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# AUDIENCE-SPECIFIC ONLINE COMMUNITY DESIGN

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**C**OMMUNITY IS NO LONGER DEFINED AS A PHYSICAL PLACE, BUT AS A SET OF RELATIONSHIPS WHERE PEOPLE INTERACT SOCIALLY FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT. ONLINE COMMUNITY IS A SOCIAL NETWORK THAT USES COMPUTER SUPPORT AS THE BASIS OF COMMUNICATION AMONG MEMBERS INSTEAD OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION [5]. THESE VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS MAY BE USED FOR EMPATHETIC SUPPORT, BUT ARE MORE OFTEN USED FOR COMMON INTEREST INFORMATION SHARING AND PROBLEM SOLVING. THESE NETWORKS ARE CHARACTERISTICALLY EASY TO ENTER AND LEAVE, NON-EXCLUSIVE, AND HAVE HETEROGENEOUS MEMBERSHIP. COMMERCIAL, NONPROFIT, AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS HAVE OPPORTUNISTICALLY VIEWED THESE ONLINE COMMUNITIES AS INEXPENSIVE MECHANISMS FOR DEVELOPING CUSTOMER AND DONOR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF INCREASING REVENUES [2].

However, it is erroneous to assume people will automatically participate in online communities. In the real world, members share common interests and the intent to interact with each other for mutual benefit. Members of an audience may have common interests or needs, but have little or no

intention of establishing a social network to share them. Such audiences may have identifiable demographic and psychodemographic characteristics. For example, a study of online community needs for mid-life career changers, age 35

**NOT ALL PEOPLE ARE EASILY DRAWN TO THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY. RESEARCH INDICATES PEOPLE OF A CERTAIN AGE AND LIFESTYLE ARE INDEED RELUCTANT TO INTERACT ONLINE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.**

and older, found they are reluctant to interact online with people they have not met face-to-face [1]. The study subjects are avid Internet users for information gathering and communicating via email with people they know. However, they prefer and are satisfied with meeting people face-to-face to establish and maintain supportive relationships. They have strong feelings of distrust, concerns about privacy, and question the appropriateness of the Internet as a medium to establish community relationships. When trust is not an issue, other factors influence their willingness to participate (for example, a dislike of the online community structure, a lack of appro-

priate topics, and an inability to find communities whose purposes match their interests). Additionally, they reject subscription fees as a way to create a trusting environment.

In summary, the design of an online community and the strategies used to draw people into that community might vary dramatically depending upon age characteristics as well as attitudes, beliefs, and behavior toward the Internet. Based upon the study of one highly resistant audience, special efforts are suggested to mitigate identified resistance.

### A Conceptual Framework

In designing any type of online community, we must recognize that online relationship building differs from face-to-face interactions in important ways and that these differences contribute to resistance to their use. For example, online community lacks the physical cues of the face-to-face world. It also allows a person to change his or her identity, and reduces the face-to-face world influence of norms on individual behavior [4]. Well-known solutions to mitigate these differences include moderated discussion forums, security and confidentiality rules, codes of conduct, governance policies, and community culture [3]. But when resistance to online interaction is strong, the effectiveness of these techniques may be limited, especially when online community participation is totally voluntary and not associated with any pre-

existing face-to-face social network.

The optimistic view is that a holistic Web site approach that offers focused information and online community can be of great benefit to an initially resistant audience. But, more importantly, innovative techniques must enable audience members to do things they cannot easily accomplish in their face-to-face environment. To that end, a conceptual framework with three design guideline components to mitigate the resistance barriers is suggested (Figure 1). There are many existing tech-

*alliances.* When audience-recognized reputable organizations align themselves with an online community, trust in the reputable organization can bleed over to the online community. For example, alumni associations use their relationships with universities to gain credibility. The values and norms of the reputable organization help create trust in the online community. This alignment can be established through activities as joint promotional email, Web site link sharing, and advertised sponsorship.

*Deliver focused content.* An online community that offers content focused on the audience's primary interests is the hook that attracts avid Internet information gatherers. For example, washingtonjobs.com focuses its online community toward building careers and techniques for finding jobs. The content is easy to locate. Pages load rapidly and are easy to access (menus, graphics, and navigation). Clear and unambiguous language is used to provide forgiving, yet accurate, search functions, constantly renew content information, and provide access to professional support services.

*Implement outreach transitional events.* This approach resembles strategies used to build association chapters across geographical boundaries. Bridging the face-to-face and virtual environments can be accomplished through events such as hosted meetings or seminars in which local people experience direct social interaction with the online community organization and other audience members.



**Figure 1. A conceptual framework for resistance mitigating design.**

niques and many ideas for new ones. A sampling of ideas for each component presented here is based on research with one resistant audience [1].

#### Starting an Online Community

The first design component provides techniques to bridge the gap between the familiar, trusted face-to-face and the unfamiliar, not-trusted online environments.

*Build reputation through*

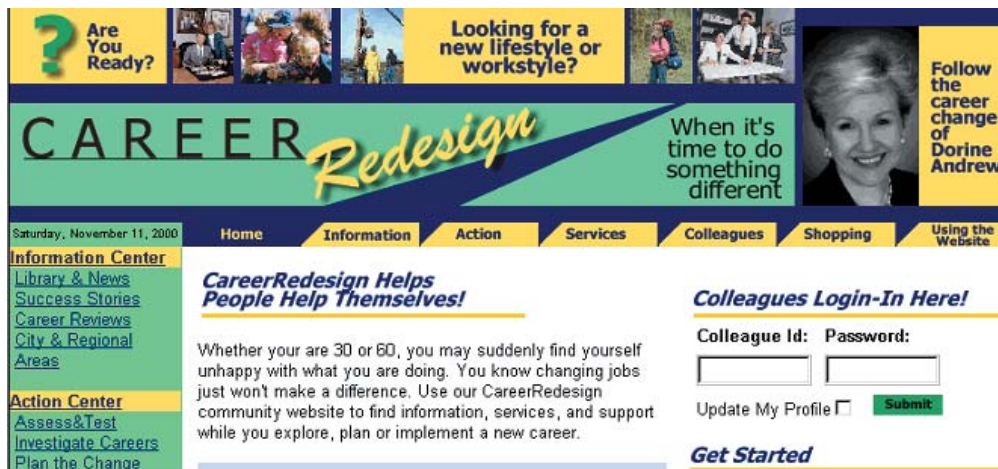


Figure 2. Reinforced purpose example.

Such events assist people in developing positive perceptions of the trustworthiness of the online community. When cosponsored with audience-recognized reputable organizations, the trust building experience may be even stronger. At the event, people have a chance to air their concerns, begin a dialogue around their interests, and experience the values and culture of the online community firsthand. People have a chance to use the community structure, content and features, register, and bond with like-minded people. Event attendees then provide word-of-mouth marketing among their existing social networks using email and face-to-face contacts. The community owners reinforce the event participation with email follow-ups and e-newsletters to encourage them to participate in the community.

### Encouraging Early Online Interaction

This second design component introduces nonthreatening and nurturing activities that allow visitors to test the online community waters. “Begin chatting” or “online community” buttons are not sufficient. For example, research revealed that mid-life career changers neither trusted nor wanted generalized chat or discussion groups [1]. Other audiences may harbor the same rejection of generalized online community. Such resistant audiences may respond positively to online community features that encourage early incremental interaction based on the expressed biases of the audience. Several features are suggested here, including reinforced purpose policies based on expressed expectations, privacy guarantees, interwoven content and discussion, member email directories, virtual conferences, and incentivized volunteerism. These features should be clear and easily visible to visitors through printed and other promotional materials, prominent displays on Web pages, and Web site language and

graphics.

*Reinforced purpose.* As stated earlier, an expressed purpose is important to defining an online community [3]. However, with resistant audiences, this purpose must be expressed in multiple ways and be matched to audience-expressed interests uncovered in the

audience analysis. For example, research revealed that an audience focused on mid-life career change problems is interested in an online community that provides topic-based fact-finding and problem solving; provides peers with whom to discuss career alternatives; and provides access to career change services and resources [1]. That purpose is expressed through the URL/Web site name, the logo, a tag line in the banner, and a statement on the homepage (Figure 2). A purpose focused on empathetic support is not appro-

Figure 3. Privacy guarantees.

appropriate given this audience’s perceptions, reliance on, and satisfaction with face-to-face relationships for empathetic support.

*Crafted policies.* Crafted policies are those that meet audience-expressed expectations. For example, audience analysis identified the mid-life career change audience expects free access with no subscription fees, strong privacy and security rules, avid and visible discussion group moderation, and member-driven Net etiquette [1].

*Privacy guarantees.* Privacy for resistant nontrusting audiences is a complex issue. For example, members of the mid-life career change audience want to protect themselves from unwarranted intrusion, but also want to know with whom they are communicating. For personal identity privacy, stable pseudonyms, and remailer email addresses could be assigned at registration. Users’ actual email addresses identify individuals

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to the Web site moderators, but other members see only pseudonyms and the remail Web site email addresses (Figure 3). The Web site routes email sent through the online community network to a member's actual email address without revealing the actual email addresses of either member. In addition, a policy prohibiting the selling of individual personal and Web site usage data may increase trust.

*Interwoven content and discussion.* Topic-centered, visibly moderated online community discussion forums woven directly into the Web site information content allow audience members to interactively contribute without having to enter a discussion board. These include opportunities for visitors/members to comment on a posted article or news item, contribute one's own story, respond to what someone else has contributed, or contribute an article, review, or other reference to the online community. For example, www.amazon.com allows visitors to contribute book reviews and rate the value of the various reviewers. People are asked to contribute their experiences with cancer at www.shareexperience.org/cancerindex.lasso.

*Member search directories.* Directory-based member profile directories with email provides an increased level of communication privacy. Instead of posting to a discussion group, a member uses more private email technology to communicate with another member. For example, mid-life career changers are interested in meeting people from many career fields, getting help with the first job in a new career, having access to experts, and finding peers with similar backgrounds and experiences [1]. Once registered, a member could create a career change interest and need profile without revealing personal name and location information. A query (Figure 4) to the directory system returns a list of members based upon the query criteria and profile comparisons. Members are free to start communicating with those members via email. The directory could also include profiled representatives from industry associations, companies, and organizations who are available to answer questions and support members.

*Virtual conferences and meetings.* Virtual asynchro-

nous conference technology has many characteristics of a face-to-face conference or seminar, making it a good vehicle for novice online community members. For example, the Jazz Group recently hosted a social network conference at www.groupjazz.com/osn2001/. This format offers structured agendas with specific

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### Colleague Directory

Find Colleagues with whom to discuss your interests, needs and experiences using email:

Only registered colleagues have access the Colleague Directory because our [security policies](#) protect our colleagues from abusive and intrusive individuals. Your privacy and anonymity are guaranteed as a CareerRedesign Colleague.

Not registered? [Register Now](#). It's free and secure!

Please enter your Colleague ID:

Option 1: By Profile	<input type="text" value="Match My Profile"/>
Option 2: By Criteria	Career Change Process Step: <input type="text" value="None"/> Career Field: <input type="text" value="None"/> Work Style: <input type="text" value="None"/>
Option 3: By Geography	City: <input type="text"/> State: <input type="text"/>
<input type="button" value="Find Colleagues"/>	

**Figure 4. Member directory search.**

topic presentations, handouts, guest speakers, registration (for example, passwords and conference badges), opportunities to meet other attendees, specific time frames for discussions, and limited attendance. People have an opportunity to become involved, but avoid committing to ongoing discussion groups for an extended period of time.

*Incentivized volunteerism.* Lastly, members can actively participate in the development of policies, practices, and topics and be rewarded for their efforts

through financial and nonfinancial means. Research shows that when members become actively involved in community moderation and standards, the virtual social networks become self-sustaining [3].

### Moving to a Self-Sustaining Interactive Environment

The third design component provides features to enhance the online community experience in personally significant ways.

*Private discussion groups.* By providing the capability for members to add their own private invitation-only online discussion groups, members can create safe spaces for moving from problem solving and information gathering to reciprocal empathetic support.

*Information sharing.* Technically, information sharing features do not directly support the online community interaction, but they do help members communicate with others who are helping them, while reinforcing continued use of the online community. An electronic notebook can provide information management services for this type of sharing (Figure 5). For example, mid-life career changers could save all types of Web site information, assessment results, resumes, lists, ideas and notes in an organized portfolio accessible to themselves and others to whom they allow access. Career changers and their coaches and mentors could review the same information at the same time.

*Recognition programs.* Lastly, reward and recognition provide opportunities for online community members who have succeeded to be recognized by other members. For example, individual success stories, interviews, thank-you pages, and online conference panel participation are all examples of ways to involve members who have succeeded in solving their problems and finding support in the online community.

### Conclusion

A thorough understanding of an audience's distinctive demographic, psychodemographic, and Internet experience characteristics are critical to crafting solutions that increase the ability to build sustainable online communities. This is especially important when the audience has demographic and psychodemographic characteristics that indicate a potential resistance to online interaction with people they do not know through their existing social networks. This understanding includes identifying potential

### Personal Notebook: Add an Item

Only registered colleagues have access the Colleague Directory because our [security policies](#) protect our colleagues from abusive and intrusive individuals. Your privacy and anonymity are guaranteed as a CareerRedesign Colleague.

Not registered? [Register Now](#). It's free and secure!

For verification, please enter your Colleague ID:

[View My Notebook](#) or Add an item to your Personal Notebook:

Classify the item:	<input type="text"/>
Item Subject:	<input type="text"/>
Allow access to:	<input type="text"/> s in a list separated by commas
Item Content	<input type="text"/>

Figure 5. Personal notebook for information sharing.

resistance, selecting targeted information content, providing the right online community technology, attracting audience members to the community initially, encouraging their early and continued participation and evolving protected empathetic spaces and personalization opportunities. **C**

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