



Online community.
Real-world impact.

Eight laws for fostering community with content

by Alexandra Samuel, CEO and Rob Cottingham, President
Social Signal

Organizations have discovered that community-driven web sites can engage supporters, stakeholders and members of the public. The most effective community sites build critical mass quickly – and compelling content remains the easiest way to attract users. The good news is that a community-based approach gives you a wealth of options for effectively creating, shaping and organizing content.

Invest in content. Spend at least as much time and money on creating content as you do on technology. Remember, nearly every community contributor will begin as a viewer – so even if you expect your community's content to be mainly user-created, you need to seed the ground with examples of the kind of compelling content you hope they'll offer.

Wag your long tail. The bad news is, you probably can't compete head-on with MySpace or Facebook. The good news, you don't need to. Your community has distinct needs and interests; understand your niche and appeal to it. Give your community members the kind of information and material they can't find elsewhere, and they'll keep coming back.

Tear down the wall. Your community doesn't begin and end on your own domain. Bringing in tagged content, interacting with open APIs and aggregating news feeds allow you to move conversations onto and off of your site — inviting people and content into your community and broadening your reach.

If you don't know, ask. You can probably make a good guess about much of what your users want – but their guess is probably better. Keep a close eye on three separate indicators of user interests: most viewed pages; most commented-on blog posts; and most linked-to blog posts. Or ask for more direct input via surveys, quick polls and blog posts.

Vive la différence. Read what your users are saying and contributing, and build profiles for various segments that are emerging in your community (or that you'd like to see). Be sure there's something to appeal to each segment. And remember there's a lot of variation in technological skill and comfort.

Promote your users. Share editorial responsibilities – like selecting front-page stories, moderating comments, and approving blog posts -- with your most loyal users. It increases their commitment and broadens the editorial perspective of your site.

Titles matter. Featured content will help build traffic to your site if you make it easy to find. Search engines like descriptive blog titles: "Top nonprofit podcasts." And people like titles that make a promise ("Raise money while your donors sleep") or include numbers ("10 ways to save the rainforest with e-mail").

Let your hair down. Don't take the site or yourself too seriously; give staff, moderators and users plenty of opportunity to express their personalities. Relaxing your grip allows the community to flourish.

Add value with structure: Net2Learn's Resource Centers

When an online community takes off, the wealth of user-generated content can quickly overtake participants' ability to find the content they need. That's what happened on NetSquared: with dozens of on-site bloggers and many more people contributing via external tags, blog posts that provided crucial insights into nonprofit technology often scrolled off the main page before they were widely discovered.

The solution: A new spin-off site, Net2Learn, provides a stable home for high-quality content, organized around hot topics like "Managing an online community forum" and "Nonprofit podcasting". Any registered user can create a new resource center, invite people to contribute resources, and easily add related content from the main NetSquared site and other RSS feeds.

Providing an easy way for users to identify key topics and organize resources required technical and editorial work. But the payoff, making crucial resources available to a large number of users, was well worth the investment.

About us

Online strategies for real-world success.

We know the web inside and out. But we also know that your organization's goals come first. Our combination of communications skills, technical expertise and community experience gives us a unique ability to envision and implement the best solutions for your organization.

We bridge the worlds of strategic communications and web development, assembling and managing the team that's best suited to your particular goals and requirements. Turn to Social Signal to harness the power of the latest digital communications tools – and of the best technology providers – in the service of your mission.

Our principals

Alexandra Samuel, CEO

Alexandra combines hands-on experience implementing online strategies with an extensive research background in digital democracy, e-governance and Internet activism. Her recent projects include managing the online launch of telecentre.org and developing the online community strategy for NetSquared.org. Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University, where her research focused on the creative frontiers of online political engagement.

Rob Cottingham, President

Rob is a seasoned communications strategist who is known online as an e-campaigning innovator, and offline as one of Canada's leading speech-writers. His recent projects include creating the Confeederation web site, a window on election blogging; and writing the report for the Canadian Prime Minister's External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. Rob maintains a long-running blog at robcottingham.ca and writes SpeechList, a free e-mail newsletter on speechwriting.

Social Signal builds online communities.

We develop and implement leading-edge strategies for online community-building.

Social Signal engages your audience and stakeholders.

We plan, set up and manage a wide range of online participation processes, from formal consultations to community dialogues.

Social Signal helps you make the most of blogging.

We can help you translate your public relations strategy into a distinctive online voice.

Social Signal helps you communicate when the computer's off.

From a single, powerful speech to a strategy that integrates your on- and offline communications, Social Signal can help.

Featured project: NetSquared.org

NetSquared is a major conference and online community initiative undertaken by CompuMentor's TechSoup, an organization dedicated to helping non-profit groups across North America make the most of technology. The project's goal: to equip non-profits with the tools they need to take advantage of the social web.

Social Signal developed a strategy for planning, building and fostering the NetSquared online community in the eight months from the project's launch to the May 2006 NetSquared conference. We helped implement that strategy by configuring the site, managing custom development, and writing and editing content, and developing a companion site, Net2Learn. And when the NetSquared team decided to dramatically expand the online side of the conference, we helped them envision a structure and build the web space to make it happen.

Today NetSquared is one of the web's premiere destinations for non-profits looking to break into new online technologies, or take their existing online work to the next level. Social Signal is proud to be part of the team that made NetSquared a vital and practical resource for expanding the capacity of the nonprofit sector.

