

SUE FIDLER LTD

e-consultancy for charities

First thoughts for online communities

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Before making the decision to build or create an online community space it is essential to work through a checklist. While simple and obvious the checklist can help save time, money and trouble by ensuring you are creating the right resource for your organisation.

First, who are you audience? Whether you want to create something for clients, supporters or volunteers; you need to have clearly identified who the tool is for.

Second, what do they want? There is no point building a community space or online tool if your audience don't want it. Identify what they are looking for rather than what you think they want. You can use your web stats, email click-throughs, even what questions you constantly get asked, all of which indicates what people find the most useful.

Third, what tools suit the audience? Do you want to provide a discussion forum or a one-to-one support? Is myspace appropriate or does it need to be closer to home? Do you have potential bloggers or would an image gallery be better? The tool needs to fit the purpose and the audience.

Finally you need to consider the creation, launch, management and moderation of the community. Can you find free tools to use and if so will your audience be happy using a different URL? Who is going to create or set up the tool? Do you need a professional design? Think about the benefits of having a community out in the public domain that others might find, compared to driving traffic to your site where you can control the message.

Once you have created the space, how are you going to promote it? Users need to be told it is there, so not only do you need to publicise it to existing contacts via web and email, you need to spread the word by seeding messages in other communities.

Do you have the resources to manage and moderate the site? Can you promote volunteer moderators or use staff resources. How heavy handed does your moderation need to be – how risk averse is your organisation?

Once you have worked through and answered these questions you should be able to both evaluate the real need for a community space and plan the implementation. People will only use something that gives them benefit. If they don't care enough about your topic they wont join your community.

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