming tips/techniques and other members have reported that they were helpful.		

Please select for each options the corresponding box and press "Check Answer".

Selecting indicators

When selecting the indicators to evaluate your online community results, keep in mind that **each indicator should be**:

- **meaningful**;
- **direct**;
- **useful**;
- **simple to collect**.

Selecting indicators

Each indicator should be **meaningful**
The indicator presents information that is important to key stakeholders of the online community.
Keep in mind that different people can have different perceptions about what defines "success" for an online community.
Reaching consensus among key stakeholders regarding what success looks like is a key to ensuring buy-in to your evaluation results.

Each indicator should be **direct**
The indicator captures enough of the essential components of the results to represent it.
Keep in mind that several indicators can be necessary to adequately measure a result.
However, there is no standard for the number of indicators to use. While multiple indicators are often necessary, more than three or four may mean that the result is too complex and should be better defined.

Each indicator should be **useful**
The information provided by this indicator can be put to practical use for online community improvement.

Each indicator should be **simple to collect**
The data for the indicator shouldn't be a burden to collect.
Think your indicator through to make sure the data can be collected in a timely manner and at reasonable cost.
Sometimes an indicator meets the other criteria described above, but the effort to collect it would be too burdensome.

Selecting indicators

Stakeholders need to be involved in selecting the indicators. Engaging key stakeholders helps ensure the selection of effective indicators.

Engaging key stakeholders in selecting the indicators

Evaluations with a high level of stakeholder participation are more likely to:

- be used to improve results;
- promote the online community to potential participants;
- design better on-going monitoring systems;
- improve an evaluation's credibility;
- increase the chances that online community changes arebased on information collected from evaluation;
- improves an evaluation's design; and
- increases stakeholders' understanding of the online community.

The importance of multiple stakeholder perspectives

Involve as many stakeholders as possible in initial evaluation discussions. Otherwise, the evaluation is likely to be designed based on the needs and interests of only a few stakeholders - usually the ones with the most power - and may miss other important questions and issues of stakeholders who are not included at the table.

Involving many stakeholders helps you remain aware of the many **levels of interest related to the project**. You will be better prepared to deal with pressure from particular stakeholders for quick fixes or a rush to judgment when that is not what is best for the online community.

Selecting indicators

Selecting indicators: an example

Results	Indicators
Increase in communication between participating health access workers and Community Partners (CP), peers in the network and with peers outside the network	The number of individual web driven and non web driven e-mail communications (in and out) between CP and network members shows a 300% increase from the 12 previous months before the network launches. The number of mass e-mail communications from CP to network members shows a 500% increase from the 12 previous months before the network launches. At least 50% of network members surveyed who use the new online network services indicate that they communicate with more peers within and outside of the network. At least 50% of network members surveyed who use the new online network services indicate that they communicate more frequently with peers in and out of the network. At least 80% of network members surveyed who use the new online network report that they have a larger pool of people to contact to help them do their work better.

Sources for collecting data

We can distinguish three types of sources for collecting data:

- **Existing information**;
- **People**; and
- **Pictorial records and observations**.

Sources for collecting data

Existing Information

- server logs, web counters, member registration information, posts, etc.;
- online community documents (such as newsletters, work plans, financial reports, etc.);
- existing databases of clients, participants, members; and
- research reports.

People

- Online community members and stakeholders who directly benefit from the project;
- funders, staff, volunteers and partners;
- key informants (i.e., anyone who has particular knowledge about the online community and benefits but may not be a direct participant;
- non-participants, critics;
- policy makers, agency staff, etc.

Pictorial records and observations

- Screen shots of posts;
- videos or photos of online community activities showing the diversity of participants;
- before and after pictures;
- videotape of group meetings or training sessions; and
- observations of events and activities.

Using web server log files and other Web site related tools

Analyse server log files regularly and act on findings.

As part of your evaluation, run an analysis of your web server log files monthly. An easy way to do this is to use a web based service that interprets your server log files into helpful graphical information.

Once several months of data are available, it is possible to look for signals related to **access** and **navigation**, **trends** and **spikes** resulting from marketing efforts, and **indicators of system performance**.

The most useful variables to monitor for internal purposes are:

- **page requests** (as a rough equivalent to amount of information used);
- **visits** (as a rough equivalent to number of users); and
- **file downloads** and **subscriptions to mailing lists** with web archives (as an indication of interest in specific content).

Using web server log files and other Web site related tools

Example of a web tracking report

STATISTICS [Year] [Month] [Week] [Day] [Now] [Hour] [Last]

Month	Unique	Reload	Total	Growth	Graph
December	15	21	36	n/a	
January	432	289	721	+1902.78%	
February	604	414	1,018	+41.19%	
March	952	909	1,861	+82.81%	
April	824	632	1,456	-21.76%	
May	1,097	777	1,874	+28.71%	
June	650	436	1,086	-42.05%	
July	306	219	525	-51.66%	
August	92	64	156	n/a	
Estimate	534	371	905	+72.34%	

The above graphic is an example of a report from a free web counter called CQ counter (www.cqcounter.com). This shows activity summarized by month over the course of the year, up to the month of August.

Let's see what the different columns are about:

- **Unique**, shows the number of individual people who have visited the site each month;
- **Reload**, shows the number of times someone has clicked the "refresh" button on their web browser while on the site;
- **Total**, indicates the unique + reloads (the total number of times the site has been accessed);
- **Growth**, compares the number of visits from the previous month to see if the traffic has increased or decreased; and
- **Graph**, represents the total visits (unique in orange and the reload in blue).

Using web server log files and other Web site related tools

More detailed analysis of log files can help to focus attention on:

- heavy Web site traffic areas;
- the way people access the site (via search engines and other links);
- additional or different meta tags required for improved retrieval by search engines; and
- maintenance of broken links.

This type of information can be used to assess:

- **hardware and software performance**;
- **content development and management** (e.g., identifying which features are being accessed often or rarely);
- **effectiveness of site marketing** (e.g., assessing whether some methods of promotion are more effective than others in drawing users to the site),
- **interesting user preferences** (such as language) that can help shape content development.

Using web server log files and other Web site related tools

What log files cannot measure reliably

Web site log files indicate trends, not the total truth. It is important to remember that log files **cannot provide an accurate record of web site traffic** because some information is misleading and other information is not recorded.

The following points are important variables that log files cannot measure reliably:

- user identity;
- exact number of users;
- a user's entry point to your site and their path through it;
- geographic location of users;
- identification of users by sector;
- time spent on a web site during a visit;
- files that have not been accessed; and
- where a user went next from your site.

Using web server log files and other Web site related tools

Using one method of data collection (for example, analysing web server log files) is perfectly fine to provide an adequate evaluation of your online community's impact.

- ○ True
- ○ False

Please click on the answer of your choice.

Combine methods

A single data collection method will not provide an accurate representation of users' needs and whether those needs were met by the content and activities of the online community.

Log file analysis has its place when combined with other user evaluation methodologies such as:

- **questionnaires**, **surveys**, **checklists**;
- **interviews**;
- **documentation review**;
- **observation**;
- **focus group**; and
- **case studies**.

Combine methods

Methods of data collection

Method	When To Use	Advantages	Challenges
Questionnaires, Surveys, Checklists	To quickly and/or easily get quantifiable information from many people in a non-threatening way. Useful for collecting "baseline data" for before/after comparisons	-can be completed anonymously -inexpensive to administer, especially if done online -easy to compare and analyse -administer to many people -can get lots of data -many sample questionnaires already exist	-might not get careful feedback -wording can bias client's responses -are impersonal -in surveys, may need sampling expert -doesn't get full story
One-on-One Interviews	To fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires	-get full range and depth of information -develops relationship with client -can be flexible with client	-can take much time -can be hard to analyse and compare -can be costly -interviewer can bias client's responses
Documentation review	To gather an impression of how an online community operates without interrupting the online community; review of applications, finances, memos, minutes, posts, server logs, etc.	-gets comprehensive and historical information -doesn't interrupt the online community or client's routine in the online community -information already exists -few biases about information	-often takes much time to analyse -may be incomplete -need to be quite clear about what you are looking for -not flexible means to get data; data restricted to what already exists
Observation	To gather accurate information about how an online community actually operates, particularly about processes.	-views operations of a online community as they are actually occurring -can adapt to events as they occur	-can be difficult to interpret -can be complex to categorize observations -can influence behaviours of online community participants -can be expensive
Focus groups	To explore a topic in depth through group discussion about reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.	-gets common impressions quickly and reliably -can be efficient way to get a large range and depth of information in short time - can convey key information about online communities	-can be hard to analyse responses -needs a good facilitator -difficult to schedule 6-8 people together -participants not necessarily representative of the total user population
Case studies	To fully understand or depict experiences of stakeholders or community members in a online community, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	-fully depicts client's experience in online community input, process and results -powerful means to portray online community to outsiders	-usually quite time consuming to collect, organize and describe -represents depth of information, rather than breadth

Anecdotal information

Evaluation data does not have to be reported only as statistics.

Sometimes **anecdotal information and informal data can be extremely useful** in guiding improvements to online communities, particularly usability concerns.

Often, anecdotal information is collected by the project manager or staff who are working directly with online community members.

Anecdotal information can be **recorded systematically**.

Anecdotal information

How to record anecdotal information

Each anecdote should be limited to a single incident and it should:

• contain a factual, non-inferential description of the observed or reported incident (e.g., "The trainees said 'I've never enjoyed using a computer before." versus ""The trainee expressed satisfaction with the training system.");

• include a description of the situation in which the incident occurs so that the meaning of the behaviour can be understood;

• be written as soon as possible after witnessing or hearing about the incident so that all important details can be included; and

• include a separate section describing your interpretation of or feelings about the anecdote (a stakeholder's personal evaluation is important because their judgments about the project are valued highly).

Anecdotal information

Example of how anecdotal information can be valuable

The XYZ organization's online community was using an **online forum** for members to share information about development techniques.

The forum software had **a built-in spell checker**, but the feature on the interface was not easy to find and use.

The project manager happened to be at a face-to-face development conference where he ran into people who also participated in the online community. Sitting around having coffee together between sessions, the project manager asked them for their impressions of the project. One person mentioned that they were often *lurking* (1) and did not post because they were concerned about making public typographical errors and looking stupid.

The project manager was able to tell them about the spell checker feature and how to use it.

When back at the office, he worked with the programmer to **make the spell checker feature more user-friendly** and **added a question to the FAQ** about the availability of a spell checker. The project manager also **put a note in his project journal** to discuss the issue with the team as part of their regular meeting to plan future training.

---

(1) *Lurking* is the act of reading through mailing lists, forum and newsgroups without posting any messages. Considered good Netiquette to get the feel of the topic before starting to participate.

Anecdotal information

Activities that online community members do online are either **public** (e.g. addressing the whole group) or **private** (e.g. sending private one-to-one messaging). This "under the radar" activity can contribute significantly to attainment of purpose and results, but is extremely **difficult to observe**.

There is also the question of lurking: "How do lurkers contribute to purpose and results of the online community?" This information may only be gained through **anecdotal information obtained from interviews with lurkers**.

Lurking

Lurking is the act of reading through online activities (i.e., mailing lists, forum and newsgroups etc.) without posting any messages. Considered good Netiquette to get the feel of the topic before starting to participate.

Lurking is fine as long as everyone is not lurking at once! There needs to be sufficient public interaction or there is no stimulus for discussion, debate or learning.

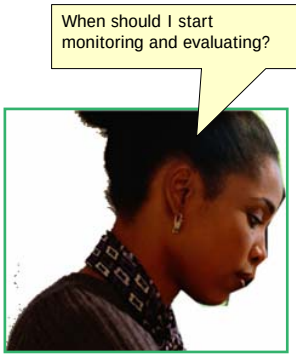
When to monitor and evaluate

Evaluation is a one-time effort done at the end of implementing an online community project.

- ○ True
- ○ False

Please click on the answer of your choice.

When to monitor and evaluate



Evaluation is an ongoing and continual process.

Whether your evaluation purpose is to track progress or to gauge impact, it should be designed as an **ongoing activity throughout the life of the online community**.

Information collected at the end of a online community's life can be used for designing an improved or expanded online community, or for new online communities with similar goals.

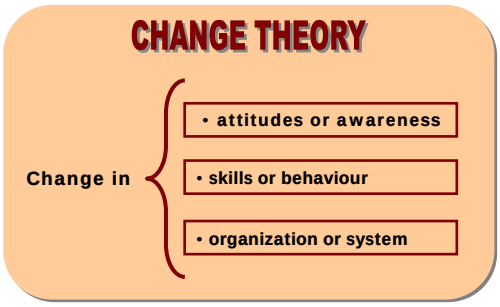
See interactive lesson for document on Evaluation throughout the life of the online community

When to monitor and evaluate

If your evaluation focuses on gathering information to determine the online community's impact, it will be important to analyse data over time.

To understand what your online community achieves, however, you have to know where you began. This is why it helps to collect **baseline information** before, or very soon after, an online community begins.

Using ***change theory*** can help you pinpoint the baseline information you need to collect...

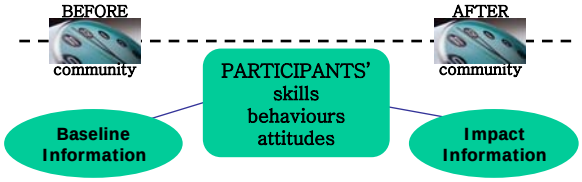


When to monitor and evaluate

BASELINE INFORMATION

Baseline questions might include:
- how serious a particular problem or need is among stakeholders who will participate in your online community; and
- what behaviours, interests, or skills the participants have at the start of the online community.

The amount of baseline information you collect will depend on your **level of resources**:
- You may be limited to asking a small group of participants about their attitudes or behaviours; or
- You may have the resources to gain a fuller picture from a larger number of participants about their needs, interests, and skills.



When to monitor and evaluate

We've identified **too many data collection instruments and sources** in relation to our available financial and human resources... What should we do?

In case you find that you've recognized too many data collection instruments and sources given your available financial and human resources, the last step in developing your evaluation plan is to **choose data collection activities that will provide the most information with the least effort**.

Ask yourself whether the information you will get is worth the expense in time and resources that it will take to get it.

See interactive lesson for Evaluation Plan worksheet: what data to collect, how often, and how to summarize it

When to monitor and evaluate

Tips for minimizing effort

- Use existing data collection instruments whenever possible. Before you think about creating a new survey or list of interview questions, ask yourself. "Does our organization already collect this information? Can we use the existing data or data instruments?"
- Augment the instruments or tools you are already using. For example if your community uses a polling tool about current issues, consider using it to ask questions about using the online community.
- Use or modify existing instruments that have been developed by other organizations, such as member surveys.

Communicating results

It is important to note that your **results need to be communicated to the whole community**.

For this reason you should **consider the needs of your target audience even before you begin the evaluation**:

- start your evaluation by **brainstorming with your team** on who will see your report and how they will use it, (*in other words, keep your audience in mind as you plan, design, implement and communicate your evaluation*); and
- **ask stakeholders what information they need**, and be sure to collect and communicate it.

Your evaluation may turn up a number of **best practices** that often form the core of the results you will want to communicate to your community.

Would you like to know more about communicating best practices?
See Annex 4.9.1 for a mini-lesson on benefits, characteristics and way of documenting best practices.

Communicating results

To make sense of the data you have been collecting, you should take into account the following:

1. For **evaluation information** that will be **collected and used to improve your process**, it is important to set up regular team meetings to review the summarized information.

- Ask: "What is this information telling us about which incremental changes we can make to improve our online community?"
- Take notes during these meetings. These "journals" will be useful in preparing any final or end of project reports.

2. For **evaluation information** that will serve as your "indicator" information and **help you determine whether results have been achieved**, this should be a matter of comparing the numbers from your various surveys and log files with the numbers you articulated in your logic model.

- Go beyond number crunching and use the data as a jumping off point for discussion. Ask: "Why have we been successful?", " Are there particular aspects of our activities or resources that should be considered a best practice?", " If we were not successful, what do we need to change?"

Communicating results

Reviewing all the data collected to prepare a final report

While your process may vary depending on the questions you need to answer, who will be reading the final report, and your resources, these steps can help you review all the data collected to prepare a final report:

1. Get to know your data.
2. Focus your analysis on a couple of key questions.
3. Categorize the information (preset categories, identify themes).
4. Identify connections between and within categories and relative importance.
5. Interpret data (ask: " What does it all mean? How will you use the information?).

Communicating results

After you've analysed the data, you are ready to **prepare any formal written reports and presentations**.

How you present the findings will depend on:

- what is the purpose of this evaluation report;
- who will use the information; and
- what are the key messages for this audience.

See interactive lesson for Guidelines on how to write a report

See interactive lesson for Evaluation Report Worksheet: who needs to know what about online community evaluation

The Return On Investment perspective

The Return On Investment (**ROI**) is a business term used to calculate how well a product, programme or service – in this case an online community - is meeting its business goals.

ROI is the amount of earnings taken in divided by the amount invested to generate the earnings.

$$\frac{\text{amount of earnings taken in}}{\text{amount invested to generate the earnings}}$$

Applying ROI to online communities can be difficult because they are difficult to quantify. One theory is that ROI increases over time and as a result of:

- the maturity of the community; and
- the level of participation of its members.

Would you like to know more about ROI?

See Annex 4.9.2 for a mini-lesson on how to apply the ROI perspective to online community projects.

Worksheet: computing ROI

Job aids

From the interactive lesson you can download and print documents that can help you in your work.

- The **Indicators form** helps you identify the indicators of success of the online community.
- **Evaluation throughout the life of the online community** (when to evaluate in order to do what).
- Use the **Evaluation Plan Worksheet** to determine what data to collect, how often, and how to summarize it to discuss each indicator with your team.
- **Guidelines on how to write a report**
- **Evaluation Report Worksheet** is about who needs to know what about online community evaluation
- Online Community **ROI Worksheet**

Summary

• Monitoring and evaluation is critical to the success of your online community because it helps you identify whether or not your community is reaching its goals and facilitates continuous improvement.

• The use of logical models – identifying measurable indicators for your results – is an evaluation technique.

• A single data collection method will not provide an accurate representation of users' needs and whether those needs were met with the content and activities of the online community.

• Stakeholders should be involved in evaluation planning.

• Communicating the results of an evaluation requires identifying your evaluation purpose, who will use the information, and the key message. You will may be communicating with several different audiences.

• Evaluation data can be used to understand the return on investment for your online community.

If you want to learn more...

Innonet: Evaluation Resource Center
http://www.innonet.org/resources (requires log in)

Collection of resources on evaluation methods
Basic Guide for Outcome-Based Evaluation: Common Myths
http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/outcomes.htm#anchor30249,

Primer on Outcome-Based Evaluation and Basic guide to Program Evaluation
http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345

Who Are the Question-makers?: A Participatory Evaluation Handbook United Nations Development Programme
http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/who.htm, How to do a participatory evaluation

Quick Tips: Sources of Evaluation Information
http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/index.html

Logic Model Guide, Kellogg Foundation
http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf, How to use logic models for evaluation

Building Online Communities for Professional Networks, Janine Bowes
http://www.educationau.edu.au/events/globalsummit/papers/jbowes.htm, Reflective piece about improving an online network

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Web Sites, TechSoup
http://www.techsoup.org/howto/npostory_article.cfm?articleid=72&topicid=13&cg=searchterms&sg=evaluation
How to evaluate your Web site

Preliminary Heuristics for the Design and Evaluation of Online Communities of Practice Systems, Elearning Magazine
http://www.elearnmag.org/subpage.cfm?section=tutorials&article=8-1 , Evaluation criteria for online communities

If you want to learn more...

Online Events Assessment Tool, Full Circle Associates
http://www.fullcirc.com/community/onlineeventplanner.htm, Evaluation tool for online events

Monitoring and Evaluating Web Communications, Sustainable Development Network
http://www.sdcn.org/webworks/monitoring/, Evaluating online communications

Tools for Assessing Web site usage, Institute for Sustainable Development
http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2001/Web_evaluation.pdf, Understanding how to use your log files

Evaluation Methods, MAP
http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345, Overview of methods of data collection

Logic Model Overview w/Links to Worksheets and Books
University of Wisconsin Extension
http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evallogicmodel.html, Logic model worksheets and examples

Logic Models to Enhance Online community Performance, University of Wisconsin Evaluation
http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/pdf/LMpresentation.pdf, Logic models for improving online communities

Benchmarks for Building Extranets and Online Communities, Benton Foundation
http://www.benton.org/publibrary/capacity/extranet_benchmarks.doc, Benchmarks

If you want to learn more...

The problem with best practices in technology, Charity Village
http://www.charityvillage.com/cv/research/rtech14.html, Article about issues in using best practices

User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation, National Science Foundation
http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/start.htm Details on data collection methods

Wading Through the Data Swamp, National Science Foundation
http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/eval201/eval201_intro_pg1.htm, How to analyse data

Measuring the success of your online community, Knowledgeboard
http://www.knowledgeboard.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=2162 , Includes ROI measures

Return on Interaction: Can you build a vibrant online community that justifies its expense?
Information Week Magazine
http://www.informationweek.com/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=6506846, How to use ROI for online communities

Return on Community: Proving the Value of Online Communities in Business
http://www.interaction-ivrea.it/courses/2002-03/conncomms/docs/wp-returnoncommunity.pdf,
How to use ROI for online communities

Annex 4.9.1
Mini-lesson: Communicating Best Practices

What is best practice

Best practice is an **online community activity or strategy** that has the highest degree of **proven effectiveness** supported by objective and comprehensive research and evaluation. It is both the lessons learned and the continuing process of improvement, feedback, reflection and analysis of an online community.

Best practice can be a:

- system;
- methodology;
- process;
- formula;
- technique;
- tactic; or
- approach.

Characteristics and Benefits

Best practices' characteristics are:

- proven effectiveness in addressing a common problem;
- proven effectiveness in more than one organization and in more than one context;
- can be replicated on a broader scale;
- conclusive data from comparison to objective benchmarks with positive results; and
- conclusive data from a comprehensive and objective evaluation by an external, qualified source (most often an academic institution or individual with the appropriate academic credentials).

Best practices' benefits could be:

- cost savings resulting from increased productivity and efficiency;
- improved quality of services offered to beneficiaries;
- improved use of resources through avoiding *reinventing the wheel*;
- identification and replacement of poor practices with strategies and online communities that have already proven successful;
- increased funding from public and private funders interested in funding online communities and strategies based on a proven track record of success;
- cost effectiveness resulting from using limited resources for increased impact and purpose and results; or
- increased performance from management and staff.

Documenting best practices

When **documenting best practices** you should highlight:
- the problem it solves;
- the context in which it has been successful;
- the evidence of its success;
- the outcome or impact it helped to achieve.

All effective practices contain two different types of elements:

- **proprietary elements** (related to the specific context of the originating organization); and
- **replicable elements** (general, replicable on a broader scale).

Pay particular attention to the process of separating out the elements that are replicable from those that are proprietary.

Review evaluation funds with stakeholders with an eye towards identifying and documenting best practices.

You can find some examples of benchmarks for online communities that may be used for comparison at: **Benchmarks for Building Extranets and Online Communities**
http://www.benton.org/publibrary/capacity/extranet_benchmarks.doc

Annex 4.9.2
Mini-lesson: The Return On Investment (ROI)

ROI and online communities

Applying the Return On Investment perspective to online community projects involves the following steps:

Step 1

Determine the total costs of your investment (*estimating both hard and soft costs*).

Step 2

Figure out benefits and revenues (*While benefits are intangible, you can gain a sense of how your online community is benefiting your organization*).

Step 3

Divide the total revenue by costs.

Step 4

Discuss with your team (*Are we getting value in each area? What do we need to adjust or change?*).

Calculating expenses

The questions presented in the table below will help you determine the monetary value of your expenses...

Expense	Analysis Question	Monthly Costs
Software	Divide the total amount for licensing or hosting fees by 12 to get the monthly cost.	
Hardware	If you purchased hardware, assume a 3 year life. Divide the total cost by 36.	
Internet Hosting	What is your monthly hosting cost?	
Technical Support	Divide the total of technical support costs (staff, resources) by 12.	
Training	Divide the total cost of training (staff/resources) by 12	
Time	Estimate the number of hours per month staff is spending on the online community and the hourly rate. If you are paying consultants to assist in any aspect, determine the number of hours monthly and multiply by hourly rate. Determine the monthly cost of any volunteer time.	
Marketing and Outreach Costs	The monthly cost of marketing your online community	
TOTAL MONTHLY COSTS		

Determining tangible and intangible costs

...the following questions will help you distinguish the tangible from the intangible expenses ...

Revenue / Benefit	Analysis Question	Monthly Costs
New Users	What is the cost of adding a new member to your community? What is the value of forming a better relationship with the member? Do your online community members refer others to your community, thus saving you money on member recruitment? Determine how many of your new members have been referrals and deduct the cost of adding a new member per each new member.	
Word of Mouth	Do your online members tell others about the community? This helps save marketing costs.	
Closing Sales/Moving to Action	Are you able to close sales or move people to action via the online community? Determine the percentage of sales revenue that you've closed as a result of your online community.	
Building Loyalty	Do your organization's constituents who participate in the online community contribute more money or time than those who do not? Determine how many participants contribute time/money and sum it up.	

Table continues on next page

Determining tangible and intangible costs

Revenue / Benefit	Analysis Question	Monthly Costs
Branding	Does your online community solidify your organization's image with your constituents more than offline methods? As well as your offline strategies? At a lower cost? Do a cost comparison between your online community costs and offline marketing efforts.	
Improving Responsiveness	Do you have a better sense of what your constituents need and want because of conversations your online community affords? Has this helped you make better short or long-term decisions?	
Facilitating Collaborations	Does your online community save you time working with collaborators? Does it improve the quality of your collaborations? Determine how much time is saved and calculate cost per hour for it.	
Saving Money on Postage	Is your online community more or less cost-effective than paper and postage? Calculate the cost savings on postage.	
Increasing Site Traffic	Does member-generated content provide you with additional point of visibility?	
Reducing Customer Service Costs	Have you reduced member or customer service costs (long telephone distance charges, etc) by providing the service via your online community?	
TOTAL MONTHLY REVENUE		

Using the previous and the above table you can compute your ROI dividing total amount of Revenue/Benefits by Expenses.