

Design for Community: The Art of Connecting Real People in Virtual Places

Derek M. Powazek

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Reviewed by Vicki Suter

"Community" has joined the ranks of words hijacked for new meanings in online settings, with terms like "online communities," "virtual communities," and "Web communities." Since fuzzily defined terms can be a source of miscommunication, author Derek M. Powazek ducks this confusion by focusing on what people can do in a Web environment. Based on his six years of experience working with the Web, he advises us not to call our Web sites "communities," but to think in terms of Web sites that provide their users with community features.

According to Powazek, "Communities happen when users are given tools to use their voice in a public and immediate way, forming intimate relationships over time." (Powazek defines intimate relationships as strong emotional bonds that users have with each other and with the site. For more on this idea of intimacy and its importance, see the Viewpoint article in this issue, "A Different Kind of Legacy Problem.") In Powazek's definition of communities we encounter both the strength of this book — its honest, no-holds-barred conversational style — and the work that information technology professionals or academics may have to do to harvest useful ideas applicable to higher education.

Luckily, the format of this eminently readable book keeps that work from becoming too onerous, with its storytelling approach, wide-ranging interviews, and dozens of examples (admittedly, none from higher education). The book is that helpful hybrid of ideas and concrete, practical examples that will give you the necessary understanding of what constitutes online community features, how such features have been used in different settings, what it

takes to build community features into your Web site, and what resources are necessary to help support and maintain community features. It can help you whether you are

- a faculty person designing a distance education class who wants to create an engaging, lively, and vibrant learning environment for students;
- a faculty support person who wants to create a sustainable support environment;
- a student services staff person charged with developing the e-commerce aspects of managing customer relationships and transactions; or
- an alumni services staff person assigned to create a portal to build long-term relationships with alumni.

Powazek assumes that community tools include chat, Web-based discussions, and e-mail, although he does address newer technologies such as instant messaging, peer-to-peer file sharing programs, and video conferencing. He describes a sensible approach to designing community features:

1. Examine site content, which is what brings people to a Web site to begin with.
2. Describe what members of the community will be able to do, using detailed scenarios that describe how different members of the community will view and participate in it.
3. Prototype what the community features will look like.
4. Evaluate back-end software that powers the community functionality articulated.
5. Pilot some communities using some existing Web-based tools (such as communityzero.com or yahoo.groups.com).
6. Make the buy/build decision, to use one of the following:
 - an absolutely free tool like one of those given above,
 - open-source shareware or freeware (such as the Slash engine),
 - a low-cost tool (like infopop.com), or
 - a complex but full-featured system, either run on your own servers or

through an application service provider.

Powazek also asserts some general design principles:

- To create effective, sustainable community features, connect the features with the site's content both architecturally and visually.
- Design the site in terms of an experience with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Invite high levels of user participation to help you identify flaws in your design and functional needs that you hadn't predicted. One way is to develop a meta-thread about site design.
- Design quality control for content into the site. Powazek gives examples of sites that have simple functions to support sophisticated practices such as self-moderation, meta-moderation, the idea of "karma," and the theory of inevitable consequences to help the community maintain itself and to manage vandals and trolls (those who don't conform to the community's values).

Although primarily a design book, this volume also provides considerable, valuable advice about growing and maintaining communities. The author argues that once the community features are provided, a community is grown by its users, not built by designers and site administrators (think farmer, not construction worker). In this environment, the role of the community host is critical to helping the community understand and enforce its own norms, rules, and values, and to providing the occasional "seeds" for creative discussion.

Finally, Powazek warns, all good things come to an end. So, in addition to design, policy formulation, and maintenance, a well-defined exit strategy is essential.

The book has a supplemental Web site, <<http://designforcommunity.com>>, that provides more information. *e*

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