

Web Crossing Community Design Guide

*Guidelines for creating and managing
your community*

Part 1: Overview

This Community Design Guide leads you through the following steps for creating your community:

- [*Creating a community vision*](#)—identify purpose, benefits, and audience, and quantify success and failure.
- [*Planning the community architecture*](#)—define what members will do within the community, how they will be attracted and retained, and how the community will evolve.
- [*Identifying the software features*](#)—identify the software features necessary to support the community.
- [*Defining hosting requirements*](#)—develop an overall code of conduct and host profile, and provide guidelines for successful hosting.
- [*Preparing for launch*](#)—prepare software, discussion space, and hosts; implement marketing and launch events; start topics and seed discussions.

Each of these tasks is described in more detail below.

Creating a community vision

A coherent community mission statement will guide decisions about the community.

The mission statement is based on a clear understanding of both what benefits the target audience derives from participating in the community, and what constitutes community success and failure from the client's perspective.

Creating a mission statement includes the following tasks:

- [*Identify community goals*](#)
- [*Quantify success*](#)
- [*Identify member demographics*](#)
- [*Identify member benefits*](#)
- [*Create community mission statement*](#)

Planning community architecture

The community architecture is built around what the members will be doing within the community, and how they will enter and grow within the community.

- [*Define member activities*](#)
- [*Define how members are brought in*](#)

- [*Define how members are retained*](#)
- [*Define how the community evolves*](#)

Identifying software requirements

Using the information from the [architecture plan](#), match the community needs to community software features and decide how to integrate the community into the site.

- [*Create a list of software requirements*](#)
- [*Define community/content relationship*](#)
- [*Define future software needs*](#)

Defining hosting requirements

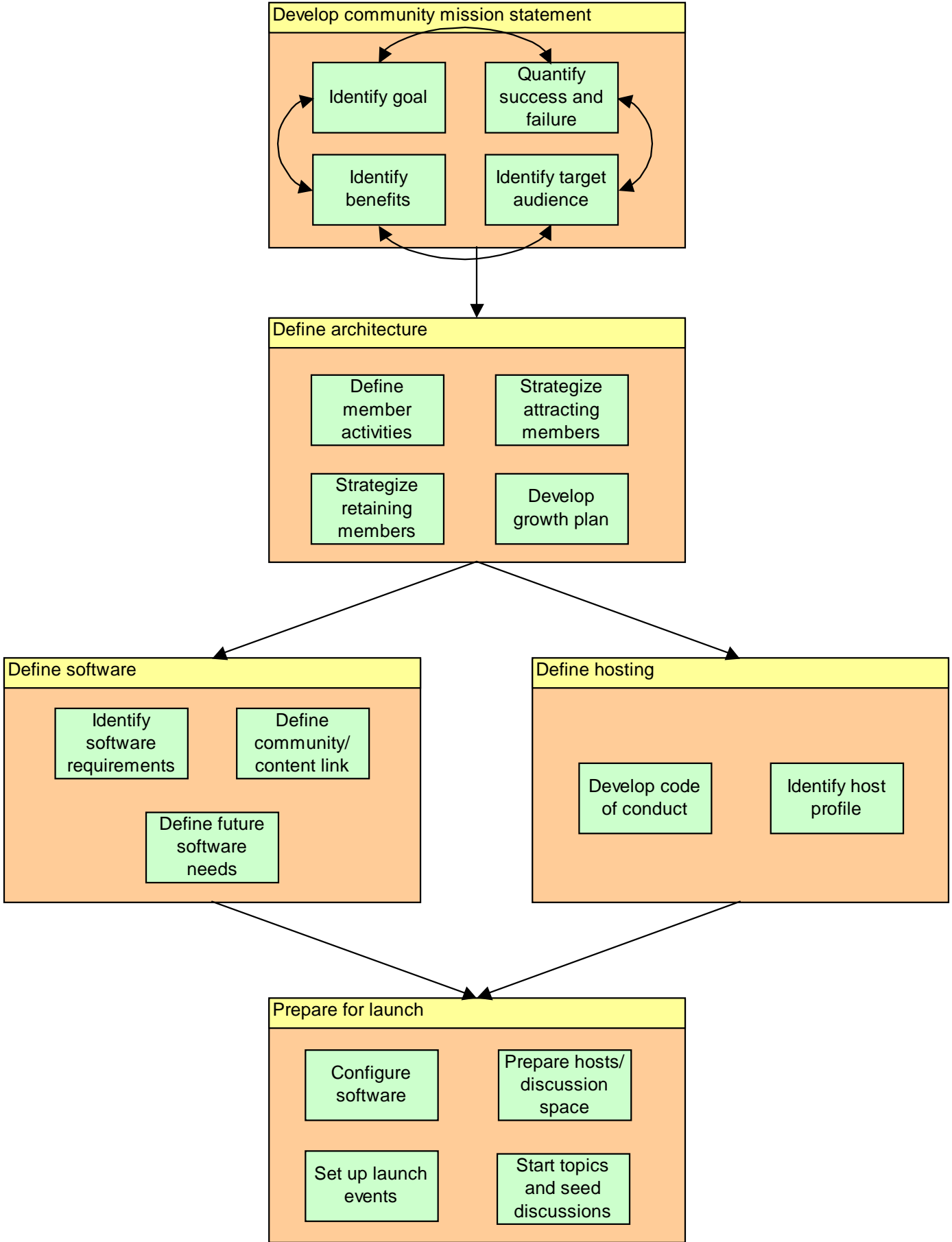
The hosting requirements set the tone for the community areas—what limits members operate within, what behaviors/attitudes/discussions are desirable, and how hosts interact with members.

- [*Develop a code of conduct*](#)
- [*Create host profile*](#)

Preparing for launch

Preparing for the launch brings all the previous steps together and creates a community that's ready for members.

- [*Configure Web Crossing software*](#)
- [*Prepare discussion areas*](#)
- [*Set up launch events*](#)
- [*Start topics and seed discussions*](#)



Part 2: Workbooks

Community Mission Workbook

*A workbook for working through the
community design guide*

Step 1: List your community goals

We are creating this online community to achieve the following goals:

- List goals here. These might include such things as increasing site readership, lessening support calls, increasing repeat visits, or creating member-generated content. Make certain to include some goals that can be measured.

Step 2: List how you will measure community success

We will measure success in the following ways:

Measurement	Current measurement (date)	Timeframe	Goal
<i>List measurement criteria here. This should include some way to measure the goals you listed above.</i>	<i>Enter current numbers here</i>	<i>Enter timeframe in which to achieve goal</i>	<i>Enter target numbers</i>

Step 3: Enter your member profile

The profile of our community members is as follows:

- Enter your general member profile here. Who are the people that visit your site summed up in a few key characteristics?

The following demographic information is available on our members:

- Enter any available demographic data on your members – where do they live, what is their yearly salary, what inspires them, where else can they be found. Any information you've been able to gather about your membership should appear here.

Step 4: List member benefits

Our members will receive the following benefits from participating in our community:

- List here any benefits your members will gain by participating in your community. What is it that will drive them to join your community, and what will make them stay.

Step 5: Write your community mission statement

Our community mission is:

Write a community mission that encompasses both your goals and the benefits your members receive, based on the preceding exercises.

Resources

Amy Jo Kim offers a terrific write-up on developing a community purpose [here](#).

Architecture Plan Workbook

*A workbook for working through the
community design guide*

The architecture plan flows from the mission statement and member benefits and helps to define the broad structure of the planned interactions.

Step 1: Define member activities

We will support the following member activities:

- Copy the [member benefits](#) you listed in your community vision, then specify all the activities they would engage in for this benefit. For example, if one of the member benefits were “Asking questions and sharing information” you might include the following specific activities below it: “Sharing resources; writing letters to the editor; asking general questions; evaluating site content; submitting articles; having casual conversation; and collaborating on shared problems.” Try to be as specific as possible when listing the activities members will engage in.

Step 2: Describe how you will attract members

We will attract members in the following ways:

- List here the ways in which you will attract new members. Remember to include both your direct efforts—such as staging an event with a clear focus—and the ways in which you will encourage your members to bring in participants.

Check [here](#) for more information on activities to attract members

Step 3: Describe how you will retain members

We will move our site readers into the community space using the following methods:

- List the methods you will use to move your site readers into the community space, such as highlighting community content on your web page or offering a reward to community members. But be realistic—only a very small percentage of readers will be interested in joining your community.

We will move our community members to active participation using the following methods:

- List the methods you will use to move your community members to active participation, such as sending email to new members or holding a monthly newcomer roundtable.

We will move our intermittent participants to regular participants using the following methods:

- List the methods you will use to move your intermittent participants to regular participants. This will mostly be through enabling your community members to grow into leadership roles.

Check [here](#) for more information on activities to retain members

Step 4: Describe how the community will evolve

We will foster community growth in the following ways:

- List here how you will foster community growth, not just in numbers but also in opportunities. For example, you might plan some online training sessions, or regular chats, or other online experiences that will add to your community. What will your community look like in 5 years?

Software Plan Workbook

*A workbook for working through the
community design guide*

Step 1: Create a list of software requirements

Based on our community architecture, we will need the following Web Crossing software features:

From the list below, delete those Web Crossing features you won't be using:

- Threaded discussions
- Linear discussions
- Real-time chat
- Moderated messages
- Guest logins
- Email access to message boards
- Support for participation via newsreader and WAP (wireless phone browser)

For more information on making these decisions, see our article on [making software choices](#).

In addition, we will include the following interactive features on our website:

From the list below, delete those interactive features you won't be using:

- Newsletter
- Polls
- Comments and evaluations
- Send this article to a friend
- Featured member

For more information on using interactive features on your site to bolster to your community, see our article on [encouraging interaction on your website](#).

Step 2: Define the relationship between the community and the site

We plan to link the community and the site in the following ways:

- List the ways in which you will link the community and the site. Some ideas might be highlighting interesting discussions on your main page, or starting a topic around a recent article.

For more information on the relationship between the community and the site, see our article on [content and community](#).

Step 3: Define your future software needs

Given the way we envision our community [evolving](#), our future software needs are:

- Look over your plans for your community's growth and map out what your future software needs may be.

Hosting Workbook

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Step 1: Developing a code of conduct

Our community will have the following code of conduct:

Enter your community's code of conduct here. Remember that it is important to set forth clear guidelines before inviting participants into your community. For a sample of community guidelines, check out Nancy White's compilation [here](#).

Step 2: Create a host profile

The ideal host for our community will have the following qualities and experience:

- List here the qualities and experience necessary for hosting your community. For some guidelines on choosing a host, check out our article on [choosing a host](#).

Launch Preparation Workbook

*A workbook for working through the
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Step 1: Configure software

We will configure the Web Crossing software in the following way:

- Using your [Software Plan Workbook](#), list the configuration settings you will enable in your Web Crossing space. For more information on configuring Web Crossing, see the [Sysop Admin Guide](#), the [QuickStart Guide](#), and the [Community Planning Guide](#).

Step 2: Prepare discussion areas

We will create the following discussion areas within our community:

- List the discussion areas you will create within your community. Be certain to create enough different discussion areas that you let different types of spaces develop, but not so many that you create a maze of unvisited areas. For more information on planning discussion areas, see our article on [folder and discussion structures](#).

Step 3: Set up launch events

We plan the following events for attracting new members to our community:

- List the events you plan to help attract members for the community launch, based on the ideas you listed in the [architecture plan](#).

Step 4: Start topics and seed discussions

We will creating and seed the following topics to jump-start the discussion:

- List the topics you'll create, and some interesting topic kickoffs. For more information on planning discussion areas, see our article on [folder and discussion structures](#).

Part 3: Further Reading

Attracting and Retaining Members

A resource for working through the community design guide

"A community is those people you keep running into over and over again."

Without regulars, there is no community. Drawing in and retaining those regulars is the most important job of any community owner. And it is a job that becomes more difficult as the net continues to grow and to fragment.

[David Woolley](#), President of [Thinkofit](#) (a virtual community consultant specializing in community software) summarizes the difficulty – "I think [building a community] is a lot harder than it used to be, mainly because there's so much competition for attention. It used to be, back in the 1980s that "If you build it, they will come." . . . Early on there weren't very many venues for online discussion, so if you opened one up, people who liked that kind of thing would flock to it. Now barriers to starting one of these things . . . well, there aren't any barriers. You just go to Yahoo or Excite and start up a "community" in five minutes. Actually getting attention for it is much harder because there's so much out there."

The stages of membership

Community membership is not an event, but a process, as potential members move from stranger -> passer-by -> lurker -> participant -> regular. Only a small percentage of people make the conversion from step to step, so it's important to hold on to as many as possible.

From stranger to passer-by

Key task: Make potential members aware of your community.

If you're starting a new community, focus on building content that will attract members and publicize that content.

Some other attractors include:

- Write a regular newsletter highlighting your site and community
- Stage events and advertise them on the major search engines
- Host regular chats and publicize them in advance

If you're hosting an existing community, the most successful marketing tool is your own members. To make the most of that potential:

- Encourage members to bring in interesting participants
- Make the invitation and acceptance process as simple as possible.

From passer-by to lurker

Key task: Move the passer-by into the community space. (But be realistic in your expectations -- only a very small percentage of the people who are interested in your site will visit the community areas.)

Here are some pointers to increase your chances of converting a web page visitor into a community entrant:

- Highlight community content on your web page.
- Create "small steps" for encouraging participation—posting regular survey questions with email or form answers on your web page.
- Make the signing-on process as simple as possible.
- Provide some reward to those who make the effort.

From lurker to participant

Key task: Transform a regular reader into a participant.

You can encourage this transformation by making the community as welcoming as possible. Here are some pointers:

- Send an email to new members within 24 hours of their membership. Welcome them, give them pointers on getting started, suggest topics where they might participate, and tell them about any interesting upcoming events.
- Make the discussion as permeable as possible. This means creating regular breaks in the discussion, through summaries or open questions, where a newcomer might sense a space for themselves.
- Provide a place where newcomers can experiment with the software.
- ALWAYS greet newcomers, and encourage other community members to welcome them.

From participant to regular

Key task: Encourage intermittent participants to check in, and participate, regularly.

While the community owner can largely manage the first three steps, this final step is wholly dependent on the entire community. People return to places where they find a group of people to talk to. If you do not have such a place, you will not be able to retain members. No effort on your part, no matter how great, will create a regular where there is no community.

This means that creating a community involves, in large part, knowing when and how to let go and allow the community to take ownership. This is an art form (much like the art of raising a child), but there are some general rules to follow:

- Just as you leave spaces in the conversation, leave spaces in the ownership. After a certain point, efficiency runs contrary to community. Find things you DON'T do well, and let your members know that you need help in those areas. And then expand the areas of your inefficiency (while carefully not allowing the community to fall apart.)
- Make certain your community software facilitates changes in membership. Can you hand over some (but not all) of the hosting tools? Can you allow members to take over certain content maintenance tasks?
- Facilitate members finding people to talk to through personal profiles, highlighting member interests, databases, searchable discussions, and so on.

According to Denham Grey, President of Grey Matter, a knowledge consultancy "It's no good being high up on a search engine. You really have to capture people's attention and commitment inside the community. That's what it's all about. You can bribe them in, but you don't keep them that way."

Making Software Choices

*A resource for working through the
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Deciding on threaded vs. linear discussions

There are two types of conversational flow supported by Web Crossing—linear and threaded. Linear conversations flow in a straight line. Someone creates a topic and all of the responses within that topic are added below that opening message in chronological order. Threaded software branches out from an initiating message. Responses are organized into branches depending on which message within the topic they're responding to.

There's an almost religious adherence to one type of conferencing software vs. the other. Actually, it's possible to build healthy communities using either type, although certain software favors certain kinds of conversations.

Here are some tips for deciding which type of software to choose:

Use threaded software if:

- You have a steady stream of newcomers looking for the answers to particular questions. Technical support forums and some distance learning applications benefit from threaded software.
- You want to emphasize one-to-one conversations over group conversations.
- You frequently need to locate a particular snippet of conversation.

Use linear software if:

- You have regular participants engaged in deep conversation.
- You want to emphasize group conversation over one-to-one conversation.
- You want to encourage free-flowing discussions.

Deciding whether to use real-time chats

While Web Crossing supports both chat and discussion, it's best to decide which will be the main home of the community.

Here are some tips for deciding which type of space to choose:

Use a chat space as your main community home if:

- You have someone available and online 24 hours a day or you have scheduled times when visitors know to expect you.
- You have an event-based community.
- You want to start new discussions regularly.
- You're willing to expend the extra effort it takes to market a chat-based community.
- You have experience in hosting chats.

Use a discussion space as your main community home if:

- You have an erratic online schedule.
- You have participants scattered across time zones all over the world.
- You want to develop a line of thought over days or weeks.
- You want past discussions to remain available for new participants.
- You have an idea-based community.

Encouraging Interaction on Your Website

*A resource for working through the
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Bootstrapping your community

Building an interactive website requires more than just slapping a discussion space on your site. Like any relationship, you need to encourage interactions in lots of different ways. This article describes how to use “community” features to build relationships even before you launch your community.

Step 1. Build a relationship

There just isn't time to build a relationship in the space between clicks. You need to step outside the confines of your web site to find that time, and the best way to do that is by launching a newsletter.

Step 2. Listen

Your visitors can't talk to you if you're not listening. Create "listening" places on your site by posting polls and surveys and opening up comment areas. Get people in the habit of talking to you.

Step 3. Start a conversation

Once your newsletter has an established set of readers, start a conversation within the newsletter format. Each time you send out your newsletter, ask your readers questions, and post their answers in the next newsletter. You might start by asking for simple opinions and tips, and then expand into a deeper discussion by asking open questions on hot topics. (I've posted some simple tips for identifying good topics here.)

Step 4. Turn your active posters into stars

Before you launch your community, you need "stars" for your community visitors to talk to-- people they recognize and whose opinion they value. You don't have to go out and hire expensive experts, though. You can do just as well by building the identities of people who regularly post to your newsletter. Once you've identified a few key participants, tap them to be experts in certain areas, have them field questions, and give them space on your site to talk about their area of expertise. In short, make them a star within your site, and get other people in the habit of talking to them.

Content and Community

A resource for working through the community design guide

Your community members need more than conversation to keep them bound together—they need the shared context, refocusing, and connection to the greater web that static content provides.

Uses of content

Interaction creates the core of community. Content can supplement that core by:

- Attracting new members with searchable pages that can be promoted on the web. If you host a community on cult films, for example, you might draw new members in by publishing a compendium of cult films, their actors, and directors.
- Orienting newcomers to the backstory and purpose of the community. Every community has stories to tell—creation myths, shared experiences, goals and beliefs. The more quickly and passionately you can impart that story, the better the chance that you'll draw in, and retain, the kinds of participants you're looking for.
- Answering frequently asked questions. These include tips on using the software as well as rules of conduct, and other tacit information.
- Broadening the base of discussions by bringing outside information and knowledge into the community, and providing a shared context for further discussions. It's easy to start repeating the same discussions, and particularly easy for members to become polarized around certain issues. You can help to span the divide by bringing in outside perspectives and opinions.
- Increasing member loyalty through member-generated content. Once you've gotten your community off the ground, increasing member content allows members to find their voice within the community, and to attract like-minded correspondents. It also creates a unique pool of information that is your communities' contribution to the greater net. According to Denham Grey, President of Grey Matter, a knowledge consultancy "I think it's all around member-to-member participation and engagement. And, I think the secret there is that you have to allow members sufficient freedom to design and build their own attractors."

Kinds of content

There are two general classes of content—content brought into the discussion, and content generated from the discussion. The former is important for bringing in and orienting new members, while the latter is important for binding existing members to the community.

Outside resources brought into the discussion

- **Links to external content:** Every community exists within a greater context of outside influences, shared beliefs, significant events, and useful resources. Just as the surrounding geography defines a physical community, a well-maintained library of links can define a space, reinforce shared beliefs, and help to get participants on the same page.
- **Internal resources:** Internal resources are those developed and maintained within the community that provide the backstory and ongoing context of the discussions. These can be posted on web pages or brought into the discussion, and include:

Text: Articles, white papers, mission statements.

Pictures: Diagrams, photos

Multimedia: Audio interviews and greetings, video clips

Database: Searchable lists

Shared documents: Any material that community members are working on together.

Content created out of conversation

Content created from conversation is especially important for increasing the sense of community and loyalty among community members. This content includes:

- **Summaries:** Summaries of ongoing discussions provide a chance to refocus and look at the discussions in a fresh way. They also allow an accessible history to newcomers.
- **Transcripts:** Transcripts from chats and discussions allow those not present to catch up on events.
- **Polls and surveys:** Polls and surveys help to codify opinions and provide a basis for consensus and understanding.

Tips for generating and maintaining content

- Content, like conversation, is best when owned by the community. Encourage community members to add their own links to the link library, and organize these links at least once a month.
- Verify all your links at least once a month.

- Change your static content frequently.
- Encourage members to build, and link to, their own web pages.
- When linking to external content, make certain that you don't leave your web page banners around someone else's material.

Choosing a Host

A resource for working through the community design guide

You're building a community and looking to identify someone to host it or see if you can host it yourself. Here are some general requirements for identifying a good community host:

- Communities are emotionally demanding. You want a host who is able to deal with anyone who enters the community without creating flare-up and problems. This requires a calm, firm, gentle hand and a mixture of warmth and resiliency. Imagine you have to leave this person alone with your children and you'll have a pretty good handle on the set of characteristics you're looking for. This is probably the most important trait, and one at which people are notoriously bad at self-assessing.
- No matter who hosts your community, they're going to occasionally get flak simply because they're a host. A good host won't take it personally.
- A successful community will require lots of personal attention at the start and then eventually become too big to manage. The host has to have both a strong nurturing ability, and the wisdom to know when to stop nurturing and hand control over to the leaders who arise within the community. What you want to avoid is someone who likes to manage every detail of a project—these people will not give over control gracefully, and will eventually crush the life out of the community. Instead, you want someone who can oversee lots of different things, without feeling the need to directly control any of it. When talking to references, you might probe how they managed projects in the past.
- Communities grow in ideas. A good host is interested in new ideas, receptive to different opinions, and can help organize information in a way that promotes new learning. Flexibility in thinking, and active seeking of new ideas and knowledge, is imperative. Also, an ability to organize materials is helpful.
- The host should have a good handle on the subject area. Someone who has gone through the same experiences as their members is liable to have a better ability to guide a discussion.
- A host should be able to think out loud in writing. You're looking for a kind of openness with information and knowledge, and a lack of fear about looking foolish when thinking out loud.

Folder and Discussion Structures

A resource for working through the community design guide

Purpose drives structure

"A community by women, for women, about women."

"A place for my family to keep in touch."

"Somewhere for my business workgroup to share files and ideas."

"A place for people in my organization to keep contact between meetings."

If your purpose to create a large public chat community like [Talk City](#) you'll have entirely different goals than someone who creates a small private community for their relatives to keep in touch. And different goals mean different tools and procedures, and a different structure for your communications.

The key is your target audience. Who are they? How many of them are there, and what kind of traffic do you anticipate through your site? What kind of internet access will they have? What browser and operating system will they be likely to be using? What do they like to do? Will you have a need to host large, synchronous events (many people online at your site at the same time), or is the asynchronous mode of conferencing (people come online and read at their leisure) more what you need, perhaps because of geographic or time-zone issues?

Asking - and answering - these kinds of questions which will help you decide your structure.

Growing organically

Except in very rare instances, your community is going to start small and build larger. Overbuilding your community space is much like buying a fifteen-bedroom mansion when you have no children. You just don't need that much space, and the rooms will get musty from disuse. A visitor could come in, wander around for half an hour, and never stumble onto any of the people who live there. If, at some future date, you were to invite your whole extended family to live with you there, those fifteen bedrooms would start to look lived in.

The same thing is true of VCs. Plan to start small, and build as you grow. You don't need more than one chat room to begin with, and you may not need one at all until your community is better-established. If your goals are modest, you probably don't need more than one folder. Within that, you'll start a few discussions that will interest and intrigue your target audience.

Not too many, because too many discussions is nearly as bad as creating 5 or 6 empty folders. A good rule of thumb is to begin with one folder containing perhaps 8 to a dozen discussions. No more, unless your situation is very unusual.

For example: If you have a community of gardeners, you might be tempted to start a whole folder called "Perennials" and another called "Annuals." You choose a dozen common perennials and name discussions after them. You do the same in the annuals folder. Neither folder gets many posts, just one here, and one there, and no real conversations - and you wonder why nobody's interested in annuals and perennials.

There's a better way. Create one folder for your whole community. Have just one discussion called Perennials and another called Annuals, in with a few others. Anybody who has anything at all to say about perennials will do so in your Perennials discussions. Dialogue and conversations will ensue. When, after a few months, your Perennials discussion is threatening to burst at the seams, you can consider breaking out a number of different Perennials discussions. And the breakdown may not be as you envisioned first, either. Maybe division by names of plants isn't the way to go. Maybe there's a more logical way that is becoming evident as you read your members' posts. Maybe southern perennials, northern perennials. Maybe perennial reproduction, and perennial pests. The point is that your expansion should be organic - no pun intended - according to what your community shows you it wants and needs.

Conferencing structure - start with the basics

Flexibility aside, there are certain basics that you'll want for any conferencing area. As your community grows, you'll find that a certain crowd of your users tends to hang out in one area, and another crowd hangs out in another. It's almost like having two sub-communities sometimes. Like churches which have more than one Sunday service. The "early service" people may or may not even recognize the "late service" people.

As a result, you want to have a consistent structure within each conferencing area, and include such discussions as Introductions (where new people can stop in and introduce themselves and be welcomed); Help (where people who are lost and confused can ask for directions); Announcements (where you can let everyone know about important events in a read-only discussion). If you include these three discussions in every conferencing area within your community, people won't miss anything and will know where to go for help.

Adding discussions of interest

If you're going to start with 8 to 12 initial discussions, and you've already used up three of those with Intros, Help, and Announcements, you're left with creating 5 to 9 discussions of interest to your target audience.

How do you create items of interest? Ask yourself what you would be interested in talking about. Visit other similar communities and see what the "hot" discussion discussions are. Ask potential community-members to help you brainstorm on possible discussions.

Don't be surprised, though, if it you don't come up with winners every time. Sometimes discussions you were sure would be duds turn out to have great discussions. Sometimes it depends a great deal on luck - who shows up to catalyze the discussion at just the right time. Sometimes it's due to hosting skills (or lack thereof.) Don't be afraid to try something different if your initial discussion choices don't fly.

Organizing and growing a larger area

Your purpose is defined. Your target audience is clear in your mind, and you have an intimate connection with what makes them tick and what interests them. You've created one conferencing area with the three basic discussions and you've thought up another half dozen discussions designed to wow your audience and draw in their attention. Then what?

Once your community has grown past the "one folder with a dozen discussions" stage, there are various ways to organize your material.

The [IBM chess match](#) organized chronologically: one folder for each new match. CNN's forums organize around late-breaking news as fodder for discussion. The "old" Electric Minds provided articles for users to comment on and had the authors there to facilitate discussions. Other groups may cluster around language groups or geographic concerns. You can add chat rooms, newsletter groups, or other community activities in the same kind of structural clusters.

The basic points, as we've said, are to start small and grow organically, taking the community's needs into account. If you do that, you can be creative about how you organize once you grow a little.