

The pre-launch community checklist: 7 questions to answer before the ribbon-cutting

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The web site's done. The launch date is set. But don't open the site's doors to the world just yet.

By asking yourself a few key questions now about how your users are going to participate on your site, you can give your community a big head start on the road to success. So ask yourself...

1. What's in it for your users... and how do they know? There's a lot of competition out there for your users' time and attention. So you need to have a simple, clear, compelling reason for them to join your community, and make it apparent from the first time they visit your site. Have another look at your home page: does it clearly express the community's value for users? Do the same for your inside pages – visitors don't just land at your front door.

2. How do you want people to behave toward each other? Write a set of user guidelines – not the legal bafflegab of most terms of use agreements, but a conversationally-worded guide to making the most of the site. And instead of the typical shopping list of "don'ts", phrase it wherever possible in positive terms. (We're pretty happy with the version we helped create for NetSquared – see <http://netsquared.org/about/how-to-be-netsquared/>.)

3. What will you do if someone behaves in an anti-social way? When flame wars are raging, it's a lot easier to follow an existing process than to try to invent one in the heat of the moment. And if you've already spelled that process out, it will look fairer and less arbitrary to your community.

4. What kind of content you want users to contribute? Think about what you're hoping to see – from the voice (serious and substantive? irreverent and provocative?) to the length (a few lines of text? a 20-minute video?) to the quality and production val-

ues (Hollywood? your parents' basement?). That's the kind of initial content you want to use to seed your community.

5. How will users know their contributions are valued? Do you feature user-created content prominently on the front page? Is there a block profiling the most active users? Is there a point system rewarding participation? You can say that users' contributions are important... but *showing* it is much more convincing.

6. How will people get help if they have a question? Will you rely mainly on documentation – and if so, is it thorough, clearly-written and prominently linked? Are you prepared to provide support to your users – and if so, how quickly can they expect an answer, and what volume of requests are you ready for?

7. How will you discover how the site needs to evolve? From new features to design tweaks to navigation changes, you'll need to respond to your growing community's changing needs. So right from the start, build in mechanisms to tell you about those needs, by getting user feedback, measuring participation, tracking popular (and unpopular) pages and features, and detecting roadblocks.

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Does this all sound like a lot of work? It probably is. Our rough guideline is that you need to spend at least as much time and money on animating a community than you do on building the technology in the first place – and nowhere is that more important than in the early days.

But that work will pay for itself quickly. The effort you put in today will make your community healthier and more vibrant – less prone to conflict and inappropriate behaviour – and a lot more likely to succeed.

The big question: What does success look like for you? Chances are you've been dreaming, imagining and noodling over this project for a long time. But your fondest goals have a way of getting lost in the technical details.

So ask yourself: what do you want this community to be like? Once you have *that* answer, the rest are a lot easier.

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