



WHITE PAPER

The Insiders Guide To Online Community Engagement



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Introduction

What is the Purpose of an Online Community?



What is the purpose of an online community?

Let's go back to basics. Think about the general definition of the word community. Words like "unit," "belonging," or "group" come to mind. Imagine any community you're a part of – your office, your yoga studio, or even your apartment complex. All 3 of these examples have one thing in common: your invested interest. In one form or another, there's an association with a sense of belonging, like-mindedness amongst your peers, and a general safe space you've identified and aligned yourself with in some way.

Online communities are no different. Social media, a prime example of how online communities function, has proven this since the early 2000's. It has evolved into a place for users to share their life updates and opinions in a multitude of mediums with their community. Online forums like Reddit have given members the capability to create their own communities, based on common interests or topics. Review sites like Yelp empower members to share their experiences and learn from others in a communal space.

Brands are now using community-based initiatives to generate insights across the organization, informing teams and strategic initiatives that address customer experience, loyalty, product innovation, brand marketing, and more. Online communities have become the most promising way for brands to peer into the future and uncover insights to questions they never even thought to ask. Today's fastest growing companies have one thing in common: a clear and compelling customer journey, which is only made possible through a nuanced and holistic understanding of the customer. Branded online communities are the new go-to strategy that leading brands are using to reclaim those direct relationships with customers. Fuel Cycle's online community offering makes building this relationship a natural and simple process for customers. Customers join a community directly linked to a brand or topic they are already passionate about or interested in and provide valuable insights throughout their experience in this space.

Sounds great, right? Sign us up! In order to achieve this seamless member experience, however, key elements need to be established. Building and fostering a community requires proper TLC.

Successful Online Communities Are Accesible, Fulfulling, and Reciprocal.

- **Accessible** – Customers can join and engage with the click of a button.
- **Fulfilling** – Customers feel valued and comfortable.
- **Reciprocal** – Customers get back what they give.

These key elements can be achieved via recruitment and engagement, two vital mechanisms that dictate a community's health. Building on Fuel Cycle's decade-plus of experience, launching hundreds of communities for a diverse range of clients across financial services, media, technology, travel, and more, this guide compiles the latest insights and best practices to recruit and engage communities that our team uses when consulting with brands like Google, Hulu, Viacom, Carhartt and Tufts Health Plan.



Recruitment

Finding the Right People



Finding the Right People

What's a community without those that contribute? Recruitment is a key component in building a community, as well as fostering and maintaining it over time. This is the group of people who represent your customer base, your business' community of fans and supporters, and most importantly, they are the people whose participation is the driving force behind your organizational research initiatives, via your community. Finding people to recruit is just one part of it – finding the right people to recruit is where the magic happens. Depending on your industry or business goals, there are numerous ways to go about obtaining the best group to meet your needs. In this section, we will outline recruitment methods, sources, and best practices.

Step 1:

Who Do You Want In Your Community?

Every community is defined by its participants, so deciding who you want in your community is a crucial first step. Size and subgroups are likely the first things that come to mind when determining your community make-up.

Although it may be tempting to think otherwise, the reality is that there is no universally correct size for a community. Every group of customers and stakeholders is different, and the minimum or ideal size will depend upon your specific audience as well as your organizational goals. For example, a community of “IT decision makers” will likely look significantly different in size and makeup than a community of “primary household shoppers.” More often than not, the success of a community is determined by the level of interaction amongst its members rather than the maximum size of its potential audience. Over time, however, we believe branded communities can evolve to accommodate

nearly any and every kind of customer, so we recommend growing your community membership to the largest size possible.

We recommend larger community sizes, because, depending on your needs, you may also be considering balancing member quotas against subgroups. Our perspective at Fuel Cycle is to recruit an even spread of the target demographic, and sequentially, create subgroups within your larger community. While it may be popular practice in traditional online research to set marginal population quotas to maintain balance, online communities have set a new and different standard to this method via subgroups.

Rather than eliminate a person that could serve as an active participant in the future, community managers should focus on recruiting to ensure that a minimum number of each audience subgroup are included in the community. This allows for broader, organic insights from a larger population of customers and the flexibility to create sample balance when necessary.

Step 2:

Where Do You Find Them?

There are multitude of sources to collect from when it comes time to recruit members into the community.

This, again, needs to be clearly thought out. Think about:

- What type of audience am I seeking?
- Where is my audience accessible?
- Where is the most conventional source to recruit from?

Where you source your members from is indirectly related to how they will interact in the community. For instance, if you recruit through a TV ad, there's a chance these members are not accustomed to being online frequently, and while they may be interested and decide to join, they may not be your most reliable and active participants. If you recruit from an email newsletter, these members are already internet users and more likely to be a more active community member. Fuel Cycle views these variations as a necessity to building a diverse community. As a rule of thumb, Fuel Cycle encourages community managers to build membership through as diverse a set of sources as possible, and to carefully vet the quality of the members that come from each recruitment channel. Some sources will recruit more engaged members than others, and the demographics will inevitably vary. Utilizing multiple recruitment sources helps build and maintain a core of members without relying on a single method, which can cause recruitment volatility. Essentially, we recommend recruiting from any source where you can insert a link, QR code, or routing mechanism to the screening survey for your community. Below, we've compiled a guide to various sources that have proven successful across a wide variety of industries at Fuel Cycle.

Step 2:

Where Do You Find Them?



Email

The most efficient and cost-effective way to recruit members. When drafting an invite to share with your CRM contacts, articulate the objective of your community, the scope of its activities, and the intended member value proposition. In this context, Fuel Cycle also suggests that brands highlight the exclusivity of their community, and the opportunity that members will have to directly influence company decisions and brand development.



Social

Another effective and inexpensive recruitment tool, as brands can seamlessly share their community recruitment link in Facebook posts, pinned Tweets, Instagram bios, and LinkedIn profiles. While maintaining the brevity that defines these busy feeds, be sure to sufficiently explain the purpose of the community, and its potential value to prospective members.



Website or Native App

Any online destination owned by a brand can serve as a way to grow its community membership. Communicate with teams across your organization to ensure that the community, along with its objectives and MVP, are featured on any and all relevant company websites and mobile apps.



Existing Marcom Materials

Sending a community invitation to your CRM contacts doesn't prevent your team from continually re-promoting the community in other email and marketing communications in the future. Encourage your customer marketing teams and front-line salespeople to promote the community in newsletters, event invites, email signatures, and more.



Receipts/Point of Purchase

Think about unconventional channels or real estate where an invitation could enjoy high visibility and reach a large portion of your prospective membership base. Miscellaneous but highly visible objects like receipts, napkins, or "SWAG" present easy and often overlooked opportunities to promote your community.

Step 2:

Where Do You Find Them?



Friends/Family/Colleague Referrals

If you're looking for like-minded individuals in your community, utilizing members' networks are a great resource. Opening up refer-a-friend recruitment is fun and interactive for members and can be a much more affordable source of recruitment.



On Site Events

Taking advantage of in-person opportunities is another way to recruit members to your community. Meeting your audience where they are and discussing the benefits of joining the community face-to-face makes the opportunity that much more tangible for prospective members.



Other Customer Research:

Chances are that your team has a number of other research initiatives underway in addition to your online community. Consider how these various activities can be used to drive engaged customers to conversations within the community where their input may be particularly relevant or valuable.

Step 3:

What's the Best Growth and Maintenance Strategy?

Community managers face a bevy of unpredictable challenges in their efforts to build a sizable and vibrant community, but a common challenge for any recruiting operation is the significant swings in active membership that occur after a specific recruitment event.

Fuel Cycle has found the most effective strategy for recruiting communities is maintaining a steady flow of incoming members via multiple recruitment sources. This is referred to as continuous recruitment – a strategy which effectively facilitates the ebbs and flows of a typical community audience.

Continuous recruitment can be executed a multitude of ways, but the concept is simple – visibility. By integrating recruitment opportunities into as many customer and marketing communications as possible, there will likely always be opportunities for new prospects.

Event brands that may be strapped for time and resources can add community links to:

- Existing campaigns
- Newsletters
- Social media posts
- Websites
- Native mobile app

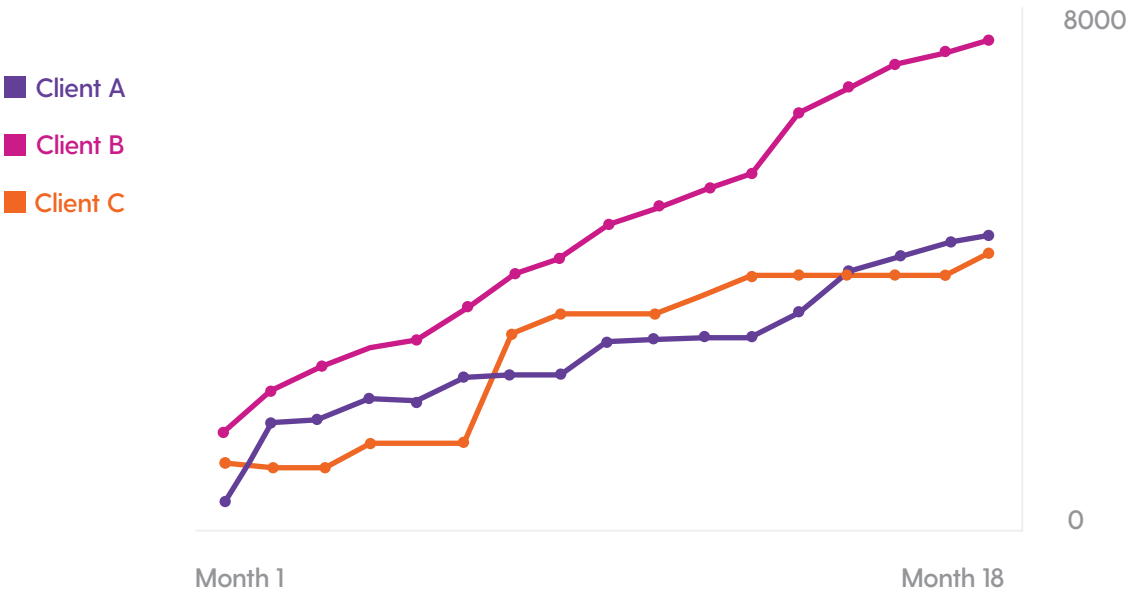
This approach extends offline as well, with the potential to embed community mentions on:

- Freebies
- One-sheets
- Posters
- Advertisements

To effectively close the loop on these continuous recruitment efforts, make sure it's easy for potential members to join the community once they arrive on-site. Many brands enable a "Join Now" button that allows people to instantly see if they qualify for the community if they happen upon the site via web search or word-of-mouth.

Bottom Line: Growth Takes Time

Healthy communities take time to grow. Whether you're aiming to build a community of 5,000 members, or 500,000, it's unlikely that you'll reach your target within the first days of recruiting. Our research at Fuel Cycle finds that growth is most successful when a continuous recruitment strategy is utilized, but even those efforts won't immediately send your recruitment numbers skyrocketing. Below is a chart displaying absolute growth for three representative communities, supported by ongoing recruitment strategies, that each took a minimum of six months to double in size:



Metrics That Matter

Fuel Cycle dashboards are equipped with the success metrics you need to share back with your organization over time. To ensure that your community maintains healthy a healthy level of new member recruitment, below are some of the key recruitment metrics to monitor on a regular basis:

- **Absolute growth:** The absolute growth of the community over time
- **Conversion rate:** The rate at which potential community members convert from starting the recruitment process to becoming double opt-in community members
- **Incidence rate:** The rate at which respondents to a screening survey qualify for the community

Engagement

What's Your MVP?



What's Your MVP?

Along with attaining the customer insights you need for your business through the use of community, it's important to also remember to maintain your members' attention and interest, whether it directly impacts your research needs or not. Keep them engaged and enthusiastic to participate is pertinent in order to achieve the sample sizes needed when running research projects. Defining your community's Member Value Proposition is what will make your community thrive and keep members coming back for more. Whether your goal is to gather audience insights or deepen customer engagement, its engagement levels rely on your ability to find and articulate a clear member value proposition to community members.

One common approach to developing an MVP is to ask the question: "What will cause community members to take time away from their day to participate in the community?" It's not an easy question to answer, especially in today's saturated marketplace, where consumers enjoy an almost infinite number of compelling ways with which to fill their time. But the question must nonetheless be asked, as the only way a community can break through the noise and succeed is if it offers something unique to members, a value substantial enough to alter a person's behavioral inertia and encourage them to give the community a trial run.

Branded vs Unbranded

Do you plan to engage your members using your brand voice or an unbranded voice? This topic has long been a subject of debate amongst community experts, but our research team at Fuel Cycle consistently finds that there are several distinct advantages that come with running a branded online community. Branded environments generate significantly greater levels of organic engagement, with members registering up to 300% higher interaction rates than their counterparts in unbranded communities. Greater organic engagement also means that branded communities rely less on financial incentives to foster feedback amongst members.

To this point, Fuel Cycle also highly recommends implementing a branded community domain in the form of a sub-domain of your company's or brand's main website (i.e., communityname.companyname.com). This not only immediately confirms the site is sponsored by your brand to prospective members, but it also continues to instill confidence and trust in the community throughout their membership.

The traditional argument in favor of unbranded communities has been their potential to minimize bias in the research process. While there are certainly merits to this approach, it also reflects an increasingly outdated mindset, inspired by the analog tactics of telephone and door-to-door surveys, which occurred on a much smaller scale. The vast majority of customer research conducted today is completed almost entirely online, generating a volume of insights that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. Ultimately, it's important to weigh the perceived need for no bias against the benefits of engaging with customers as an extension of your brand.

How To Engage Your Members

In order to engage your members effectively, remember the reason they joined the community in the first place – your MVP – and keep this top of mind. Customers crave other methods of brand engagement outside of simply submitting survey responses into a black hole. Fuel Cycle makes it easy to not only consistently engage your members, but to also interact dynamically with them.

Discussions

A standard, efficient way to not only make the community feel more conversational, but are also drivers of deep, qualitative insights. They have even been found to be useful in spurring ideas for future, more in-depth studies – ideas that you may not have even thought of to begin with!

Live Chats

Exactly what they sound like – collect a handful of valued members and engage in a text-based live chat with them, in real time.

Quick Polls

One-question polls that display on the community homepage. After members submit the poll, they can immediately see real-time results of the poll based on all community members' answers.

Engagement Surveys

Not all surveys need to have a cut and dry research purpose. Engagement surveys are a great way to maintain your members'

interest by mixing up the topics and keeping them fun.

Member Forums + Diary Studies

Allow members to submit their own posts and start their own discussions. These posts can have commenting and voting enabled to allow other members to interact within the member posts. With Diary Studies, you can opt to make these private.

Closing the Feedback Loop

When members know they are making an impact, they are encouraged to participate even more. What Fuel Cycle refers to as “Closing the Feedback Loop,” sharing back results of studies with members in a fun and interesting way (e.g., infographics), is a very effective way to remind members that their input matters and does not go unnoticed. Even more so, sharing blurbs about how study results have made an impact within your business or organization as a whole is something members appreciate even more. Closing the Feedback Loop is a staple to a robust MVP.

Sources of Motivation

While launching engagement activities is a great way to maintain your members' interest, what are other ways you can keep them motivated to keep coming back? What's in it for the members besides just being involved?

Fuel Cycle communities foster reciprocal relationships between the client and the members.



This cycle drives engagement and positively influences overall community health.

We've boiled down sources of motivation into 4 core categories: "The 4 F's":

- **Fame:** Recognition for participation in the community; member of the month, 'likes' comments from the brand team
- **Fun:** Enjoyable discourse with execs, engagement with brand leaders, thought leaders, etc
- **Fortune:** Monetary incentive/free tickets, swag, discounts
- **Facts:** Exclusive learnings/knowledge, understanding the impact of their contributions to the community

Combined, your community can convey the ideal motivational facets members associate value with. In return, your organization can reap the benefits of consistency and reliable resources at your fingertips.

Sources of Motivation

Across every community we host, Fuel Cycle finds that incentives are the only consistent source of value. Whether a community is in financial services, media, or travel, incentives have proven effective at increasing engagement and participation, and we recommend that every brand incorporate some form of incentives into their community experience. The suggested volume or frequency of incentives vary depending on the “exclusivity” of a specific community membership. In this case, exclusivity is defined by audiences that are either hard to access (e.g. doctors, left-handed people with mustaches in LA), or extremely valuable (e.g. only able to access once a year through the company CRM). Wherever audiences tend to be more exclusive, we strongly recommend the use of incentives to spur those prospective community members into action sooner rather than later.

Metrics That Matter

Fuel Cycle dashboards are equipped with the success metrics you need to share back with your organization over time. To ensure that your community maintains healthy a healthy level of member interaction, below are some of the key engagement metrics to monitor on a regular basis:

- **Active rates:** The percentage of community members who have logged into the community in the past 30 days
- **Participation rates:** The percentage of community members who have logged into the community and participated in any action inside the community
- **Email performance:** Open and click-through rates for outbound emails to the community
- **Logins per Member:** The number of logins per community member in a given time period
- **Incentive redemption:** The rate at which community members redeem points or incentives in the community

How Fuel Cycle Can Help

And there you have it – the complete insider’s guide to community recruitment and engagement.

Unlike most marketing and customer engagement channels, communities are living and breathing entities, and their success depends upon a sustained attention and agility to adapt to the changing needs of their members. No matter what the specific business goals are for your online community, look for technology partners that prioritize user adoption, support a broad range of engagement capabilities across desktop and mobile devices, and can integrate with important vendors across the organization (such as e-commerce, survey, or CRM solutions). Active communities require round-the-clock moderation, and depending on your own internal bandwidth or resources, your team may need to employ a self-service, full-service, or hybrid approach to community management. When evaluating potential partners, be sure that a vendor’s technology and account management team can effectively fill the gaps needed to execute your specific community playbook.

Fuel Cycle community managers and account teams set communities up for success and beyond, backed by years of experience and a passion for community research. It is this precedence that continues to push community research forward and enables Fuel Cycle to continuously grow, improve and most importantly, offer exceptional products, services, and knowledge within the ever-growing competitive landscape.

We’re on Cloud 9, and you can be, too! [Click here to see what Fuel Cycle’s Market Research Cloud can do for you!](#) Or [schedule a demo.](#)

