

THE STORY OF A ROUNDTABLE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

There once was a group who wanted to make a difference in the world with their particular capabilities. They came from all over the world, but their common ideals overcame the barriers of language and culture. They acknowledged they could only engage in face-to-face interaction a small percentage of time, due to time and travel constraints, so they decided to design themselves as a “virtual community” in order to accomplish their quest.

They declared that the aim of their virtual community was to enable every member to share information and engage in other forms of exchange with others so that all could extract ever more value from their interactions, both for their own personal benefit (in meeting their social and learning needs as people) as well as making them more effective in their contribution to the collective quest.

The group set out to learn what would make them a successful virtual community; they decided to measure success in terms of the innovations in their community of practice, which they produced or implemented collectively. They discovered the following principles of design for a virtual community:

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN FOR A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY (Hagel & Armstrong¹)

1. Virtual communities must be designed for a **distinctive focus** (e.g. geographical area, topical area, expertise area, etc.) to both help potential members to readily understand what kind of resources they are likely to find in the community as well as to let those organizing the community to determine the full range of resources required to meet members’ needs.

They asked themselves what is our Roundtable’s distinctive focus?

2. Virtual communities must have the **capacity to integrate content and communications**. This meant they could not just deliver content one way to a target audience, which offers little opportunity for the audience to interact; nor could they just be a communication network, with no ability to capture, store, and retrieve content to create new value. Virtual communities harness the unique capabilities by providing environments in which communication and content are not only available but also tightly integrated. Thus, individuals can come together electronically (on bulletin boards to post messages accessible to all or in chat rooms where real-time “conversations” are conducted or through email to clarify understanding and evaluate credibility of content with others) and retrieve content relevant to their discussion from previous postings.

They asked themselves how could our Roundtable develop this capacity?

¹ Adapted by Carolyn A. Ordowich, STS Associates, Inc. from (1) NET GAIN – Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities by John Hagel III & Arthur G. Armstrong, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 1997 & (2) PLACE TO SPACE – Migrating To eBusiness Models by Peter Weill & Michael R. Vitale, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2001.

3. Virtual communities must **appreciate member-generated content**. This is the single most empowering element of the virtual community. The virtual environment provides the vehicle for the generation and dissemination of member-generated content, which allows members to compare and aggregate their experiences and understanding, which in turn creates value for them, i.e. a fuller range of information, deeper knowledge, and a higher level of consciousness with which they can fulfill the collective quest.

They asked themselves how could the Roundtable manage the content so it would result in the highest value to its members?

4. Virtual communities must design for **access to the broadest range of high-quality resources possible** to be “on line”.

They asked themselves how could the Roundtable attain the highest level of diversity in its community?

5. Virtual communities must design for **achieving the purpose of the community**. The virtual community is a vehicle, which can augment the potential of its members by providing them with valuable resources and engaging environments in which to connect with other people. This will enhance each individual’s impact as well as the collective impact. The true value created is trust and real insight. In order to deliver this value, the virtual community must aggregate members, aggregate resources relevant to members, and aggregate information about the collective memory of the community.

They asked themselves how could the Roundtable carry out these tasks of aggregation of members, resources and information?

6. Virtual communities must design to meet the following **four needs of members**:
 - **INTEREST**: the need to connect with others who share your interests with a passion
 - **RELATIONSHIP**: need to interact with others who have had similar personal and/or emotional experiences, in order to form meaningful personal relationships
 - **FANTASY**: the need to explore new worlds in a fun and risk-free way; the freedom to try out new values and principles and observe their impact without harm to others.
 - **TRANSACTION**: the need for fair exchange with others of information, ideas, knowledge, etc.

They asked themselves does the Roundtable understand its member’s specific needs with respect to these categories?

7. Virtual communities must design a **compelling environment to draw in new members to keep renewing themselves**.

They asked themselves what environment would be compelling for Roundtable Members?

8. Virtual communities must provide a **rich array of means** (host electronic and face-to-face events) for members to connect with each other in convenient ways.

They asked themselves what could the Roundtable design as a rich array of means?

They reflected on the above questions and gave thoughtful answers. Then, they realized that what they had described was more than just a technology link or a series of events. What they had created had value. They had designed a connectivity, which had value to them, so they felt the need to invest in properly supporting their design with technology and people resources. In order to do this, they needed to think about how to acquire the financial resources to accomplish this. They recognized they had three primary means for doing this:

- Subscription fees, which are a fixed monthly charge for participating in the virtual community
- Usage fees, which are charges based on the number of hours of usage or the number of pages accessed or a combination of both
- Member fees, which are fees charged for downloading specific information or for specialized services

They agreed on a fair formula, which would reimburse those organizing the community while also being fair to those benefiting from it. Now they were ready to design the processes and roles to support this.

DESIGN OF THE ROUNDTABLE COMMUNITY

CORE PROCESSES

The design of the Roundtable virtual community described three core processes - member acquisition, content maintenance, and hosting exchanges and interactions among members. Two support processes also were defined – technology support and information gathering support.

The purpose of the first core process, **member acquisition**, was to focus on attracting members by marketing, providing attractive access and layout of content and free trial memberships. Members would come if they (1) understood clearly what the community is about; (2) understood the obligations of membership; (3) had a sense of personal connection; and (4) felt the benefits were worth the membership.

The purpose of the second core process, **content maintenance**, was to promote participation in the community by engaging members in generating their own meaningful content, by valuing the content through using it to spur further conversation, by using the content in editorials or linking it to published content, and by bringing in guest speakers to comment and dialogue with members regarding their contributions.

The purpose of the third process, **hosting exchanges and interactions among members** was to stimulate loyalty by innovating and customizing these interactions among members. The

sustainability of a virtual community results from offering an attractive mix of information, communication, and interaction, as well as updating the features of the community site as technology evolves.

The Roundtable members realized they had to take active steps to make their vision a reality and to maintain its existence over time. They also realized these steps would not occur on their own and that organizational roles and special skills were required to build their community. They knew that at this point in their evolution, they could not afford these roles, nor were they sure to find volunteers to fill them. They also had discovered through their learning phase that these roles were new, as virtual communities are new, so that it would be difficult to find examples of these roles in action. They reviewed the set of roles that follow and made a decision to create a few key roles to get the Roundtable Virtual Community 'organization' started.

ROUNDTABLE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ROLES

1. **COMMUNITY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:** overall responsibility for running a community
 - Skills: creativity, flexibility and rigorous coordination
 - Feel for the community members
 - Instinct for drawing talent to the community
 - Strong sense of timing – know when to intervene and when to let things take their course
 - Grow and organize the community
2. **COMMUNITY MARKETING MANAGER:** responsibility for reaching out to potential members
 - Develops messages to attract potential members
 - Leverages current member information profiles to identify selling points
 - Communicates messages through free PR and stimulating word of mouth
 - Promotes through associations
3. **COMMUNITY HOSTS:** stimulate usage of a community by its members; often staffed by volunteers
 - Responsible for managing member-generated content, which includes bulletin boards, chat areas, and real-time and on-line events.
 - Provide editorial control so that no unsuitable material is posted
 - Seeding with interesting questions or ideas
 - Ensure high quality of conversation and member interactions
 - Identify what content to keep for archivist
4. **COMMUNITY EXECUTIVE MODERATOR:** responsible for setting and implementing policy on editorial control
 - Searching for new ideas to improve the quality of member interaction
 - Closest to the pulse of the community 's members, therefore responsible for growth and weeding
 - Creating policy regarding:
 - What will the community not allow to appear?

- How can it respect both freedom of speech and feelings of members as a whole?
5. ARCHIVIST: responsible to build up the library of member-generated content
 - Skills: adept at handling information and current in systems and software technology
 - Develop processes for reviewing the output of the bulletin boards and chat areas, deciding what to weed out and what to keep
 - Ensures storage is done in an accessible way
 - Processes vast quantities of information and passes appropriate pieces on to live commentators
 - Sifts through all member-generated content, identifying pieces of interest, marking them, and filing them electronically.
 - Indexes information
 6. COMMUNITY EDITOR: responsible for the community's nonmember content, that is, content published by external sources or created by the community organizer
 - Understands members' needs for information
 - Matches members' needs with relevant sources of information
 - Negotiate with external providers of content
 - Oversees the development of in-house content
 - Decides what types of content is generated by the community versus external sourcing
 7. CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER: responsible for quick response to questions
 - Handles a variety of questions from users from computer beginners to those questioning level of service
 8. INFORMATION SYSTEMS MANAGER: responsible to ensure that the community has adequate server capacity to store all the community's content
 - Ensure adequate transmission capacity
 - Ensure security of data flows
 - Design, with the archivist, the system that allows access to archived member-generated content
 - Skills: high level of IT expertise
 9. COMMUNITY DEVELOPER: responsible for establishing new subcommunities or services (often doubled with other roles such as architect)
 - Skills: project management
 - Enable innovation
 - Works with all other roles to understand what subcommunities need to be seeded and fed and then get it done
 10. COMMUNITY ARCHITECT: optimizes a community's structure and design
 - Skills: software development
 - Focus is on how to balance the desire to meet members' needs and be innovative with the need to make sure each chat area and bulletin board has a critical mass of member interest

- With the editor and content developers, works on how to improve the user's interface and menu structure (sequence of steps a member has to take to reach a desired destination)
- Decides with editor on the balance between the community's ratio of published versus member-generated content

11. INFORMATION ANALYSTS: responsible for managing member profiles

- Analyze members' patterns of behavior to deduce what is important to members, what is not, and what can be improved
- Produce tracking reports and regular feedback to organizers
- Storage and mechanical processing of data and synthesis into a report
- Defines requirements for the information architecture – what information should be captured, in what format, and how it should be stored
- Spot implications from consistent patterns in members profiles

12. COMMUNITY MERCHANDISER: responsible for meeting the transactional needs of the community's members

- Ensures the providers of goods and services desired by members are encouraged to participate in the community
- Maximizes value of what is offered

The Roundtable members agreed the following four roles were necessary for building long-term value to members and growth of the community:

1. Community Executive Producer, which they called the Community Organizer, whose role is to guide the community up the growth curve by facilitating the setting of strategic objectives and keeping the purpose clearly focused on members' interests and relationships with one another.
2. Community Marketer whose role is to interest people in the community and build membership of a diverse base.
3. Community Hosts whose role is to create a stimulating environment that makes people want to return to the community and become involved.
4. Community Moderator/Archivist whose role is to improve the community's environment for members' interactions by identifying the value in member-generated content and filing it for easy extraction.

The community found a number of volunteers to fill these roles initially, but knew they would have to creatively recruit members who could fill these positions in the long run. Someone had the bright idea that students in their discipline might find this a very useful learning vehicle and therefore volunteer to be hosts or moderator/archivists. This would also deal with the community's concern about bringing in new, young blood.

THE HISTORY OF THE ROUNDTABLE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

The Roundtable, in its early stages, looked like a virtual village. It was small and highly fragmented because of its limited resources and ability to clearly differentiate subcommunities. Its members were still not fully committed, and therefore their willingness to contribute to the accumulation of information residing in the community was low. But in a short period of time, members were communicating directly with one another via email, bulletin boards, online chat rooms, and through Web-based conferencing and other computer-based media. The roles of producer, marketer, host and archivist greatly enabled this.

Over time, this ‘organization’ learned to pay its own way by offering its members advertising and links (e.g. to Amazon.com) on its homepage that provided income to sustain these roles for the Roundtable. The community felt this was as far as it wanted to go in terms of economic transactions, although it knew other community sites were paid for clickthroughs to advertisers’ sites or received a flat fee or percentage commission for sales made to community members. It very much wanted to protect the privacy of individual members and felt that these transactions might require it to provide suppliers with information about the size and general demographics of its member base, which it did not want to reveal. But it stood fast to having links to *useful information* because those (and *revenue generation*) are *characteristics that distinguish a virtual community from an electronic mailing list* setup by a community of interest. The former is characterized, for example, by Fishing.com which offers up-to-the minute fishing reports and a database of seven thousand patterns for flies, as well as providing a place for free email and access to discount bookstore featuring fish-related titles. While the latter is represented by chess players who with the electronic mailing list now have a place to connect with others with the same interest. At first, the Roundtable wasn’t clear about its identity – *was it simply an electronic mailing list or was it really a virtual community?*

This identity confusion created a struggle within the small community between those who ‘visited’ or as some put it, ‘lurked’ and those who were actively conversing with others. The connotation of ‘mooching from others in the community’ probably did more to discourage membership than encourage it. But the Roundtable learned that successful virtual communities encourage ‘visitors’ to become members by granting privileges not given to casual visitors, such as allowing anyone to read the messages posted on the community site, but only allowing members to respond to the messages. It investigated how some communities allow members to select favorite message boards and to customize the presentation from those message boards, while others have sections accessible only to registered members. In their own creative way, the Roundtable resolved this confusion and developed even further.

Since it is the interaction between members that creates value for this community, the Roundtable ‘organization’ devised a system by which they could capture the value these interactions had for the community so they could also use them for marketing the community and for archiving innovations in this community of practice. Finding and retaining a critical mass of members is an ongoing process in this community, as they know it is one of the critical success factors.

The Roundtable virtual community originally developed a simple set of rules ('netiquette') about the rights, responsibilities and behavior of its members such as (1) Please keep posts relevant to the topic at hand; and (2) No Advertising – this will result in your being banned from the entire site. It managed these rules through peer enforcement. This low involvement in community governance reflected the tentative nature of the investment at the start. As the community became more valuable, its members requested a higher degree of governance by its chosen 'organization' because all members were making a higher level of investment of time and energy in the community and wanted to protect that and especially to protect the community from the risks of inappropriate use.

Over time, members started to develop core communities around topics of interest. Finally, the Roundtable was building and maintaining loyalty with an appropriate mix of content and features – offering some general information to a broad segment and creating sub communities for narrower segments. These core communities eventually felt secure enough to spin off niche topic communities who, nevertheless, were dependent on the core communities for information about events and exchanges of common interest. The core communities became concentrated constellations (each with its own content, tools and message boards) who could offer more to these distinctive communities than any one core or niche community could offer to its members on its own. It did this by integrating the offerings and member-generated content of all members in a common directory and search facility. This created a much broader range of offerings and the opportunity to establish a broader network of personal relationships, all the while maintaining privacy and security for member information. Thus, the Roundtable benefited from the network effect, which meant the community was becoming progressively more valuable as it grew. The community had a real challenge in understanding the value members attached to their needs, but once overcome, the community knew it had sustainability.

The Roundtable is now a very robust virtual community and ready to form coalitions with those beyond its original discipline because of the feeling of trust in the community by its members. This is greatly appreciated by the members as they now feel their true purpose, making a difference in the world, can be realized. The 'coalition' would not have common indexed information systems, but it could provide interaction with others outside its boundaries. The Roundtable virtual community continues to thrive and is a highly respected virtual community. Its founders are very proud of their initial design.²

² As an STS colleague, I wrote this as my contribution to stimulate the discussion of the future of the STS Roundtable. I hope you find it helpful. I welcome any comments to carolord@aol.com.