

**Excerpt**

# **Companies and Communities**

**Participating without being sleazy**

---

**Dawn M. Foster**

[fastwonderblog.com](http://fastwonderblog.com)



**Excerpt: Companies and Communities**

Participating without being sleazy

by

Dawn M. Foster

**© 2009 Fast Wonder LLC**

**All Rights Reserved**

**including the right to reproduce or redistribute this book**

Copies of the entire 80 page eBook can be purchased for \$19.99 at

<http://fastwonderblog.com/eBooks>

Published by Fast Wonder LLC

4110 SE Hawthorne #131

Portland, OR 97214

# Table of Contents

- Introduction\_\_\_\_\_ 5
  - Definitions.....5
  - Benefits of Community.....6
  - Building a Community is Like Hosting a Party.....7
- Guiding Principles\_\_\_\_\_ 9
  - Social Principles.....9
  - Participation.....11
- Blogs and Blogging\_\_\_\_\_ 15
  - Corporate Blogs are Important.....15
  - Strategy and Vision.....17
  - Making it Happen.....18
  - Content is King.....19
  - Communication Issues on Corporate Blogs.....20
  - Examples of Good Corporate Blogs.....22
  - Details are Critical.....23
  - Should Every Company Have a Blog?.....24
- Twitter\_\_\_\_\_ 26
  - How does it work?.....26
  - Best Practices.....28
  - Things to Avoid.....30
- Social Networks\_\_\_\_\_ 32
  - Facebook.....32
  - MySpace.....34
  - Niche Social Networks.....34
- Custom Corporate Communities\_\_\_\_\_ 36
  - Getting Started and Initial Planning.....36
  - Community Ownership.....39
  - Hosting On Domain or Off Domain.....40
  - Defining A Community Structure .....42
  - Maintaining a Successful Corporate Community.....46
  - Promoting Your Community Efforts the Right Way.....50

Community Management_____	52
Community Manager Role.....	52
Skills Required for Community Managers.....	55
Community Roles: Manager, Moderator, Administrator, and More.....	57
Hiring a Community Manager.....	59
Community Reporting Structures.....	60
Motivation for Participating.....	61
Advanced Topics_____	64
Monitoring Dashboards.....	64
Social Media Guidelines and Policies (Internal).....	69
Community Guidelines (External).....	71
Reputation Systems.....	72
Rewarding Community Members.....	74
Importance of Place and Context in Online Communities.....	75
Future of Corporate Communities_____	77
About the Author_____	79
Additional Resources_____	80
More content by Dawn M. Foster.....	80
Information about online communities from other sources.....	81
Find Dawn M. Foster on various social media sites.....	81
Feedback.....	81
Contact Information.....	81

## Introduction

While some companies struggle with how to participate in online communities and social media, other companies take to it naturally and create an online presence that is genuinely participative and community oriented. There are right and wrong ways to interact with any online community whether it takes the form of blog comments, discussion forums, wikis, social networking, or some other mechanism. It is worth taking the time to do some research and plan for how you want to approach your community activities. This book is designed for those companies who need a little help interacting with online communities. I hope it will help you get started in way that will be productive and engaging both for your company and your community.

### Definitions

I want to start with a couple of definitions of what I mean by a few of the terms used throughout this book. Most of these concepts are a bit nebulous, and each person seems to define them a little differently with conflicting ideas about what each really mean. As a result, these are not meant to be definitive industry definitions; they are simply guidelines and starting points to help people understand the basic concepts in the context of this book.

### Online Community

An online environment where a group of people with similar goals or interests share experiences and build relationships using web tools.

## **Social Networking**

Connecting with a community of people in your network through services like Facebook and Twitter with various methods of online interaction.

## **Social Media or New Media**

Online media like blogs, podcasts, videos, and news with a strong participatory element through comments, ratings, or other mechanisms. Social media is generated by the people and for the people with content created by anyone with a voice (average Joes, village idiots, respected journalists, CxOs, ...). I also consider online communities and social networking to be a subset of the broader topic of social media.

## **Benefits of Community**

There are many reasons for a company to have an online community, but I think that the benefits can be grouped into four primary benefits.

### **People**

Communities first & foremost are about the people. Having a community gives people a place to engage with your company. These people will talk about you and your products in blogs and other online forums whether you choose to participate or not, so giving people a place to talk about you can help you keep engaged with the conversations.

### **Product Innovation**

Communities provide a great forum for getting product feedback. It gives you a central place to ask questions about how people use your products. You also get to see first-hand what they complain about, what issues they have, and where they have questions about you or your products.

## **Evangelism**

Communities also help you grow evangelists for your products from outside of your company. These are the customers or users of your products that are passionate and deeply engaged with you. Interestingly enough, these people frequently come to your defense within the community when people say negative things about your company. They can also have exceptional feedback for you, so it is important to identify these people early and encourage them to get deeply engaged (often with some special community permissions). For Jivespace, I created a special “Friends of Jivespace” blog with top community members as authors.

## **Brand Loyalty**

Having a community can also help drive brand loyalty for your products. Giving people a place to engage with you can drive a tremendous amount of loyalty for your products.

## **Building a Community is Like Hosting a Party**

This analogy comes from Josh Bancroft, and it was such a great way to describe acceptable behavior in communities that I had to include it in this book. The idea is that as the host of a party (or a community), you provide the location, invite people to attend, encourage interesting conversations, and take care of any issues or unruly attendees. You would never try to tell people what they can talk about, kick them out of the party for offering a differing viewpoint, impose arbitrary and annoying rules, or spend the entire party talking only about yourself, yet for some reason certain people think this is an acceptable way to host a community. In other words, host your community the way you would host a party.

Josh describes the comparison from the perspective of companies who host the community or the party; however, the analogy applies equally to the people attending the party. Would you attend a party hosted by someone you dislike and spend the entire party talking about how much they suck? Would you go to a party and talk about how your house is so much better than their house? Would you spend the

evening lying to people? Would you spend all night talking about yourself without listening to any of the other participant? I'm going to guess that the answer to these questions is 'no' at least for most of us. You should not expect to participate in a community using these types of behaviors. Be a good host and a well behaved participant at parties and in communities. The guiding principles in the next section and other sections in this book will provide more information about what is and is not acceptable behavior within online communities whether you are hosting the community or participating as a member.



## **Custom Corporate Communities**

Corporate communities refer to any custom community created by an organization for the purpose of engaging with customers or other people who may be interested in the organization's products and services. For the purpose of this book, custom corporate communities include communities created by corporations, non-profit organizations, educational institutions and similar organizations. These corporate communities can take many different forms: support communities, developer communities to help developers work with your products, customer and enthusiast communities, and many others.

### **Getting Started and Initial Planning**

Before jumping in to create a new community, you should think carefully about the purpose of this new community including your goals and objectives, fitting your community efforts into your organization's overall strategy, measuring success, and committing the resources required to make your community flourish. Here are a few questions that can help you think through the process of planning for your new community:

#### **What is your overall strategy and how does the community fit with it?**

If your custom corporate community does not support the overall strategies of the organization, I give it about a 5% chance of being successful. Creating a new community can be a very large project with quite a bit of upfront work to create the community along with a large effort over the life of the community to manage and

maintain it. If this time and effort is spent in support of the overall corporate strategy, then it will be much easier to justify keeping the community during the next planning cycle for your organization. On the other hand, when a community is built to support goals that are not clearly aligned with the overall strategy, people will look at it as a big expense that can be cut, and your community will die a quick death if you are lucky or a horrible slow death by neglect if you aren't quite as fortunate.

Spend the time now to make sure that you can find a way to structure your community plans to support the overall strategy of your organization. If you can't find a good way to align your plans with the strategy, you should think twice about whether a corporate community is an appropriate solution for you right now.

### **What do you hope to accomplish and what are your goals for the community?**

Think very carefully about why you are creating a new community for your organization. Spend plenty of time upfront to clearly define the reasons for creating it and what you will accomplish by having the community. Think back the earlier section on the benefits of having a community. You might want to consider some or all of those benefits when you think about the goals for your community:

- **People:** gives people a place to engage with your company
- **Product Innovation:** get product feedback and ideas
- **Evangelism:** help you grow evangelists for your products from outside of your company
- **Brand Loyalty:** engagement can drive a tremendous amount of loyalty for your products

After you have a good grasp on what you hope to accomplish, you need to set some specific goals for the project. When you get into the platform selection process and design phase later in the project, having clear goals will help ensure that you build the right kind of community to achieve these goals.

## **Community Management**

An online community manager will provide ongoing facilitation / moderation, content creation, evangelism, and community evolution to take your community to the next stage. In this section, we'll talk about why community management is important for any organization and some bad things that can happen when you don't have a community manager (chaos, spam, war). You would never launch a product without someone in the product management position, and likewise, you should never launch a community without a community manager. Building a community is a big job, and it requires resources and coordination to grow a successful community. The community manager can be the person leading the charge to make sure that the community is getting the attention it deserves.

### **Community Manager Role**

Community managers frequently get asked this question, "What exactly do you do?" This question doesn't just come from friends and family; it also comes from customers, co-workers, and in the worst case from the management staff overseeing the community manager. Many community management tasks are behind the scenes and unpredictable, which can make it particularly difficult to understand exactly how community managers spend their days.

I see the online community manager role as having several key elements: ongoing facilitation, content creation, evangelism, community evolution, and monitoring. There are certainly many more tasks, but I suspect that 90% of the work falls into one of

these five very broad categories.

### **Ongoing Facilitation**

This is probably the activity that most people think of first. A community manager is an active participant within the community to answer questions, deal with trolls or other abuses, explain how things work, monitor the content closely, and much more. It also involves a lot of cat herding, since community managers frequently need to find ways to bring subject matter experts from around their company into the discussion to answer questions in an area where additional expertise is needed. It can also mean walking a very fine line between the community and the company by representing the company in community discussions and representing the needs of the community when working inside the company.

### **Content Creation**

In any community, content needs to stay fresh and current regardless of whether you are talking about code releases for developer communities or other informational content relevant to your community members. People will wander away from a community that looks stale or inactive. This includes making sure that questions get answered (also part of facilitation), blogging, audio / video podcasts, or any other forms of content. The community manager should never be the sole content creator in any community, so this also involves convincing and encouraging co-workers and other general community members to create content in their areas of expertise.

### **Evangelism**

Getting the word out about your community can take a number of forms depending on the type of community. In general this can be served by talking to people (customers and other interested parties), blogging, speaking at conferences, and being actively involved in related communities. The community manager should also be working closely with marketing to make sure that the community is being mentioned in other traditional marketing communications that are relevant to the types of people expected to join the community.

## **Community Evolution**

This may be the most overlooked area for many communities. A good community manager will be looking into the future to come up with ways that the community should be changing and evolving along with your products, your industry, community platform technologies, and more. Any community can become stale and lifeless without enough thought going into improvements that will continue to keep the community engaged. New focus areas, community features, group activities / events and more should be planned.

## **Monitoring**

While many discussions will take place in the community where you can easily find them and respond, the internet has many other places where people will talk about your company, community, products and more. Great community managers also monitor across many different sites to find and respond to conversations happening outside of the main community. See the section on monitoring dashboards for more details.

All of these items need to get an appropriate amount of attention, and you need to be careful not to put too much focus in any one portion of the community manager role. Responding to questions and writing an occasional blog post may not be enough if you want your community to flourish. Community management can be a tough job, but finding the right person to fill this role will help to ensure success in your community over the long term.

## Future of Corporate Communities

Corporate communities and social communities have frequently had very different ideas and norms for behavior; however, there have been some recent trends toward bringing the two closer together. As people increasingly use social networks for personal interactions, they are starting to expect to see similar features and functionality in their corporate communities.

Enterprise community platforms (SocialText, Clearspace and others) are starting to shift the focus more toward people with the addition of social networking, ad hoc groups, and conversation functionality leading the way. These features are just a couple of examples of how community software focused on the enterprise is incorporating the features that people have been using extensively in their personal online community interactions through sites like Facebook, Twitter, and more to connect with other people.

If you look at the early community software platforms and other early ways of building communities (mailing lists, etc.), the focus was on the data more than the person. Inside companies, the focus was similar. Companies had knowledge bases, document repositories, email and other ways for people to share data. Most of these applications made it easy to find data, but difficult to find out any real information about the people behind the data. Even some of the applications designed to help coworkers find other people within the company were often skill based, which made it easy to find someone with Java programming expertise but not the sort of information that tells you about the person behind the skill set.

I always talk about how communities are all about the people. This has always been an important concept, but it has been more true in social communities and less true in many corporate communities. Recently, I have been seeing a bigger trend toward companies and other organizations putting the focus on the people in corporate communities. The information is still important, but I like seeing this shift toward people. Knowing more about the person behind the data can help put the data into context. For example, information about venture capital investments coming from Dawn Foster would be less credible than information about venture capital from Guy Kawasaki.

Having the functionality to connect with other people in a corporate community, whether it is an internal company community or an external community focused on a company's products, helps us strengthen our connections with other people who share similar interests. This trend toward putting the focus on people is an important step in the right direction for corporate communities.

## About the Author

Dawn Foster is a [consultant](#), community manager, event organizer, blogger, podcaster, technology enthusiast and business professional. She provides consulting services for companies wanting to engage with online communities and has more than 13 years of experience in business and technology with expertise in strategic planning, management, market research, social media, blogging, podcasting, rss, community building, web 2.0, and open source software.

Dawn regularly blogs about online communities as the author of the [Fast Wonder Blog](#), and she blogs for [GigaOM's WebWorkerDaily](#). She is the community evangelist for [Shizzow](#), a co-founder of [Legion of Tech](#) and is an organizer for the Portland BarCamp and Ignite Portland events.

Dawn holds an MBA from Ashland University and a bachelor's degree in computer science from Kent State University. Previously, she worked at Intel, Jive Software, Compiere, and a Midwestern manufacturing company in positions ranging from Unix system administrator to market researcher to community manager to open source strategist.

You can read Dawn's [Fast Wonder Blog](#) to learn more about her ideas.



## Additional Resources

### More content by Dawn M. Foster

- [Fast Wonder Blog](#): Starting point for new readers with links to top posts.

### Presentations

- [Companies and Communities](#): Participating without being sleazy.
- [Online Communities](#): short and basic introduction to online communities
- [Online Communities and Marketing](#): comprehensive 40+ slides on how people in marketing can engage with online communities.
- [Open Source Communities](#): overview of how open source communities function
- [What Would Dr. Seuss Say about Online Communities](#): fun with online communities presented in Ignite style (slides with audio included in this link).
- [Online Community Manager: Yes, it's really a job](#): careers in community management.

## Information about online communities from other sources

- <http://www.web-strategist.com/blog>
- <http://www.onlinecommunityreport.com/>
- <http://conniebensen.com/blog>
- <http://www.communityguy.com>
- <http://www.feverbee.com/>

## Find Dawn M. Foster on various social media sites

- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [FriendFeed](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Delicious](#)
- [ClaimID](#)
- [Shizzow](#)
- [Upcoming](#)

## Feedback

I would love to hear your feedback about this book. Please let me know what you liked or didn't like, send suggestions for improvement, point out typos and more!

## Contact Information

The best way to contact Dawn M. Foster at Fast Wonder: [dawn@fastwonder.com](mailto:dawn@fastwonder.com)

Fast Wonder LLC  
4110 SE Hawthorne #131  
Portland, OR 97214  
503-702-7223