

Notes on Starting and Fostering an On-line Community

I. Introduction

This document was created to outline the key points for initiating and fostering an on-line community for a museum environment. These recommendations are based on data culled from the On-line Community Unconference 2007 and Museums and the Web 2007.

II. Getting Started

Define your No. 1 priority for this community, and keep it in the forefront during planning. For example, the Leonardo's might be:

"The goal of the Leonardo Community Ning site is to enrich and extend the visitor experience. We aim to do this by giving them a an on-line environment to continue exploring topics they were exposed to during their visit, deepen connections with staff, and have a place to practice looking at the world through the' Leonardo lens'."

Define success: is it a small, busy site that is focused on one discreet area? Is it a site with high turnover/constant stream of temporary users? Is it a broad topic area with many visiting experts? Are the visitors your experts?

Be clear about who you are and reinforce it. Give an overview or introductory statement for each new content area.

Start Small, then move out

- Think of your community as a club where the walls move out and in as it fills up. Move slowly so that both you and your visitors can adapt¹. Keep the change tied to your vision.
- Do test piloting and evaluate it. It's a good idea to test and evaluate before making any big commitments. The formative stage is the time when you can begin to gauge what 'community' really means for your institution.²
- Make changes slowly, and incrementally. Take on what you can support, and there is a need for.

Define the Culture, and reinforce it:

Make it clear on your Home and About pages what you are all about. Use the following tools to define and reinforce culture and set expectations about behavior through tone.

Posting Terms, Guidelines, etc.

Terms of Service [TOS]: this is the legal document where you spell out the specific legal parameters of the site. For example, see:
<http://info.yahoo.com/legal/us/yahoo/utos/utos-173.html>

¹ On-line Community Unconference Wiki: <http://www.socialtext.net/ocu2007/index.cgi>

² Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum: A Timeline, Nicole J. Caruth and Shelley Bernstein, Brooklyn Museum, USA

Community Guidelines: these are based on subjective concepts like Politeness, Decency, Civility, etc. They set the cultural norms for your site. Reiterate the vision for the community here. For example, see:

<http://www.flickr.com/guidelines.gne>

Other opportunities to reinforce cultural guidelines:

Aside from the above, the About page [again, see Flickr's: <http://www.flickr.com/about/>], and the Registration screen are good places to do this. When new users are signing up is an important moment for the culture to be described and expectations to be set. Make it visually scannable, so it's quick and easy to convey.

Always give new members a safe place to ask questions, etc.

Setting the Tone

Think of your on-line community as a party. It needs a space, host, food, place, music, etc. What type of event would it be? Birthday? Halloween?³ Pay strong attention to the user interface design and make it consistent with your goals and your audience.

Finding and fostering your audience

Leverage the real world

- Leverage a real community: Start with real world experiences such as piloting, exhibits at the museum and physical interviews. Provide links on your home page and reminders throughout the museum to the site.
- Leverage communities that your users may be familiar with. If you are trying to reach new communities, provide content that looks like those communities.

Know your audience; find out what they are saying

- Google yourself and find out what people are saying about your institution and its Web presence. Create surveys, if you can. Even the quick and dirty can be extremely useful.⁴
- Other techniques for finding visitors are: look for your visitors on the web. Search sites like MySpace and Flickr to see who is posting photos of their visits. Invite them to contribute to your site. Create a "Leo" group on sites like Flickr.

Involve your audience in the site

- Create a kids executive team. Have an ambassador program, where every 6 mos., they elect or you appoint a new ambassador. This avoids burnout and favoritism.

³ "Your Community is a Party Waiting to Happen" <http://www.commoncraft.com/party>

⁴ Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum: A Timeline, Nicole J. Caruth and Shelley Bernstein, Brooklyn Museum, USA

- Be on top of who is using your site intelligently. Interview them, spotlight, podcast them or invite them to host a blog.

III. Fostering your community

Show the community is alive

- Commit and respond. Remember, these are communities, and to be a good community member, you need to participate. That means reading comments, posting responses, joining groups, and providing a steady stream of fresh content.⁵
- Show energy. On your home page, clearly display the flow and number of member participation.
- Spread Firefox widget buttons, they are easy way to evangelize

Make it easy and obvious that members should invite their friends: give the members easy ways to learn about and connect with one another

Getting discussions off the ground

For each area, provide a clear overview of what that discussion, blog, photo set or activity is about. Give examples, ask questions. Be humble, your users may know more than you realize!

Rituals and Customs help keep things lively

Create rituals on your site to define and foster your group. Have traditions that develop amongst the groups. For example, feature a Leo Invention of the Week, or make Fridays Science Fridays. Have a special time of day/week for posting, or event on Pie Day, and so on. Again, keeping it tied to your community goals.

Involve visitors

Enable people to become "gardeners" - people who take care of the community. Share the vision of the community with fellow members. This enables them to "buy" into the goal of the community. Wikipedia does this by conveying that their visitors are created "the worlds largest encyclopedia".

Handling Trolls and Troublemakers:

- Create a mascot to handling pointing out the do's and don't (at Yahoo! Answers, it's a hamster)
- Build in Reputation Rating (users with low ratings my find their post lower on hierarchy)
- Stealth moderation mode (members who's accounts receive excessive reports, are automatically banned).
- Elevate and promote positive member content to the homepage.
- Keep in mind that sometimes "trolls" are passionate users, and you may be able to direct their passion towards your community in a positive way.

⁵ Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum: A Timeline, Nicole J. Caruth and Shelley Bernstein, Brooklyn Museum, USA

Conclusion

Start small and make changes slowly so you and your audience can adapt. Create a culture that resonates with your audience and your goals. Keep your site lively, and involve visitors in the development.

References:

The On-line Community Unconference wiki

<http://www.socialtext.net/ocu2007/index.cgi>

Common Craft blog article: "Your Community is a Party Waiting to Happen"

<http://www.commoncraft.com/party>

Museums and the Web 2007 papers

Building an On-line Community at the Brooklyn Museum: A Timeline

<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/caruth/caruth.html>

Designing a Web Site for Young People: The Challenges of Appealing to a Diverse and Fickle Audience

<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/cardiff/cardiff.html>

Case Study: New World Blogging within a Traditional Museum Setting

<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/gates/gates.html>

COPPA - Children's Online Privacy Protection Act

<http://www.coppa.org/>

<http://www.ftc.gov/ogc/coppa1.htm>