

THE PROVEN PATH

The most successful and reliable approach in
the history of building online communities.

by Richard Millington

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Start small.

That's the secret to developing a successful community.

If you remember nothing else about this book, those two words can get your budding community out of a lot of difficulty.

Of course, some people claim to already know this. They nod their head and wonder why they bothered hiring us in the first place. Yet, when the moment of truth arrives, when they're at the dawn of their community building efforts, *they freak out*. Instead of taking *the only proven path* to building successful communities, they go for a *big launch* instead.

This eBook will stop that. This eBook aims to persuade both you and your boss about that the big launch will result in an expensive failure. This eBook will prove that starting small is the best approach to developing a community.

Perhaps most importantly, this eBook will explain how to get a community started and then grow your small community into a huge success.

THE PROVEN PATH

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THE PROVEN PATH
to Failure

The \$2,000,000 Launch

In 2009, I received a call from the European marketing manager of a multinational organization that sells well-known consumer products. It's a big company; about half of your will have purchased a product of theirs.

Their community, he said, had been launched to much fanfare several months ago but was now floundering. It was the usual problem. They had persuaded lots of people to join, seeded initial conversations and watched as the initial flurry of activity faded within a few weeks.

I flew out to their European headquarters the next week. When I arrived, I was brought into the office of the marketing manager to discuss the project. He was worried he might have half of his huge \$4m budget on a community that was going to fail. I know what you're thinking, *'how do you spend \$2m and still fail?'*

The budget included:

- Hiring a leading social strategy firm to come up with the plan to develop an online community.
- Spending a high six-figure sum to develop a state-of-the-art community platform. This platform included every modern social networking feature developed to bespoke specifications.

The \$2,000,000 Launch

... they did everything they thought they should do. But in the end, they made every mistake in the community builder's playbook.

- Hiring a PR agency to promote the community upon launch.
- Hiring a small team of community managers/moderators to manage the activity.
- Hosting a major contest to attract people to sign up for the community.
- Hiring one of the world's top legal firms to draft the terms and conditions for the community (this was my favorite!).
- Hiring two journalists to create content for the community.
- Paying a low six-figure sum to a translation company to translate the community content into every language the company operated in, nearly 40 different languages!

Other items included designers, accountancy, hosting costs, and the list went on and on. They had the biggest budget of any community I've ever worked on, and they did everything they thought they should do. But in the end, they made every mistake in the community builder's playbook. Even with \$2 million left in the bank, they had no idea how to turn the community into a success.

The \$2,000,000 Launch

For all that work and money, how many members had they attracted that had stuck around for the entire three months since the launch? Two.

So what went wrong?

Big launch thinking – they were stuck in it. The brand took a traditional marketing attitude to something that is beyond the realm of marketing. They didn't realize that community building was a gradual process.

They held a massive competition to get people to register for the community. They issued press releases. They spammed every mailing list they could possibly reach. Their PR team waived their magic wand too (the Harry Potter kind) and got coverage in several top publications.

So what happened next?

It seemed to start well. Over 10,000 members joined. But after an initial flurry of activity, the level of discussions began to dwindle. Despite the community manager creating fresh content twice a week and asking people plenty of questions, the level of activity in the community continued decline. At the time of my first meeting with them, less than 50 members had been active in the community during the previous week.

For all that work and money, how many members had they attracted that had stuck around for the entire three months since the launch? Two. That's one million dollars per member. It was a 'big launch' failure, a big one.

The Story of the Internet's Ugliest Online Community

He started small and kept going.

Rob Ludlow runs one of the ugliest online communities on the planet; it's also amongst the most successful.

BackYardChickens has the sort of activity most brands would eat their interns for. At the time of this writing, their forums contain 6.7 million posts and they have a population of 105,000 members – and there are no signs of it slowing down. Even better (at least for the owners, this may be painful to read if you recently coughed up your company's pension fund to build a community), it costs Rob a three-figure sum to host and run.

How did BackYardChickens become the raging success it is today? It certainly isn't the design of the site. It looks like a reject from the Geocities era. Visit the community for yourself if you like. Rob hasn't spent a cent on advertising. He hasn't spent a minute on blogger outreach campaigns. He wouldn't even know how to write a press release, and he didn't even have access back then to all the amazing communications tools which now exist. He didn't have effective mass mailing lists, no Facebook, no Twitter, no simple viral marketing techniques, no content sharing.

So how did Rob turn a niche community site into a rip-roaring success? He started small and kept going. In Rob's own words:

The Story of the Internet's Ugliest Online Community

In January 2007, the BYC community forum was created with about 50 members. We grew by about 10-15 members a day for the first 3 months and then 15-20 members a day for the rest of the first year. Those members were posting about 25 topics and 300 posts per day. It took us until 5/6/08 to get to 10k members and then less than a year, 3/14/09 to hit 25,000 members. In less than a year on 3/2/2010 we doubled our membership to an amazing 50,000, and on 7/27/2011 we surpassed 100,000 members! Now we have over 100 new members, 500 topics, and 7500 posts per day!

Don't just put up a community forum, etc. without some type of initial core base of users.

Rob is a major proponent of the proven approach to building successful online communities, in his own words:

I'm often approached by people who see the success I have with my online communities who say, "Wow, you've been so successful with a community, how do I start a community in another niche?" My answer is always the same: "NEVER start a forum from 'scratch!'" Meaning, don't just put up a community forum, etc. without some type of initial core base of users.

Forums, more than almost any platform, require an active critical mass of users or the forum will die an ugly death. I tell people, "Start a blog, newsletter, and/or some other combination of content and subscribers. After you've built up content and subscribers for a year, you may be in a position to start a community forum and then parley those subscribers into the core critical mass of initial active community participants."

The Story of the Internet's Ugliest Online Community

This advice to the people who pose the question serves two purposes: 1) It weeds out those who shouldn't be starting a community. If someone doesn't have the tenacity, persistence, and work-ethic to stick to consistently update a blog over a year, then they will definitely not be able to keep up on maintaining a forum. 2) Successfully creating a core group of users DRASTICALLY improves the probability of starting and maintaining a healthy and thriving community with the critical mass needed to be sustainable.

BackYardChickens wasn't a fluke. Rob has repeated his *start small* approach several times to develop successful communities in a variety of different fields. He's done it for InkJet printers, other farm animals, gardening, and sustainable lifestyles.

If brands want the success of BackYardChickens, you might imagine they would copy the approach of BackYardChickens. You might imagine that when they're launching an online community they would use hundreds of examples of successful communities for guidance.

But they don't. Most do no research at all. In fact, the ignorance of brands of successful communities is as remarkable as it is costly. Is it any surprise that branded online communities' failure rates are so high that finding successful examples is a challenge in itself? But who or what is stopping brands from following the proven approach to developing communities?

Cue, the *evil* Big Launch Brigade.

The evil Big Launch Brigade

The BLB is clueless about building communities. The BLB has never done it before.

Every good story needs a good villain. The villain of this story is the *Big Launch Brigade*.

They are a shadowy bunch of marketing types joined in a (feasibly) global conspiracy to trick you into believing you need a big launch for your community.

The Big Launch Brigade (BLB) will tell you that communities need a big, expensive, launch. They'll say you need to reach a *critical mass* of members. They will tell you that you need to conquer the chicken and the egg problem (you need a lot of members to get a lot of members).

They are wrong.

We will destroy their ridiculous logic in a minute, but first, it's important to know something about the BLB. The BLB is clueless about building communities. The BLB has never done it before.

If they had built communities in the past, they would know that their big-launch approach was guaranteed to fail. Sadly, their income usually depends upon selling companies on big launches. They use their marketing and advertising mojo to publish a few press releases, work a few contacts, get some coverage and get a lot of people to join in a matter of seconds. They walk away with fat pockets.

Pretty evil huh?

“It’s the Critical Mass, Stupid”

... you need a critical mass of activity, not just a critical mass of members.

Lets tackle this *critical mass* question.

The critical mass is the point at which the community begins to become self-sustaining. It’s the point at which the community will generate increasing levels of activity into infinity ...and beyond!

So what’s wrong with aiming for a critical mass of members? It seems reasonable enough. Right?

The trick is that you need a critical mass of *activity*, not just a critical mass of members. Activity begets more activity, but members won’t beget more members if everybody is quiet. Those evil BLB death-eaters will use their devious dark arts to attract hundreds, perhaps, thousands of members to join the community in a matter of minutes, but few of these will be active.

That translates to a short-term activity spike before you’re left back where you started -- wondering how to get people to participate in your community.

There is some truth in the BLB’s logic; that’s part of why it keeps getting funded. You actually do need to quickly reach a critical mass, but it’s *activity*, not users, that counts. In fact, the actual number of members you need to reach this level of activity is far lower than you might imagine. At FeverBee, we’ve found most communities can reach a reliable critical mass of activity by attracting an early group of 50 – 100 active members, and that even assumes that some of them will drop-out.

The BLB's Trail of Devastation

The BLB has left a trail of devastation stretching from Mercedes to BA, from Virgin Media to BMW.

In a matter of minutes, you can find hundreds of communities left rotting in the BLB's wake.

If the failed communities weren't taking down in humiliation, this number would be in the tens of thousands.

These poor communities were doomed before they began. They experienced a short-term promotional blitz followed by a long decline into the abyss.

We need to stop it.

A Closer Look at the Big Launch

So how does the BLB wreak their wicked havoc?

They usually begin with persuading their organization (or their client) that they need a big launch, that they need that critical mass of users. They might stomp their feet and make a ruckus about *their irrelevant marketing experience*.

Potential methods for a big launch are numerous, but they usually include one or more of the following:

- Developing a bespoke online community platform.
- News posts on the organization's website.
- Numerous e-mails to everyone on the organization's mailing list.
- A PR campaign to persuade journalists to write about the community.
- Blogger outreach campaigns.
- A competition or incentives for people to join the community (we can't get enough t-shirts).
- Hosting an *offline* launch day attended by journalists, celebrities and the CEO declaring this community will change the way {audience} does {activity}.

A Closer Look at the Big Launch

It takes a lot of time and effort to convert a new community member into an active community member.

If the big launch does succeed (which is rare), the community platform will be overrun with a rampaging bunch of bloodthirsty members.

Bloodthirsty or not, more members is a good thing, right?

No, you nincompoop!

Members are fickle beasts, like stray cats that may wander up to your porch. They may check things out, but it takes a lot of personal attention to keep them interested. Otherwise they come, browse around for a few seconds and then vanish back into the internet wilderness.

It takes a lot of time and effort to convert a new community member into an active community member. It requires the community manager to build relationships with and between members, initiate discussions, prompt members to participate and slowly increase their interest. This can't happen if the community manager is crushed by a raging stampede of incentivized newcomers.

And as an aside, a sudden rush of growth into an existing community can do serious harm to existing members too!

First Impressions that Kill

Do you know what Facebook looked like when it launched? Pretty ugly. The same is true with most communities you see today. When they launched, they simply weren't that interesting. There wasn't a clear community culture nor were there many active discussions for newcomers to participate in. There wasn't a clear list of community achievements, nor was plenty of awesome content.

Is this the first impression you want most of your potential members to see?

Every community improves as it grows. Communities gain more members, create more content, initiate more discussions (and respond to discussions quicker). As a community develops, it simply gets better and better. The later a newcomers sees your community, the better their impression will be and the more likely they will become active members.

It's madness and self-defeating to send an army of people to see your community when it's first launched. Unlike almost any other product or platform, a community will look far better a year from now than at its launch. By sending an army of people to see your community at its launch, you're ruining your only chance at a great first impression *with the majority of your prospective audience*.

First Impressions that Kill

It's not the technology that makes a community great; it's the sense of community among the members.

It's very hard to recover from a bad first impression; most communities never do. Every member you reach when you launch will be harder to get back when your community is actually good. It's not the technology that makes a community great; it's the sense of community among the members. It's the responsiveness of discussions. It's the achievements and milestones the community has reached. It's the exciting events taking place.

A big launch might attract 10,000 people to sign up, but if only 50 are active after the first month, that's 9,950 potential members you've squandered. Nice going, bozo!

First impressions matter, so don't ruin yours by trying to grow too quickly.

Great Expectations

As any Dickens fan will tell you, great expectations can be a killer.

A press release establishes great expectations. A press release will promise the moon. It inevitably will proclaim the community will become the leading community in its field. The press release will cement what the community is about prematurely. The press release will kill your community.

The problem with great expectations is that communities usually take longer to deliver the goods than your wily press release author imagined. A community will usually pivot in subject matter. A community might change its focus when members realize that they actually interested in something very specific within their field.

I bet you can't find a successful community that issued a press release when it launched. You can go trawl through a press release archive or two if you like, I'll wait....

Great Expectations

The problem with press releases isn't just about the expectations they establish in your public audience, journalists and others in the sector. There was never any harm in ambition. In fact, at FeverBee, we recommend communities declare their broad ambition for the future. It helps members to get on board. The problem is with the expectation it establishes inside your own organization. If your boss expects you to develop a successful community within 6 months, he's going to be bitterly disappointed when you only have a few hundred members by then.

Instead of seeing a few hundred active members as a sign of vitality in the community and appreciating the percentage growth figures, they might see such a number as a sign of struggle and kill the project. This happens more frequently than you might imagine.

Many, many, communities are killed by their own organizations before they had a chance to succeed. There will be a time to issue a press release, as we'll cover later, but for now, kill the press release before it kills your community (or your career).

The Problem with Successful Communities

The community got big because it was good, it didn't get good because it was big.

So what made the BLB the warped, love-depraved, creatures we see lurking in the shadows today?

There are numerous factors. These include misleading examples, scientific experiments gone wrong, and the aforementioned lack of community building experience.

Lets begin with the examples. Take a look at any successful community. You will see it has a lot of members. You will see it might get mentioned in a variety of publications and media. You might even notice it issues the dreaded press release.

A BLB member might see a successful community and confuse the result with the process. They believe that the community needs a lot of members to be a success, that it needs media attention and needs to issue promotional material. They believe these elements were integral to the success of the community and not the outcome of the community's success.

They don't see the process that led to the community being a success. The community got big because it was good, it didn't get good because it was big. They got media attention because they were media-worthy, not because they strived hard to get media attention. They had a successful small community that grew into a big community. They didn't get a big community by being big.

The Problem with Successful Communities

Most brands copy the way a community is today as opposed to the approach the community took to be a success. They see a community like Mumsnet which is mentioned in innumerable blogs and frequently cited in the media and assume that their new community also needs to be frequently mentioned in blogs or discussed in the news media.

Even if this approach succeeds, they can't sustain that level of attention and convert those members into active participants of their online community.

That, as we might say in the Twitterverse, is a #communityfail.

Take the approach of the successful community, not the result of the successful community.

Losing The Game of Risk

Supposedly businesses try to minimize risk. Risk, we're led to believe, is bad. Risk means someone (perhaps you? perhaps your boss?) might lose his or her job.

It stands to reason that a company launching a community will want to minimize the risk of failure. Most companies think that's what they're doing with a big launch. They think they're giving themselves several channels of growth. They believe they're covering their tailor-suited asses. But what they're really doing is exactly the opposite. They are upping the risk level from moderate to extreme.

That amounts to rigging the game...against yourself.

It's not just that they up the cost of failure; they also decrease the odds of success. They're stacking the odds against themselves. A small launch is a success when you have 50 to 100 members participating in the community. Would that also be the same criteria for success if you've put your promotional machine into action? Is that enough people to justify the costs that go into trying for a big launch? Nope. You'd probably need thousands of active members to justify that expense.

Losing The Game of Risk

You only get one shot at a big launch, and the chances of success are minimal. If it doesn't work out, you've got no more aces up your sleeve. It's game over.

Do you know how many communities have had thousands of members actively participating two months after its launch? None.

You only get one shot at a big launch, and the chances of success are minimal. If it doesn't work out, you've got no more aces up your sleeve. It's game over.

Starting small isn't risky, though. You make no public declarations of victory. You make no proclamations of greatness. You simply work with a few people to keep the community going and grow it steadily from there. It's the minimal risk, minimal expense, and most minimal crazy expectations possible. It sounds easier, too, doesn't it? To simply interact with a few people to get a community started?

Starting big decreases the chances of success while raising expectations. Starting small increases the odds of success and lowers the bar for success. Which do you want to take? Do you want to stack the odds heavily in your favour? Go for a small launch.

The BLB Will Suck Your Blood Budget Dry

You don't need the most advanced, fanciful stuff. You just need the technologies that are proven to be popular.

You see what I did there? I sneakily implied the BLB are blood-sucking vampires. That's slightly sensational, but it's not entirely wide of the mark.

They will suck your budget dry then come back for more. They will persuade you to spend far more money than you need (and probably more money than you have). They will whisper things in your ear about the need for a professionally designed community platform, an advertising budget and other "must-haves."

If they're especially ~~blood-thirsty~~ fancy, they might even mention terms like brand reputation, consistency of image, and *essential* integration requirements.

Cover your ears, my small-launching brothers-in-arms! They're misleading you. The majority of communities you see today spent three figure sums (at most) to develop their thriving platforms. We're living in the world of open-source and there is a range of proven technologies. You don't need the most advanced, fanciful stuff. You just need the technologies that are proven to be popular. You need technology that your audience can easily use.

The BLB Will Suck Your Blood Budget Dry

Most of the successful communities today use the simplest platforms available.

The BLB will tell you otherwise. They might tell you that you need to build a community using Flash (like GenerationBenz) or it needs to be designed to “modern standards” because of some other bullshit bad reason.

Most of the successful communities today use the simplest platforms available.

Let me repeat.

Most of the successful communities today use the simplest platforms available.

One more time for luck...

Most of the successful communities today use the simplest platforms available.

You don't need to spend a 5 to 6 figure sum to launch a community. You just need a platform that works *and that your audience knows how to use*. You can invest more money in the community platform once it's a success.

If you look through examples of successful and failed communities, you will notice that most successful communities use free, cheap or open-source community platforms. Most failed online communities spent the farm on custom-bespoke platforms. Pretty, yes. Functional, no.

Don't let the BLB eat your budget for breakfast.

The Power of Simple Platforms

Sue defies the idea that you need an expensive platform. Sue developed BritishExpats.com, a thriving community for expats on simple forum software.

We started with a basic forum set-up. Costs only started escalating as the community started to grow and we needed a robust server. I do recall those early out-of-pocket expenses for the server were tough, but the ability to provide a stable server to host our growing community on was important. In those early days servers were not as abundant, and competitively priced as they are today.

It took around 12 – 18 months to reach the stage where the community was generating most of its own activity/discussions. We started small and I spent a lot of time building relationships one-on-one with each member.

The Power of Simple Platforms

Forget bells and whistles because above all people will join a community for the discussions and the opportunity to build relationships.

Several years later, Sue sold her community and was retained by the new owners to continue developing the online community. Sue's advice developing communities is simple:

Start slow and don't try to run before you can walk. Concentrate on basic community platforms that make it as easy as possible for members to connect with each other. Forget bells and whistles because above all people will join a community for the discussions and the opportunity to build relationships. Start with as few sections as possible, as too many sections often means it will be hard to create a community feel, and conversations will be diluted and stretched too thin. It's difficult for members to get to know each other if you've got dozens of different sections with little to no activity.

At the time of writing, BritishExpats.com has 9,048,375 posts from over 152,000 members. Wouldn't your brand want a community like that?

Community Building Experience

If you're like Rob, Sue, Susan, Martin, Matt and hundreds more small-launch comrades, you know how to build a community. You know you need to start small. You know the BLB is wrong.

But the BLB doesn't know they suck. They don't know they suck because they confuse community building with another very different discipline – marketing. Or worse, *online* marketing. {cue *Darth Vader Music*}

The BLB representative will traditionally come from a marketing background and believe that, for a campaign, product launch or company to be successful, they need a big launch. They believe that they need a lot of attention to get a lot of attention (they believe a lot of attention is critical, you see). They don't realize that community building is very different.

They're not just wrong. They're entirely deluded – pity the fools!

Community Building Experience

Community building is a slower process of stimulating interactions, building relationships and fostering social capital.

Community building experience is a unique experience amongst the social fields. You need to do it to understand it. You need to actively develop an online community. You need to understand that the community is a result of building a sense of identity amongst a specific group of people. You need to understand that this is the outcome of thousands of micro-interactions between you and them and between one another. You need to understand that you stimulate those discussions. That's the *process* of developing a community. If you would have that perspective, you would know that the community isn't developed from a *silver bullet* perspective that makes things quick and easy. You have to get down in the mud and actively interact with these people – and you need to love doing that.

If the BLB had ever built a community, they would know that they couldn't be more wrong. But they don't because they haven't. Pity the fools, but don't tolerate them in your community efforts.

Community building is a slower process of stimulating interactions, building relationships and fostering social capital. It begins small and grows with time, at its own pace. Those without the relevant experience don't understand that. They have absolutely no frame of reference for developing a successful online community.

Tackling the BLB

“But Rich, you fearless truth-teller, I’m just one person! How can I defeat this evil global conspiracy outfit known as the BLB?”

Fear not, *one person*, for your power lies not in your strength of numbers but the validity of your argument.

Whenever a BLB death-eater begins spinning their wicked web of deceit, ask them this simple question:

“How many communities can you name that began with a big launch?”

Or, if you’re feeling slightly more antagonistic, you can ask:

*“How many communities **have you worked on that** began with a big launch?”*

Then watch as the BLB evildoer shrivels into a spluttering, humiliated wreck before your eyes. Feel free to add to your momentous victory by passing round a list of dozens of successful communities that began with a small launch (see the end of this book).

Stay true, and victory shall be yours! Looking smug is optional.

Every Big Community Began As a Small Community

Just because you didn't hear about a community until it was big, that doesn't mean it was always big.

So now you have the BLB on the ropes. They're dazed and confused. It's Ali in Zaire all over again. However, unlike Ali, we're going to throw that final knockout blow.

Find any big community today. It doesn't matter which, any will do. Look at the community's history. You can use archive.org if you like. You will find that a big community didn't suddenly become big. Every successful big community began life as a small community.

Being a small community is a stepping-stone to being a big community. That sounds obvious right? Just because you didn't hear about a community until it was big, that doesn't mean it was always big.

The community needs to work small before it can work big. The community concept has to be sufficiently interesting enough for a small number of members to participate. Your engagement tactics need to work at a small level. The community spirit has to be developed at a small level. If your community can't succeed when it's small, it'll never succeed when it's big.

Every Big Community Began As a Small Community

Yet nearly every brand that attempts to build a community ignores this successful approach. They decide they want a huge community, and they want it NOW! If {insert ridiculous example here} has a community, then we can do it better! It doesn't matter if they spent 5 years putting that community together.

It's crazy that companies ignore the approach taken by all these amazing communities. Instead they go for a big launch, a big marketing push, a big platform and a big team to launch it.

Can you imagine any other industry acting that dumb? Can you imagine an industry deciding to ignore a proven successful approach in favour of an approach that has never succeeded? We've seen brands actively ignore dozens of examples from their own industry in their rush to satisfy their inner BLB demon.

Yet it happens nearly every time for branded communities. It's time for us, my beloved community-building comrades in arms, to change this.

Moving the Goalposts

The goals that the BLB is obsessed with are all wrong.

Getting people to register is easy. If that's your goal, you're going to succeed in no time. Almost any idiot can (and quite frequently does) get thousands of people to register for their platform. Just offer a big incentive for registering, undertake a promotional campaign or show that lots of people have joined already (people are most influenced by what they see others doing).

The goals that the BLB is obsessed with are all wrong. They're obsessed with getting as many people as humanly possible to complete your community's registration form.

Now, the registration form is a wonderful thing. It collects a bunch of mostly irrelevant and useless information and counts how many people are in your community. The greater the number of people who have completed this registration form, the bigger your community is. We can use this number to brag to others about how big our community is. We can tell journalists about it. We can tell our bosses about it. We can boast to our colleagues about it.

Moving the Goalposts

We have to move the goalposts for success from a large number of defunct, registered, accounts to how many members are actively participating in a community.

But this number will have absolutely no benefit to your organization.

Completing the registration is a meaningless act that has no impact upon the community. We have to move the goalposts for success from a large number of defunct, registered, accounts to how many members are actively participating in a community.

The BLB will drive people to complete this form with little regard for whether they actually do anything besides handing over their details. The result is a huge number of registered accounts but few participants. Still, at least you can boast to your buddies about how many members your community has – that’s what really matters, right?

Arguments Against the Dreaded Big Launch

Some of you might be sold already, but now you're going to be looking for ammunition to use against the BLB in a meeting with your boss. So, to summarize this attack on the BLB, here are the key arguments.

- The BLB is an evil group of budget-sucking vampires with no idea how to develop a community and who have a vested interest in you starting with a big, risky, bang that has little chance of success.
- No successful community began with a big launch.
- The big launch is a big risk.
- Big launches ensure that the first impression the majority of your audience has of your community is bad. It does more harm than good.
- The big launch is expensive.
- The big launch sets expectations too high.
- The big launch puts the emphasis upon getting members to register, not keeping them active.
- There is no evidence to support that the big launch will succeed and plenty to suggest it will fail.

2

THE PROVEN PATH

Welcome to the Proven Path: Starting Small

My good friends, you made it! Welcome to the light. Welcome to the safe-haven, blossom-tree lined, *proven path*.

If you've reached this far, you've probably received a response from your boss such as, "*Well, what do you recommend we should do then smart-ass?*"

You might also be battling a disgruntled BLB lieutenant-vampire hybrid waiting to pounce upon any hint of hesitation or error on your part. It's your moment to stand up and declare what should be done.

The Start Small Philosophy

The start small philosophy incorporates several fundamental principles, principles that are essential tenants of our community building practice.

These principles are:

Members that aren't active don't count.

- **Interactions are the lifeblood of a community.** We believe that interactions are the lifeblood of a community. We believe that we should focus our efforts on stimulating, sustaining and growing the number of interactions which take place within the community.
- **Focus on active members.** Our focus is on keeping members active and engaged. We care little for how many members are registered with a community. We only care about how many active members you have. Members that aren't active don't count. We define active as making a contribution within the past month.
- **Every member is precious.** We don't believe there is an inexhaustible number of members we can continually tap to join our community. We believe that every member is a precious flower that needs attention and development. We believe they need the right environment to grow.

The Start Small Philosophy

We believe that a community should be launched with as little cost and as little risk as possible.

- **Low-cost, low risk.** We believe that spending a lot of money on a community before it exists is, well, stupid. We believe communities should be cheap to launch. We believe the majority of money that should be spent on a community must be spent after the community has launched. We believe that a community should be launched with as little cost and as little risk as possible.
- **Sense of community.** We believe that the goal of community development is to develop a sense of community (duh!). We believe that this needs to be carefully nurtured. We believe we can use academic theory to guide our actions here.
- **Micro-interactions.** We believe that a successful community is the result of correct processes and thousands, potentially millions, of micro interactions. We believe that big grandstanding actions and singular events have little impact upon a successful community. We believe that we need to focus on setting up the correct processes and engaging in dozens of micro-interactions to make the community a success.

The Start Small Philosophy

- **Everything can be planned and measured.** We believe that community management activities can be planned and measured. We believe that data gives us an unfair advantage over other communication efforts, but we're cool with that. We believe that we need to test, identify what works using quantitative and qualitative data, and adapt our efforts to match.
- **Relationships are lovely.** We believe that spending time building relationships with members is worth the effort. We believe that they pay off in the long run even if they're not immediately justifiable to your ridiculous measurements. We believe that building relationships with members will help us make things happen in the community. We believe we should spend a significant part of our day doing this.
- **Momentum matters.** We believe that by starting small we can focus our efforts on members and establish some initial momentum. We believe that momentum matters. We believe people want to be a part of things that are growing. We believe it's easier to establish momentum by starting small.

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

*... every big community began
as a small community.*

Let's establish something from the outset; getting your first 50 members is really hard work. It's much harder than you probably imagine.

In fact, earning those first 50 people is a full-time job.

But, remember, every big community began as a small community. To have a big community, we first need to have a successful small community. A successful small community begins with a handful of members and grows steadily from there. A successful small community will attract more members *organically* because existing members will invite their buddies.

To get that bigger community you crave, you need to work just as hard to have a small community. To have a small community, you need to get your first 50 members.

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

... if you can't find anybody interested in your topic, don't build a community about that topic (duh!).

Building Your List

Start by building a list of people you might ask to join this community and get it started. This list will probably include your existing contacts (friends, customers, clients, colleagues, family, followers, likers, mailing list addresses etc...). This list should be substantial. It should contain about 200 names, e-mail addresses and a few notes (see list format in the resources).

If You Have No Friends

If you don't have this many contacts, then you need to go online and find some. You might look at people who have talked about your community's topic on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or other platforms. You might look for people that have posted comments on blogs about the topic. You might include commenters on news sites too. You might look at people who have attended conferences for this topic.

One company once complained, "*But we can't find anybody.*" Well, if you can't find anybody interested in your topic, don't build a community about that topic (duh!).

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

Befriending Your List

During the course of building your list, you should also have made a few notes about each individual. E.g. *Mark Smith, marksmith@gmail.com, special interested in Victorian Gardening tools, Morgan Withers, morganwithers@gmail.com, posted positive comments about use of renewable fuels on Guardian's gardening story.*

Segment your list into three to four categories by their level of passion for the topic. This will be highly subjective, but it should only take an hour and is worth doing. Put the most passionate at the top and the least passionate at the bottom. Now begin interacting with those people who are most passionate about the community topic.

You should begin interacting with 50 to 100 people at this stage (I told you it was a full-time job). Don't rush this. Be genuine in your approach. Ask them questions. Compliment them on actions they've taken. Ask them for their opinion on an issue. Reveal and share your plans and aspirations. **But don't ask them to do anything yet!**

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

Begin by inviting 5, then invite 5 more each day.

Building Relationships 101

Your goal is to build up goodwill and established relationships that you can later leverage to forge your group. If you ask them to do something in one of your first interactions, you will destroy that goodwill. You should be able to get the majority of this group to the stage where you've exchanged 3 – 4 e-mails. Once you have a trusting relationship, then you might like to ask if they would be interested in becoming a *founding* member of the community.

If they agree, you can invite them to join a simple mailing group (or closed Facebook group) until the platform is ready. In this group you can ask them for advice about the platform, introduce them to each other and stimulate discussions about the topic. The goal here is to keep them highly active at interacting on a daily basis with each other.

Do not invite all 50 to 100 members at once to join the community. That's big launch thinking! Begin by inviting 5, then invite 5 more each day. This lets you gradually grow the community, welcome and introduce newcomers, and perfect your process of inviting individuals. This also creates a feeling of momentum. It shows to members that the community is growing and evolving every day. Momentum is a powerful force in the development of a community. People want to be part of things they believe have momentum.

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

*You have to make them
feel like founders.*

Keeping People Active: What Can Your Founders Do?

Inviting people is easy enough, but how do you keep them active and engaged in the community?

It's not enough to give members a *founders* label when they join the community. You have to make them feel like founders. You have to give them a sense of ownership over the community. You have to give them real power and real influence. That means they must be able to contribute to the development of the community itself.

There are a number of things you can ask your community founders to work on:

- **Manifesto.** You can ask your community founders to collaborate on a community manifesto. This outlines what the community stands for, what it hopes to achieve, who it hopes to attract and what it plans to do in the short-term future. Community founders can add their digital signature to the bottom of the manifesto.
- **Design.** Community founders should be intimately involved in helping design the community. They should have input on colour schemes, layout and functionality. It might be prudent to put together a design advisory panel of founders. They can provide feedback on different areas of the community platform (asking members to test the platform is also a clever way of migrating the group from the mailing list to the platform).

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

- **Promotion.** You can ask community founders for promotional ideas to help launch the community. Will they be willing to tell their friends about the community? Who do they know with an interest in the topic? What might they like to tell them?
- **Content.** You might also ask community founders to help create content for the community. They can interview VIPs in the sector, write opinion columns for the community, come up with interesting ideas for content and tell you what they want to read about.
- **Rules & Guidelines.** Founding members can contribute to the rules and guidelines of the community. They can write a set of basic principles and some direct rules for the community (e.g. no advertising, no vulgar language etc...). By writing the rules, they're also more likely to abide by the rules.
- **Activities.** What will happen in the community? Why not ask the founders? Ask them what events/activities they want to take place in the community. If anyone suggests a great idea, ask what help they need from you to make it happen. Encourage them to take responsibility for making their own ideas happen. These are events such as live chats, interviews, offline events etc..

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

- **Take roles.** You can establish roles within the community and invite founders to put themselves forward for these roles (though be wary of rejecting people for a role outright, find something similar for them to do). Founders might take roles within the community. These may include editor, recruiter, moderator and so on, or it might even be simpler than that. Members might take responsibility for responding to discussions about particular topics.
- **Talk to each other on the platform.** Perhaps most importantly, founders must actively be talking to each other on the community platform. They must use the platform on an everyday basis and ensure there are vibrant discussions taking place. They need to help stimulate those discussions and respond to those discussions. They must help you ensure that most discussions are receiving a reply within 24 hours.
- **Welcome newcomers.** This is more important than you might imagine. You won't have time to meet and greet every newcomer yourself, but if you have a core group of people keen to take this role, you can do it with others. It is useful for founders to welcome the newcomers to the community and encourage them to be involved and participate.

Starting Small: Your First 50 Active Members

Keep on Growing

It's at this stage that we learn what sort of discussion keeps members active. In other words, we learn how to engage members. You need to initiate discussions and prompt people to reply. You need to keep growing the community. You have direct control over this. You decide how much time you spend building relationships. You decide how much time you spend prompting people to participate.

As a general rule, the more time you spend on this, the better the results. Once you have reached approximately 50 active members of the community, it's time to move them to the platform and make the platform open to the public. This isn't the sign to go crazy and jump on the BLB bandwagon. Instead, it's time to gradually open up the community and let more people join.

A Spark of Community Genius

Martin Reed, author of CommunitySpark.com, is (possibly) the Brad Pitt of the online community industry. He's a *serial* community builder! He has developed communities in numerous fields. His efforts include: www.justchat.co.uk, www.femaleforum.com, www.insomnialand.com and www.justepals.com.

Can you guess Martin's approach to community building? Yup, start small and grow steadily. Martin explains:

I like starting out on Twitter. I post relevant, valuable information for my target demographic and see what kind of response I get. This is a great way of 'testing the water', too. If nobody bites, then you can reconsider your approach before spending a lot of time and money. If you can get conversations started and attract a following then you know you are onto something.

{...} Once I have a small, core group of people who are really interested and engaged with the community concept, I will work with this group to build the actual community website. I'll keep the community private and exclusive during this period, with new members being accepted on an invitation-only basis.

A Spark of Community Genius

The next step is opening up membership (if desired) and continuing to engage with existing members, encouraging them to develop content and build relationships.

Martin spends little on launching a community, usually no more than a few hundred dollars to get started. The major expense, as Martin describes, is time:

Be aware that successful online communities take time.

Forget about technical functionality and don't measure success by the number of members joining your community. Be aware that successful online communities take time; you can't build a successful online community overnight.

In my experience, communities and their members need a lot of prompting and cajoling for at least the first six months. It takes time to build a community culture and for members to get to know one another. Until then, people are worried about being judged, they're shy and they don't want to make mistakes.

Building Your Contacts Before You Build a Community

Matt Milletto isn't a serial community builder. He's just a mere mortal – a mere mortal who runs Barista Exchange, the world's largest community for Baristas (yup, they're chatterboxes too!).

His community presently has 12,325 members and 300,000+ posts. His community has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, New York Times and every relevant trade publication. If you're a Barista whom uses the internet, you're almost certain to be a member of this community. BaristaExchange has the sort of exposure, membership and reputation that most companies would die for.

So, how did he do it?

"I was able to start the site by having a large amount of contacts, peers, clients and friends in the specialty coffee industry [...] There were also a couple of companies that helped from day one with the support that allowed the site to grow quickly. The hard costs were fairly inexpensive, under \$1000, but the hours of work creating the network, updating and monitoring on my end, plus the hours of support from moderators was staggering."

Building Your Contacts Before You Build a Community

Because Matt had already developed a good network of contacts within the industry, he was able to skip the seeding phase of the community and grow the platform rapidly.

“Barista Exchange became very active within the first few months. We had 1000+ members in our first month, and the site has continued to grow at a steady pace. I also started having Barista Exchange meet-ups around the country at industry tradeshows which was a great way to promote the site and build our membership base. After only a few months, I was featured in the Wall Street Journal for building the network which was both flattering and helped with establishing momentum and exposure as well. “

Not only is this approach much cheaper and quicker than the big launch, it's overwhelmingly the most successful approach to develop an online community. What advice would Matt give to others looking to develop a community?

“Know your industry. You must be truly passionate for what your community is about. Fresh content is important, and plan on spending countless hours populating your site with great content and features, and find some friends who will help moderate the site. {...}. The community should elevate the related industry or topic that you decide to focus on.”

From 50 to 500

Remember, that it's active members we care about.

Planting the seeds of the community was fun wasn't it? But now we want to see the community blossom. We want to put an extra zero on our active member count. We want to see the number of *active* members grow from 50 to 500.

Remember, that it's active members we care about. We care not for how many registered members we have. We only care about how many active members we have. If during the course of your work the number of active members begins to decline, you need to stop approaching new members and focus on engaging the members you have.

Four Growth Channels of a Community

There are four channels of growth for a community. They are:

- 1) Direct invitations
- 2) Word-of-mouth from existing members
- 3) Promotion
- 4) Search

From 50 to 500

The best way for a community to grow in this early stage is via direct invitations.

Because we're not yet ready to throw caution to the wind and promote the community to the masses and because there isn't an almighty amount we can do about search (people that come from search are generally interested in satisfying their informational needs as opposed to their social needs), we're going to focus on direct invitations and word-of-mouth activity.

The best way for a community to grow in this early stage is via direct invitations. That's right, that's you inviting people to join the community. It takes time. It takes effort. And it works like a charm.

It's also mathematically plan-able (music to any community managers ears!). You can spend two hours per day personally inviting people to join a community. Assuming your approach is personable and genuine (not copy/pasted), you should be able to persuade approximately 5 to 10 people per day to join the community. This is a reasonable number that you can keep active in the community through a high level of personal contact.

That's 25 to 50 people per week. Which means it will take between 10 to 20 weeks to reach 500 members. This is a reasonable level of growth during the early stages of the community. This is a manageable level of growth. This is a level of growth that will allow you to ensure that every member who joins the community is converted to an active member.

From 50 to 500

The golden rule is to invite people to do something specific within your community.

Direct Invitations

Remember that big list I made you write out earlier? You should keep working your way through that list of direct invitations. Keep building relationships with individuals and inviting them to join. Remember to measure the conversion rates of these approaches and continually test different approaches.

There is one golden rule of inviting people to join a community – **don't do it**. I'm serious. Don't invite people to join the community. No-one is looking to join a community. No one realizes that they need a community. No one knows what they are missing by not being in your community.

The golden rule is to invite people to do something specific within your community. If you invite people to join the community, that's all they will do (at best). If you invite people to do something specific within the community, on the other hand, then they're likely to do that. Once they participate, they're likely to participate again. They get into the community's notification system. Once they make a contribution, they're likely to return to the community again to see how others replied to their contribution (We've all done it, right? Continuously checked a page to see how others replied to something we said?).

From 50 to 500

So what can you ask your prospective members to do in your community?

- Participate in a discussion.
- Submit questions for an event.
- Provide a unique perspective on something specific.
- Take a specific role within the community.

You have to be specific in your approach. You have to explain why they have been approached – the specific and personal reason. This should relate to their skills, opinions, experience or anything in the past that has a bearing upon this activity you're asking them to do.

Employees

Employees are an untapped channel of early members of a community. Yet, why would your customers participate in a community if your employees can't be bothered? Wouldn't a dream community for a customer be one in which multiple employees were participating? Provide some guidelines and let your employees interact with your supporters in the community. You might just be amazed at how many people want to participate in a community which employees participate in.

From 50 to 500

Word-of-Mouth

I know, so far this sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? Do you really want to write 10 personalized e-mails to members every day? Probably not. But then people that want to be a CEO of a company don't want to spend most of their lives in meetings. Yet that's what they do in pursuit of their greater goal.

However, do not despair. It's unlikely that you will need to invite 450 people to join your community to reach 500 members. As your community grows, members will begin to find your community through word of mouth channels. Existing members will tell their friends about it. This is the primary growth channel for most online communities.

Now you, like the BLB, can leave your word-of-mouth referrals efforts to chance if you like. If you've been good this year Santa might bless you with some referrals. But *chance* doesn't make for a good strategy.

Instead, you need a cunning plan to stimulate referrals.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

Your plan begins with understanding why people give referrals. People refer others to join the community because of motivations that usually fall into one of four categories:

- It increases their status within the community
- It increases their status outside of the community
- It helps their friends
- It helps the community

The first two are pretty selfish; the latter two are very much altruistic.

Broadly speaking, the selfish motivations are more reliable than the altruistic reasons. However, all motivators can be used to get people to invite their friends to join the community. Here are some ideas for each category:

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

Many referrals to join a community are initiated by the sender's need to increase their reputation amongst other members in the community and, thus, climb the social ladder.

1) Increase Status Within the Community

We have a fundamental need for appreciation and power. We seek out positive opinions of ourselves and we wish to feel influential within our environments. Many referrals to join a community are initiated by the sender's need to increase their reputation amongst other members in the community and, thus, climb the social ladder.

There are many ways organizations can stimulate this level of referral activity. Primarily, this involves providing members with a means of ranking themselves against each other, allowing them to compete or showcase their popularity.

For example, the organization may give members areas of responsibility within the community. This might be for a specific group within the community, a specific topic or managing a specific type of content. Individuals who manage these areas are likely to invite others to join the community. Each additional members increases the sender's own status within the community.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

If we're highly involved in a community, we're very likely to tell our friends about it.

2) Increase status outside of the community (impress friends)

Have you ever been involved in something really amazing? What did you do? You told others about it, right? Why did you tell them? Was it because they were desperate to know? I doubt it. It was because you wanted to impress them!

Don't give me that look... you know it's true. You wanted to impress them. No need to be coy about it because it's human nature. There's nothing inherently wrong with it.

The desire to impress our friends by telling them something we're involved with is a big driver of referrals to a community. If we're highly involved in a community, we're very likely to tell our friends about it. There are some very common tactics for facilitating this kind of referral.

One of the most popular is to offer existing members a limited number of invitations to join the platform. If the community is exclusive (or there is something exclusive happening within the community), you're likely to find that members actually use their invites. Just look at some of the recent platform launches; Gmail, Spotify, Google Plus, ~~Google Wave~~. They all work on the same principle.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

This doesn't have to be for the community as a whole; it can be for something specific within the community. Perhaps an upcoming online or offline event could be treated as something more selective.

It is also common for those who make an excellent contribution to the community or who are heavily involved in the creation of something significant in the community to share that with their friends.

If the community co-writes an eBook collection of their best advice, collaboratively works on a statement for the media or is campaigning on a cause, individuals are likely to invite their friends as it demonstrates their own ability and status. In addition, if members are interviewed, given awards or mentioned in news posts, they are also far more likely to invite their friends to join the community and see what is being said about them.

It's a good idea to make these activities a regular part of your work.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

3) Help Their Friends

Of the two altruistic motivations for referring people to join the community, helping friends is the most powerful. Although this is probably linked to the impressing friends motivation, that motivation is at most a secondary factor.

Most people enjoy the positive feeling of helping others, especially people they know. Organizations are able to shape their community in a manner that encourages such referrals.

Organizations can do this by helping members identify content that can easily help others. This might involve a beginner's guide to the topic, an expert guide to the topic and advice for tackling most of the common problems related to the topic.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

If a community has an objective that is likely to require more people, members are more likely to invite their friends or acquaintances to join.

4) Help/Improve The Community

Perhaps the weakest, but by far the most useful to your community, of the four motivators is the genuine desire to improve the community. This is most common in groups which have the strongest sense of community.

There are several channels through which organizations can stimulate these altruistic referrals. For example, a good option is establishing a clear goal that the community can aim to achieve. If a community has an objective that is likely to require more people, members are more likely to invite their friends or acquaintances to join.

Another channel is to highlight a specific problem or situation within the community that requires external expertise. If your community needs an expert in Shakespearean literature, you can ask members to recruit their Shakespearean literature buddies. This also works for any number of problems or opportunities. It's you, however, whom needs to identify what's needed and ensure members know to find someone that can help.

A Cunning Plan to Stimulate Referrals

Plan for Referrals

Many organizations have no plan to generate referrals for their community. This significantly limits their likelihood of gaining referrals. A referral strategy needs to extend significantly beyond adding sharing features to the platform to include planned activities aimed at the four key motivations for generating a referral.

Other Stuff

This community building sounds rather simple doesn't it? Isn't there more to it?

Yes. You need to be creating content on a regular basis. You need to be building relationships with your top members. You need to be converting a growing number of your community members into active volunteers. You need to measure what's working and optimize the conversion process. You need to initiate regular discussions and prompt people to participate.

All these are extremely important to keep a community engaged and sustain a high level of active members. You can't afford to neglect any one of them. So, though this book is focused upon growth, don't neglect any of these other elements.

Starting Small and Growing Too Big

Susan Fox is a testament to the benefits of starting small and staying persistent.

Susan was a local mom who realized, after having a child, that she had no real connection to other moms who were close by. There were signs of non-connection everywhere. Perfectly usable baby gear was left in the trash for pick-up.

In 2007, Susan launched Park Slope Parents for free using Yahoo Groups. The group was highly focused on parents living in the Park Slope area of New York. Susan explains her start small approach:

After a month there were about 20 members, but over the course of 6 months there were about 100 members. After 3 years there were 2,000 members. At its height there were as many as 13,000 unique emails addresses using various aspects of the website and email groups.

Starting Small and Growing Too Big

Soon Susan had a problem most brands would die for, her community was too big. So Susan did what any respectable community builder would do, she decided to make it smaller.

After becoming so large that it needed to be financially supported, those 13,000 unique emails translated to 1,400 families who pay a yearly fee of \$25 (a fee which includes a membership card and discounts to over 300 local businesses). As of August of 2011 we have 4200 paying families.

Susan did what any respectable community builder would do, she decided to make it smaller.

Over the course of its lifespan, Park Slope Parents has fought off competition from *me-too* communities that tried to launch big and struggled to compete. Today, Park Slope parents includes a website (www.parkslopeparents.com), a variety of gently moderated yahoo groups, a main list where members exchange information, a classifieds group, meet-ups, two paid staff members and earns revenue from additional channels such as events, advertising and makes deals for discounts from local businesses.

High Level of Contact With a Small Group of People

Blaise Grimes-Viort is one of the most experienced community professionals in the industry. He has helmed up major community projects for an array of known brands and now works as head of community for eModeration.

Blaise knows the value of high levels of interpersonal contact with members from an early stage in the community lifecycle.

Focus on the people and not the technology or marketing.

“Focus on the people and not the technology or marketing. Reach out consistently to new members, ask them what they want from their community rather than enforcing a space the business wants

Involving your new community members in the early stages helps ensure you offer an environment that closes matches the needs of your community. It can take anything between 3 to 12 months to get the community to a stage where it's generating its own discussions/content.”

Like Rob and Susan, Blaise supports a conservative approach to technology:

“Beyond the cost of a dedicated community manager (which is a must for the success of your fledgling community), platform solutions exists from free to several thousands a month. The best approach is to start with a conservative approach to technology and concentrate on developing strong relationships with your first community members.”

There is a pattern here. Every top experienced community professional is advocating a very similar approach to developing a successful online community. Perhaps it's time the BLB listened?

From 500 to 5,000

Are you sure you even want this many? It's hard work.

But 500 members isn't cool, is it? Do you know what is cool? ~~A billion!~~ 5000!

In truth, only a tiny handful of online communities have more than 5000 active members. 5000 active members is a lot of work. Imagine if each posts 2 to 3 times a month, that's 10,000 – 15,000 posts a month. That's some 500 posts a day, and this is a *low number*.

If you imagine a typical community member visits several times a day, probably makes 3 to 4 contributions a week, the sheer quantity of discussions and activity taking place with 5000 active members can easily top 2000 a day – especially if you have a controversial discussion taking place within the community.

Are you sure you even want this many? It's *hard* work.

Assuming you do (and this isn't true for every community – remember no community wishes it was bigger, just better), how do you add that extra 0 to that 500? Wouldn't it be easy if you could just persuade every member to invite 10 friends? If *only* it was that easy. You have to work hard for that extra digit. Luckily, you have other weapons up your sleeves. You have your referral activities, and it's time to break out your promotional weapons of mass communication. In short, it's time to bring out the big guns.

From 500 to 5,000

Direct invitations are your guarantee that you will continue to have new members joining and participating in the community.

Direct Invitations

You should keep directly inviting people to join the community. It's sluggish work, but it shows measurable results. The amount of time you can spend doing this can drop to about 50% - 75% of what it was early on, but it's important you keep doing this.

Direct invitations are your guarantee that you will continue to have new members joining and participating in the community. Imagine, if you invite 10 people to join your community every day, it only takes 100 weeks to get to 5000 active members (lets exclude the weekends for now). That's a good steady rate of growth.

In practice, however, the more active members you have the faster your community will grow. The bigger your community is, the more people will hear about it and the more people will join it. It shouldn't take long to develop into a thriving online community.

From 500 to 5,000

The most effective channel to get content shared is to involve members in the creation of that content.

Content Sharing

Content sharing activities are an easy way to get the message of your community out into the wild. When done correctly, it can bring in a large number of individuals who want to do something within the community.

The most effective channel to get content shared is to involve members in the creation of that content.

- **Joint eBook.** eBooks are fun to write. I'm writing this from a café with a child kicking the back of my seat. It's a blast! Seriously though, eBooks are fun for a community to write. They make for great content. They help increase the community's sense of identity, stimulate a lot of activity and are amazing promotional tool. They thrive on the school play tactic.

Do you remember when you were young and had to participate in the school play? Your parents and other relatives probably came to see you, right? Maybe they even had to buy tickets to see you. They clapped, cheered and cried on cue.

From 500 to 5,000

A great strategy is to get your community to create an eBook of their best advice on a topic and publish that eBook.

Well, I don't know how to tell you this, but they were lying. Your school play sucked. All school plays suck. Everyone knows they suck. Perhaps, deep down, even you knew you sucked. But while the play sucked, the strategy is fantastic. By involving a lot of people in a project, you get a lot of their friends and relatives to buy into that project. The same is true online. By including a lot of people in a collaborative project, you get a lot of referrals from those involved.

A great strategy is to get your community to create an eBook of their best advice on a topic and publish that eBook. Give everyone that made a contribution credit. Let them share it for free. Ensure the book includes plenty of links back to *relevant* areas of the community, such as discussions people can participate in and calls to add their expertise to the next addition of the eBook. Promote the eBook widely. It's simple, useful and effective. You can even offer the eBook to newcomers that sign up.

From 500 to 5,000

- **Statements from the community.** We will cover these in greater detail below. For now, it's suffice to know that if your community members collaborate on a statement to be published on behalf of the community, they're likely to share it. Make sure there is something specific the recipient of the statement can do in the community. Remember the rule of conversion, members must be able to do something specific within the community.
- **Write about the people you want to join.** A simple tactic to persuade a group of individuals to join a community is to write about them. I don't mean write about topics they're interested in (although that helps) but write about them specifically. If you write about a specific group of people (what they're doing, why they matter in the community ecosystem, their achievements, their failures) those people are almost certain to join to read the content.

From 500 to 5,000

A community that serves as a useful resource for journalists is very likely to gain positive coverage and attract further members.

Promotional activities for a community.

- **Be a Resource for Journalists.** Many journalists participate and follow online communities to learn about the latest trends, uncover the latest news, find people in the topic to interview and build their own contact base within that sector.

In many communities, it would be a good idea to approach journalists who specialize in the field and offer them such resources. An organization could e-mail or call a journalist and offer the community as a resource. This might include sending them a weekly snippet of topical/controversial stories, opportunities to interview members or founders of the community and a summary of the latest trends in the industry.

Many journalists would find such a service very useful for their own work. A community that serves as a useful resource for journalists is very likely to gain positive coverage and attract further members.

From 500 to 5,000

One simple and effective means of promotion is to issue regular statements on behalf of the community on topical issues.

- **Statement on Behalf of the Community.** One simple and effective means of promotion is to issue regular statements on behalf of the community on topical issues.

You see many advocacy groups, lobbying organizations and community groups doing this every day. Whenever there is a topical issue, the organization will issue a statement on behalf of their group giving their version of the story. This achieves several things.

First, it gets them attention from the journalists within that ecosystem. It tells the journalist that this is a group that matters on this issue. Second, it might help sway the debate in their favour. This is especially true on political matters. If your community feels strongly about an issue, by issuing a statement you can convey that opinion (representative of a broad audience) to the people that matter. Third, it gives your existing members a sense of pride that they are part of a group that makes a difference. It encourages your existing members to be more active in the community. It increases the sense of group identity amongst your members.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, other people will see your community mentioned frequently in relevant news topics and decide that this might be a group worth joining. This works best when the statement has an agenda i.e. something that people can do within the community to change the situation. Then you have a great shot at converting these newcomers into regular, active, members.

From 500 to 5,000

Sneaky stuff...

- **Launch an Ego-Trap.** Peter Kim coined the term *ego-trap* in 2008 to describe the ranking, ratings and other systems used to suck people in to their platforms. A typical ego-trap will be as follows:

Sneaky Company will want to get a lot of attention to their website in the Sneaky Industry. So, they will create a ranking system or a challenge of sorts to find the most influential, most respected, most skilled or most powerful people in the industry. They will include every influential person they can imagine and let them know they've been nominated.

Here comes a dastardly twist -- it's the audience which gets to determine who the most popular person is. Therefore, every person in that list is encouraged to get their audience to vote for them (and consequently send a flood of traffic to that platform). No one wants to rank as the least influential, so they promote the challenge like crazy and invite all their audience to vote for them.

Before long, they're well known by every influencer that matters. They have a strong brand name and a popular platform to build upon.

Sneaky stuff...

From 500 to 5,000

- **Latest Trends.** People in the industry love to know the latest trends. They love to feel a part of the latest trends. A simple way to get promotion for your community is to position it that way. You can work with journalists to achieve that.

You might, for example, issue a latest trends report using anecdotal, quantitative and qualitative data to justify your views. This report can be sent to journalists (who always crave to find out the latest trends first). Latest trends will usually be related to social or technological changes and their impact upon your community's sector or topic.

You can identify these by a change in what the community is discussing, a change of views as a result of polls you have conducted in your community or whatever surveys the community has identified as unique or special.

From 500 to 5,000

Newsworthy issues are usually those that are innovative, unexpected, tie into local events/news, reveal new trends or provoke a strong emotional reaction.

- **Doing Newsworthy Things.** The second approach to gaining publicity within a community is to do *newsworthy* things. Newsworthy issues are usually those that are innovative, unexpected, tie into local events/news, reveal new trends or provoke a strong emotional reaction.

Before we review each of these tactics, we must understand a key principle with regards to journalists. Journalists prefer to write stories that involve people. A community will be an unattractive story for journalists because it's too abstract. A story that features people within the community is likely to prove more popular. Fundamentally, people like to read about people. Therefore, it is important that all newsworthy things are presented through the perspective of individuals as much if not more than they are about the community.

Finally, the journalist is unlikely to stumble upon the story by chance. They need to be directly approached and informed about the story. They may need a phone call or e-mail.

From 500 to 5,000

- Journalists like to report on organizations or groups that are doing something new. If your community is tackling an old problem in a unique way, then it may be interesting for a journalist to report on the story.

Another possible channel of gaining coverage in newspapers is to do something unexpected. What do most people do or think about an issue? Can the community do this differently? This can be deliberately undertaken. It is also useful to refer back to the audience analysis to see how most people see or feel about an issue and approach this issue from the opposite side.

- **Issue Press Releases.** Arrghhh!!! Press releases!!! EVIL EVIL EVIL!!! You hypocrite, Rich. You lyin' cheatin' good-for-nothing hypocrite! You said press releases were evil. You lied to us. You lied, and I want my money back. Now!

From 500 to 5,000

It has to be an event that is unique, clever or innovative. It has to stand out from other events.

Hold on a minute! Let me explain myself. It's dumb to launch a press release to announce the launch of an online community. It sets misplaced expectations, and it can lead to a lot of members seeing the community before you're ready. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about issuing press releases on behalf of the community when the community has something cool to announce.

For example, you might launch a campaign on a particular issue and issue a press release for that. You might have reached a major milestone or achieved something fascinating and issue a release to tie in with that. These are all good expectation-lite reasons to issue a press release (although it's better just to call journalists instead).

- **Initiate and Promote Events.** This is easy. Initiate a major event. Promote the major event. It has to be an awesome event though. It has to be an event that is unique, clever or innovative. It has to stand out from other events. What would be a truly remarkable event in your sector? What has never been done before? Look to see what other events take place both online and offline that catch people's attention. Flick through the back pages of a magazine covering local events in your area.

From 500 to 5,000

Regular Events

Communities should have online events scheduled on a weekly and monthly basis. These events may include:

- **Webinars.** This is an interactive presentation in which the community manager, a member of the community or an expert on the community's topic matter delivers a presentation online and answers questions from community members. There is a variety of software for hosting such events. The most popular are GoToMeeting and WebEx.
- **Themed Discussion.** A community may, each week, join a live chat room to participate in a themed discussion. This discussion will have a set topic. This topic may have been determined in advance by the community manager or by the community at large through a vote or picked by one or more community members responsible for the discussion. It may also be rotational with different members guiding the discussion each day.

From 500 to 5,000

- **Weekly Interview.** Similar to the themed discussion, this is a weekly interview with a VIP in the community's sector. This VIP will be someone identified in the initial sector analysis. This will include people of power, fame, expertise and those with unique personalities. This list may include managing directors at relevant companies, skilled experts in the sector (such as those designing products or can do something unique within the community) or those that have a unique and interesting personality. This can be undertaken using a moderated live-chat or via soliciting questions from members in advance.
- **Competitions/Challenges.** The community may host a regular competition or challenge for members to participate in. This can be a quiz or a skill-based challenge. Some communities, for example, ask members to submit their favourite community-related stories or photos and nominate a winner each week. It might be possible for some communities to find sponsors to support these events with free products/vouchers for the winners.
- **Newcomer Orientation.** Once a month, a community may host a day to welcome new arrivals in the community. This can involve regular members introducing themselves, setting up some basics threads for newcomers to participate in and help teach members about the culture of the community. This even can increase the sense of community amongst existing members and help convert newcomers into regular members of the community.

From 500 to 5,000

This frequent activity builds a consistency of interactions between members and leads to trust, a key component of successful relationships within communities.

- **Promotional Days.** Many communities may also use promotional days as a way to provide access to sponsors and opportunities for community members. These promotional days might include price discounts on products/services, promotions from one member to another (by allowing a day a week for this, self-promotion on other days might be alleviated).

These are all regular events that can be held at frequent intervals. Different events will be suited to different audiences. Some will be looking for traditional entertainment while others will be looking for information and tips leading to self-improvement within their topic.

Regular events also encourage frequent activity within a community and build expectations from members to such regular interactions. This frequent activity builds a consistency of interactions between members and leads to trust, a key component of successful relationships within communities.

In addition to these short-interval online events, there is also a range of long-interval events that a community may embrace. These include those related to specific calendar dates such as:

From 500 to 5,000

- **Christmas.** Most communities can use Christmas to initiate activities relevant to their members. This might be calling upon members to participate in a *secret santa*, discussing the best Christmas gifts to get family members or co-writing a Christmas wish list for organizations in their sector.
- **Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving.** In addition to Christmas, a community may use dates throughout the calendar with a community twist. These should be related to the topic matter and be entertaining. This can range from theming the community site, initiating discussions, setting challenges or asking members to submit their ideas.
- **Birthdays and Anniversaries of Popular Figures.** Communities can celebrate the birthday of a popular figure or other dates of significance for their life. This might be some expected contribution from members, an award in the person's name given to a member etc..

From 500 to 5,000

- **Awards.** A community may host an annual awards ceremony for members. This may include a live channel announcing who wins each award (as voted by members).
- **Named days.** Communities of a certain age may show members recognition and contributions for outstanding contribution by naming days after members in the community. These should, for most communities, be weekdays when activity will be highest. This might involve allowing the member to contribute an opinion post and other members thanking the member for their outstanding contributions to the community.
- **Elections.** A community may host regular elections for key posts within the community. This encourages a high level of activity in the group and is a great technique for referrals. These elections should be held at regular intervals (6 to 12 months).

These infrequent regular events are ideally suited to communities that are two or more years old. The community manager should consult widely before hosting these events and ensure members are actively engaged in establishing these events.

From 500 to 5,000

These events are designed to celebrate community achievements, bring audiences together for a specific purpose or promote the community to external audiences.

Special Events

In addition to small to mid-sized regular events, communities should host special (irregular) events. These events are designed to celebrate community achievements, bring audiences together for a specific purpose or promote the community to external audiences.

- **Milestones.** The community should celebrate significant milestones achieved. This might be the community's 10-year anniversary, the 10,000th active member, 50,000 posts in a single month or the recognition of something happening such as changing something significant in the community eco-system.
- **Fundraising Days.** A community may host a fundraising day/week for a set cause. Fundraising has many benefits for a community. It puts action and a clear investment in the successful of a community. It creates a common goal that increases the sense of community and provides a sense of achievement (or even shared failure) that can significantly strengthen the community.

From 500 to 5,000

- **Broader Victories/Celebrations.** A community may celebrate something else of relevance in the eco-system. It might be the success of a VIP within the sector, a legal ruling in favour of their interests, the end of something bad happening within the community's ecosystem or the success of something good within the ecosystem.
- **Product-Launches.** A community might celebrate the launch of a new product or service within that category. This can including building anticipation of the product/service, speculation about possible features of the product/service, a live-blog leading up to the launch or initiating threads asking members to submit their views and thoughts on the topic. These threads will be sticky for the day/week.
- **Member Achievements.** The community may also celebrate the achievements of a member. This might be the release of a book authored by the member, the birth of a child, a marriage, the launch of a new company or anything the regular member takes a significant amount of pride in.
- **Hall of Fame Induction.** Some communities have introduced a hall of fame for individuals within their ecosystem. Have your members done something great recently? Induct them into your community's hall of fame.

From 500 to 5,000

- **Community Exclusives.** Another simple promotional strategy for a brand is to drip-release exclusive information into the community. This works better for product-related brands than service-related brands. For example, you might have staff release the latest tidbit of information through a forum post or a news post before it's announced anywhere else.

This has the fascinating impact of causing those interested in the ecosystem (and potentially some journalists) to join the community to get the latest news or risk being left behind. This works better when you genuinely do awesome things that people, you know, actually care about.

There's no point in announcing the appointment of your new director of corporate marketing through your community because, as much as I hate to tell you this, you members just won't care. They may even mock you for trying to get them to care.

- **Community Awards.** You mean we can have an awards ceremony within our community? Absolutely. It's a common promotional tactic. Many organizations that initially developed awards as a short-term promotional tactic have seen them evolve in to a powerful force within the community's ecosystem. For example, the Empire Magazine awards are a mighty force within the film industry – and your community can do the same for your industry.

From 500 to 5,000

- **Competition, Challenges and Incentives.** It is common for organizations to use competitions, challenges and incentives to grow the community. This typically involves offering rewards to people to join the community or to recruit other people to join.

A competition might offer a prize to people who joined the community within a set period of time or contributed something to the community during the period of the competition. Competitions are a bad strategy to grow a community. They attract individuals to join the community for a tangible benefit which, as we learned in the third lesson, will not convert newcomers into regular members. These members are unlikely to return and visit the community for a second time.

A challenge may be for existing members to refer their friends to join the community. Whoever manages to persuade the most people to join the community may receive a prize or recognition at some level. Again, this goal of achieving mass is to the detriment of quality. Those who are brought into the group through this channel are unlikely to participate and become regular members.

A common example would be to publish a free report or guide to the topic that people can download if they sign up to join the community. This is a mistake. This approach will attract a large number of registrations but very few participants to the community. Avoid competitions, challenges and other incentives which require people to complete a registration page. These can be great to get existing members more active, but are terrible for attracting newcomers.

From 5,000 to 50,000

*In the early stages, all the activity is down to you...
As you grow, much of this begins to take care of itself.*

As you might have guessed, the exact numbers are meaningless. This might be 1,000 members to 10,000 members or 8,000 to 80,000 members. The numbers will vary wildly by industry and type of community.

What matters is how well developed you feel your community is. That is what determines what stage in the process you should work from. In the early stages, all the activity is down to you. You start the discussions. You prompt people to participate. You create the content. You do the moderation. You invite people to join. You convert them into active members.

As you grow, much of this begins to take care of itself. The community starts the discussions, members reply to those discussions. You and your volunteers create the content about the community. Much of the growth comes through referrals. Your work shifts from these micro tasks to more macro tasks.

From 5,000 to 50,000

The community becomes a platform through which a number of smaller, successful communities thrive.

One of these macro tasks is the development of sub-groups within the community. As the community grows, you need to foster sub-groups within the community. To develop the sub-group, you should identify a topic, group of friends or a category to build a group around. These can be identified by their existing popularity within the community. For example, if you run a community about animals and there have been several very popular discussions about a specific animal welfare issue, a particular animal or a location, the community manager may create a group/category solely for those discussions.

Individuals interested in this discussion may then join the community to participate in the debate. Through participations in a smaller group, they will gradually develop relationships and feel a sense of influence within the community.

When you reach this phase (we call it *mitosis* in the community management industry after the way some biological cells split and multiply), you begin to focus on building these sub-groups as opposed to the community at large. The community becomes a platform through which a number of smaller, successful communities thrive.

Where It All Began

The secret to starting a successful community is to start small.

A few months ago I was asked on a podcast interview what is the one piece of advice I would give to an organization looking to start a community. I struggled to think of something at the time. How can you narrow everything down to a single piece of advice? There is so much that goes into developing a community, the blood, the sweat, the tears...

A week later, I was with a brand about to start their community, and everything was wrong. They wanted a big promotional push. They wanted 10,000 members in 3 months. They wanted to see measurable benefits within a matter of weeks. They were lining up a big competition to get people to register. Their philosophy was simple; they wanted to start big and get bigger.

I noticed a theme running through the advice. Use a simple platform to start with. Focus on getting your first 100 active members. Try to get 10 discussions going, not 1000 at once. All my advice concerned starting small, narrowing the focus, getting some quick wins and establishing momentum. In a flash I understood why most brands fail to build communities and most amateurs tend to succeed; brands start big, amateurs start small. The secret to starting a successful community is to start small.

Where It All Began

Building communities is important work.

Building communities is important work. I say that with all seriousness. You are building potentially life-long connections between people, creating friendships. You're giving people a group identity and social connection that they might be lacking in their everyday lives. You're building social capital that can be used to achieve really amazing things.

I completely reject that community building is a short-term exercise for organizations. I reject marketers trying to get the community to serve the brand, rather than attempting to get the brand to serve the community. I reject all selfish efforts to build a community. The work we do has long-lasting impacts. Building a community is a long-term project, not a short-term effort to manipulate a group of people to buy your stuff.

Yes, it really is important work. If you start small, put your community's interests before your own, and work really hard, you might just succeed.

Richard Millington

THE PROVEN PATH

by Richard Millington

About Richard Millington

Richard Millington is the founder of FeverBee Limited, a Community Consultancy dedicated to improving how organizations develop communities, as well as The Pillar Summit, the world's first course in Professional Community Management.

Richard has worked on dozens of successful community projects, and his client list is one of the most impressive in the industry. Clients include The United Nations, The Global Fund, BAE Systems, AMD, OECD, The RSPCA, Future Publishing and a variety of youth and entertainment brands.

Richard's blog, www.feverbee.com, is widely cited for introducing best practices in developing communities and is read by over 5000 community management specialists every day.

Richard graduated top of his class with a First Class bSc Honors degree from the University of Gloucestershire. He is married and lives in Notting Hill, London.

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THE PROVEN PATH

by Richard Millington

About the Pillar Summit

The Pillar Summit is an intensive community management course for Professional Community Managers. It is the first course dedicated to training community managers to build and manage communities for brands. The Pillar Summit Alumni includes community managers from Lego, Greenpeace, PatientsLikeMe, and Telligent.

The Pillar Summit brings proven academic theory, practical tactics and clear standards to the world of community management. It provides participants with a clear framework for developing their community and ensuring it's a success.

You can sign up for the Pillar Summit at: www.pillarsummit.com. Applications for the Autumn/Winter course close on September 31st.

eBook design by [Erika Buenaventura](#).