

My blast from the past....Guidelines for Community Moderators

I have to apologize for slacking off on the blog recently. I've been heads-down in a project that's chewing through my time and not leaving much bandwidth for writing. I did, however, start reminiscing with an old colleague at the E2.0 conference in Boston and it got me thinking about how we keep revisiting the same basic ideas in the context of new technologies.

This got me thinking of BBS that I ran back in the early to mid-90s and how many of the guidelines for community are just as valid now as they were then.

I left in some of the technical information for context and omitted the inventory of feeds (it was tedious then and even more so now). For those of you that can't find anything better to do with your time, in the spirit of laziness, I present...

The OnRamp Community Moderators Guide (circa 1993)

Thanks for volunteering (or being recruited) to become a community moderator for the OnRamp BBS. The term "Moderator" is a bit misleading, since your role is actually one of mentor, advocate and facilitator. However, "moderator" is the common term used in the BBS community, so we've stuck with it.

To get your started, this document will provide you with some background information on the system, our various content channels as well as some guidelines for becoming a successful community builder and advocate for your users. We ask that you take the time to review this document thoroughly both to make sure that this is a role that you'd like to take on, as well as to provide you with some guidance to help you get started.

The technical mumbo-jumbo

As a current member of the board, you're probably aware of at least some of the features. However, the OnRamp is one of a new generation of bulletin board systems that's paving the way for a new interconnected worldwide community of users. (and no, that's not just marketing rhetoric). It's important to understand that unlike most BBS systems, we're connected with a number of national and international networks and many of our communities are essentially "syndicated" to the world. So, your role as a community manager is not just a local responsibility. It's also a commitment to ensure that we respect, collaborate and cooperate with the communities that we interact with. We're also one of the few public BBSs with Internet connectivity. The Internet is a series of high-speed data connections based on leased telephone, data or satellite links. Unlike dial-up connections, our data circuits are always on and have real-time access to tens of thousands of computer systems around the world. This allows our users to send email (via UUMAIL), transfer files (via HoloUUCP), collaborate in real time (using Searchlight chat and Tribal Voice) and reference a huge library of files and document repositories via ARCHIE, GOPHER or WAIS (for more details, please refer to the Internet FAQs in the system Help conference). We have also recently implemented NCSA Mosaic support for our PPP users (Precompiled Win3.0 and WFW binaries as well as Unix SysV sources available in the main Tools File library). Mosaic provides a freindly graphical interface to standard standard Internet tools as well as support for hypertext and hyperlinked graphics similar to Apple's Hypercard stack, but in a networked context. The topic is a bit broad to cover here. but we've already embraced the technology and adopted many of our site features to work through a Mosaic front-end.

<available feeds and interconnects omitted...>

SearchLight: In addition to standard BBS functionality, we also provide online questionnaire and survey tools, a full graphical interface based on TeleGrafix RIPdraw, real-time chat via Unix TALK protocols, Searchlight Chat and an experimental HyperText system based on NCSA Mosaic. You can also offer guided tutorials or tours of the system (or any connected systems) using Tribal Voice. These tools are all available to our community moderators to help you personalize and tailor the community to your users. Even if you're part of a larger community feed, feel free to customize the experience for your users. We also encourage you to share your developments with the world. Community is about sharing information, not hoarding it....which brings us to the most important

part of this document...

Guidelines for Community Moderators

1. Make sure that you want to do this.

Being a community moderator is not a way to attain personal power or recognition. It's not about you, it's about the users. They own the community. They're the ones that will shape it, guide it and develop it. It's the role of the moderator to understand the will of the community and to act as an advocate and a tool of the community. You will have tremendous power and visibility. But if you attempt to make it about you, the community will take your power away in a heartbeat. Either they'll find a way to make your life miserable, they'll push you out or they'll simply abandon the community for greener pastures. Functional communities are the embodiment of democracy and dictators (even benevolent ones) are not tolerated.

2. Remember that the community exists for it's own sake, not for yours.

Communities are not about supporting The OnRamp, supporting the sysops, corporate sponsors, product groups, you, me or any specific individual. They exist because of group of people decide that they want it to exist. No company, organization or individual can mandate a community. It's also not a case of "If you build it they will come". You can build an infrastructure and you can plant the seeds of a community by providing interesting, relevant content and conversation. But ultimately, it comes down to the collective will of the users whether the community will live or die. As a moderator, you're the caretaker of the community, not the "owner". You need to encourage the contributors and discourage the disruptive influences. You need to seed content when things are going slowly. You need to diagnose problems, lack of interest or frustration and encourage discussion to resolve the issues. A gardener can't make a garden grow. They can simply plant seeds, water it when there's no rain, fertilize the soil, trim away the dead plants and weeds and occasionally rotate the crops to keep the soil productive.

3. Engage, recruit and empower those that are willing to help from the ranks of the community

You are a tool of the community. But you can't build anything with just one tool. Recognize your own strengths and weaknesses and engage other members of the community to work with you. Many well-intentioned moderators have burnt out by trying to do everything by themselves. In most well-developed communities, the members will end up taking control whether you like it or not. Encourage those that are supporting the will of the people and try to refocus those that are working against the greater whole. Publicly acknowledge, reward and empower those that are helping to build the community

4. Keep the conversations relevant, interesting and exciting

Don't censor content, but if the noise starts to surpass that actual useful signal, you need to step in and try to get things back on track. Many communities will go through phases of "irrelevant chatter", so don't be too quick to shut things down. Occasionally people need to blow off steam and these flights of fancy are one way that they do it. But when people start to get annoyed or your core community members are getting lost in the noise, it's time to step in. A community has to provide some sort of value or it will die. That value can be unique information, social interaction, entertainment or something totally unexpected. If your community is happy with the direction, support it. If they aren't, intervene. But don't assume that you, personally, are the measure of that value. Watch the feedback and conversation and if in doubt, ask your community.

5. Allow the community to change them even if you disagree with the direction

It's not about you. If you get to the point where the direction of the community has become something that you can't support, then get out. I know that it's harsh, but it's very difficult to be an effective advocate for something that you personally disagree with. Talk with your users. Express your concerns and figure out the best way to help them reach their goals. If the best way is to replace you, then work to transition out gracefully, professionally and without being a jerk about it. If the community begins to fragment and there are clear factions forming, consider splitting the community into different groups. People evolve and so do communities, so

don't stand in the way of that evolution. When it makes sense to do so, support and encourage changes, splits, mergers or even entirely new directions without alienating the people themselves.

6. Take risks/Don't be afraid of failure/Admit mistakes

You're human and so are the members of your community. They're going to want to try new things, push boundaries and experiment. As Moderator, you need to facilitate these activities, find ways to limit the risk and then either adopt the changes or discard them without blame, bad feelings or any implied loss of respect for the people that suggested them. If you aren't taking risks, you're stagnating. So work with your community to encourage new thinking and new ideas and don't be afraid to admit when something goes wrong. Even if it's not your fault, you can earn a lot of good will by accepting responsibility instead of allowing blame to fall on community members (even if they were clearly responsible). Allowing the lynching party to go after a community member will just create dissent and make others think twice before suggesting a new idea. By focusing the attention away from specific individuals, you can help to develop a team mentality without really creating any risk for yourself personally.

7. Facilitate, don't direct

Occasionally, you'll have a strong opinions or ideas on a subject. As a moderator, you should try to take a back seat and encourage discussion and debate before throwing your own opinion out there. Ask questions. Call out the experts and active members of the community to comment. Encourage debate. It's easy for a conference to become a soapbox for the moderator. But it's not about you. If you guide discussions into a narrowly defined "back alley", you kill the dialog and the community becomes nothing more than your personal journal. You need to encourage and inspire your community to communicate. It may take some practice, but pay attention to how people respond to your postings and watch for the "dead end". Diffuse threats to the community politely, publicly and with respect, but avoid dictatorial threats or using your authority/power to shut someone down as a "first response". Engage other members of the community in determining more decisive responses if discussion, facilitation or gentle suggestions don't do the trick.

8. Don't be a corporate mouthpiece

Some of you or your community members may feel the need to represent employers, services, products, etc. That's fine. But don't try to use the community as a marketing tool or a corporate soapbox. If the community smells a "corporate agenda", members will treat it like a dead skunk. I can't say it enough; The community is about it's members, not you. Not your company. Not your product. Even if the conference is "GumbyTech, Inc.", it's not about GumbyTech. It's about the people interested in GumbyTech and what the company offers them. If you turn it into a sales and marketing tool, you'll have sold out the community and basically told them that you care more about your sales than interacting with your customers. Communities have to consist of dialogs and not "targeted communications". If you aren't prepared to have honest, genuine dialog then you don't belong in a community. Keep this in mind as moderator. Throw the press releases, product announcements and other one-way communications into the Files sections and don't interrupt the conversation with it. Think about how you'd feel if someone sat down next to you on a bus, delivered a sales pitch and then walked away without even waiting for a response. That's what these unilateral postings are in the Community space. They can sometimes be disguised as dialog, but you'll recognize them almost immediately as propaganda.

9. Be genuine

You can be professional and still be genuine. Be a human being. Share personal insight and feelings on subjects. Share personal stories if they're relevant. Be honest and be approachable. A community is an ongoing social event and it's about people, not jobs, titles, roles or any sort of posturing. As a moderator, this is especially important. People need to feel that you're approachable and working on their behalf. They also want to make sure that you're supporting them and not your own agenda. The best way to help them understand that is to talk with them. Engage in the dialogs and encourage your members to participate. Also, try to be as transparent as possible. Don't expose people that have contacted you in confidence. But explain decisions that you may have to make and talk about difficult or controversial issues that may arise (like banning disruptive members, removing postings, etc.)

10. Provide a release valve

Make sure that you clearly and repeatedly let people know how to get in touch with you and how to submit complaint or issues. It may be obvious to you and long time members of your community, but if you don't make sure that everyone knows that there's a release valve somewhere, issues and frustrations will leak back into the community by default. Some of the issues should be discussed out in the open, but there are also situations where members will want to be more discrete. Make sure that they know how to get a message to you privately.

11. Promote and publicize your community leaders and contributors

Reposting or highlighting content as "Editors Picks", "Community Highlights" or some other form of award or recognition can encourage a much deeper level of participation. If a thread is particularly active or a discussion is highly rated or relevant, call it to the attention of others. If there's a related community that might have a particular interest in the discussion, send a note to their moderator (visible in the Conference information pages). You may draw in new members into your community or provide some visibility for your own community members.

12. Engage the grey matter

Use your brain. Don't get caught up in rules, politics or the letter of the terms of service. Use common sense and respect for your community members as your guiding principles and you're unlikely to go wrong.

Welcome to The OnRamp

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April 17, 1993