



# Building successful User Groups

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## Introduction

The way we work is changing. The way we interact with others is immensely important. Business is personal.

Communities and user groups offer a powerful means to improve our personal means of communication. This article explores some of the underlying principles that make them so effective.

## Overview:

Successful communities act as highly trusted networks with members willing to share contacts, knowledge and experiences. This enables communities to act as cost effective, high quality sources of information through knowledge transfer; one of the main aims being to raise the overall level of understanding and professionalism. Some communities permit overt sales and marketing activities, many do not. The “rules” of a community need to be clearly understood by all involved.

A user group is a community with a common interest in specific products and services. The benefits of a successful user group are considerable, both to the members of the group and to the profession or products with which it is associated. The more complex the profession or products the more important such a group is to the members.

Membership of a successful community provides an excellent vehicle for interaction and communication. The more senior the members are within their respective organisations, the better the opportunities for personal networking. Direct interaction is far more successful than e-mail or forum based communication.

## Building a successful community:

Success is not easy. There are principles we can follow that increase the probability of success. The most difficult problem is finding a core of good people who are committed to the goals and ethics of the community; who will work together and who will respect and trust each other. Those core people will use their own reputation and personal contacts to bring in members and speakers. Most groups usually form around one or two exceptional individuals who have the ability to attract and involve good people. It's a rare gift.

It is essential that the manufacturer actively participates within a manufacturer specific user group. Why? The creation of a successful community or user group is one of the most powerful and cost effective ways of maintaining a dialogue with the customer base. Access to a trusted user group enables the flow of critical information based on real experiences



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and provides the manufacturer with a friendly environment in which to trial new products and services.

Active communities and user groups often have a thriving social life. Throw the occasional party. It works well.

## **Trust:**

Members need to feel that they are part of a community which they can trust to behave in a predictable manner and which meets their needs. Any community must carefully select its members, and be capable of coping with those who do not meet the standards of ethics and behaviour expected.

Sharing membership of a successful community with someone else confers the ability to bypass the initial barriers when making contact. This is a combination of a sense of shared belonging and the feeling that members of a self-selected community can be trusted.

## **Leadership:**

The leadership are the public face of the community. The leadership have to behave with utmost integrity; be capable of leadership by example; display no self interest and have the personal qualities which encourage all members to communicate easily with them, to respect them and to trust them.

Any community is only as good as its leadership and thus the process by which the leadership is selected. In any community there is always a smaller active core and the leadership will generally come from that core group. Future core members and leaders need to be identified and encouraged, as do those who wish to help in other ways. The leadership cannot develop or move on without identifying and mentoring their successors. Succession planning is an essential part of any leader's responsibility.

It differs little from running a successful company or project, but in a community the leadership have no authority other than that which they have earned. There is no concept of seniority such as exists within an employment structure. Communities tend to take on a life of their own. The leadership role is not to control the community, but to support it and act as a trusted gateway between members, and between members and the outside world.

One must not confuse leadership with administration. Enabling a community or user group to work effectively requires good professional administrative services. This requires funding and it must be clear to the membership that they receive acceptable value for money in return. Transparency is essential.



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## **Ethics, values and goals:**

Communities and user groups generally come into existence because of a common set of interests, ideas and goals. Communities develop their own sense of ethics and behaviour. These will evolve over time and it is essential that the membership is aware of changes and is willing to accept them. The leadership must not become disconnected from the aims and objectives of the membership.

## **Sharing and helping:**

Communities and user groups will often attract those who aspire to excellence and who willingly contribute. These people will enable the community to expand by increasing its membership and its sphere of influence. The leadership and administration must match these standards for the community to become a recognised authority.

Do not ask what others can do for you; ask how you can best help them. Deliver to the best of your ability. You'll be surprised how much help flows back to you when you need it.

## **Conclusions:**

Creating a sense of community among a group of individuals with a common purpose can be an extraordinarily effective "route to market". Enabling a community to work well requires outstanding leadership combined with deep understanding of the dynamics and behaviour of the community. Really good communities can make a big difference to the field in which their members operate and can wield enormous power and influence. Being part of a good community can be a great deal of fun as well.

## **The Author:**

Colin Butcher is the founder of technology consulting company XDelta Limited. A council member of AICS. The regional chair of Topinterim, a member of the PCG, a member of Skillfair and former deputy-chair of the HP User Group (which follows a 15 year active association with DECUS).

Colin was a finalist in the BCS "IT Consultant of the Year 2003" for work in collaboration with Compaq (now HP) on a major air traffic monitoring system. He was presented with the John Wisniewski Spirit Award by HP OpenVMS Engineering in 2005 in recognition of the quality and value of his work over many years. He is a well-known presenter of educational seminars and author of articles for publication.