

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Be a community organizer

It's easy to set up an online community, but it's also important to nurture it so that all members benefit

Unlike traditional, static web sites, community sites powered by social media let users take charge. But there's a flip side to this.

The word *community* gets slung around a lot in our online and offline worlds, doesn't it? (Google it and you'll get more than 357 million results.) Podcasters don't have listeners; they have communities. Non-profit organizations don't aspire to have thousands of followers on Twitter; they reach out to "peeps" who behave like a community of advisers or evangelists. Media organizations, bookstores and political organizations have similar needs.

But when we talk of social media and communities, we often get distracted by the word *media*, and pay lip service to the word *social*. I like to think of a community as a bunch of people gathered around a fire pit, swapping stories and building strong relationships without ever needing to reach for an iPhone. This is not to dismiss the value of technologies that give us a new kind of connective tissue, but rather to consider communities in terms of *what* gets shared, not *how*.

Building a community takes a lot more than automated invites to a Facebook fan page that takes about eight minutes to set

up. I've joined, set up, run into and been invited to a few dozen of them over the past few years. Each one has a different dynamic. Some are clunky and badly designed, but have surprisingly great participation.

So what is a community?

Community as fire pit

If you reach back to early academic discussions on the "effects of asynchronous computer-mediated group interaction" (the phrase comes from a highly regarded 2002 article in *Social Science Computer Review*), you'll recognize that what we have today are ongoing experiments on how people gather around different fire pits to share ideas, argue and work out solutions.

Pat Elliot came across one the hard way. A Phoenix, Arizona-based communication professional, Elliot is someone who's joined several—70 and counting, she says—so-called communities.

As a communicator, she had heard about CaringBridge, a nonprofit web-based service that builds a community around someone facing a critical illness or undergoing treatment, but it wasn't until she was diagnosed

with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a rare form of cancer, that she signed on. More than half a million people connect through CaringBridge every day. Yes, it's a "family and friends" network, like many others, but that is where the resemblance ends.

CaringBridge gives Elliot an easy way to stay in touch with friends and family, doctors, researchers, and strangers from many parts of the world who have formed bonds. It also lets members maintain a journal and invite people in their network to visit and stay informed. By tracking back-and-forth communication, it eliminates the need to send or respond to dozens of individual e-mails or Facebook, LinkedIn, text and Twitter messages every day.

"If you suddenly find yourself having to deal with something you know nothing about—like a very rare illness—it's highly likely that there's support literally at your fingertips from others who've walked in your same shoes and will share what they've learned with you," Elliot says.

Online communities come in various flavors. Digg is a com-

about the author

Angelo Fernando is principal of Public Radius, an Arizona-based strategic communication and PR consultancy that helps organizations bridge the gap between traditional and digital media. Read his blog at HoiPolloiReport.com.

munity for sharing and discovering content. Members of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) community share ideas on topics ranging from pet care to animal cruelty. Or consider Freecycle.org, a global community built around sharing and reusing items. Most often communities are all about empowering people through interactions, not commerce.

Pick the right features

Where do you start if you want to build an online community? There are a number of platforms available. Ning, which is the platform behind the ASPCA community, does not require web design experience. Big Tent, another free community-building platform, is easy to set up as well, attracting groups such as nonprofits and homeschoolers. Pick a platform that suits your organization's long-term needs. While writing this column, I set about creating a Ning community to make sure any communicator with zero design or coding skills could do it; it took me less than 15 minutes to have one up and running, including pulling in apps for photo sharing, polling and live streaming of video, and inviting members.

Also consider how much moderation you will need. Unlike traditional, static web sites, community sites powered by social media let users take

charge. But there's a flip side to this. Just because an online community can be powered by its users doesn't mean you shouldn't assign someone to it. A 2008 study (by Deloitte, Bee-line Labs and the Society of New Communications Research) of more than 140 organizations involved in building online communities recommended against adopting an "if you build it, they will come" attitude. A community, after all, is more than the sum of the social media technologies you throw into the back end. In communities, as in communication (as the Deloitte report wisely noted), it's important "to understand Human 1.0 before you try to figure out Web 2.0."

What does it take to build and nurture a community?

- **Think micro, not mass.** Mass media went after big audiences. Social media work best with niche groups. Online communities are best when they have a personal look and feel to them.
- **Empower users.** Provide the tools to let everyone—not just the admin person—steer the boat. Lay down some basic guidelines, but let users manage the service on their terms.
- **Don't build a silo.** It's easy to turn a community into a content dump. Ning and Big Tent let you connect the dots to other areas where people interact and engage with complementary communities. CaringBridge, for example, partners with health



The ASPCA's community page is built on the Ning platform.

care organizations, professional groups such as the National Alliance for Caregiving and several foundations.

- **Be social, not commercial.** It's tempting to promote products or an agenda, or to "monetize" the site with floating ads and pop-ups. Don't!
- **Be open to ideas.** The community will let you know what works and what doesn't. Be open to feedback. A community is always a work in progress.
- **Assign someone to the care and feeding of the community.** The Deloitte study found that 32 percent of online communities have no full-time employees assigned to them. Be part of the 68 percent! •

community service

Build an online community using these services:

- **bigtent.com**
- **affinitycircles.com**
- **webcruising.com**
- **pluck.com**

Check out these good examples of online communities:

- ASPCA Online**
www.aspcacommunity.org
- Freecycle**
www.freecycle.org
- MyModernMet**
www.mymodernmet.com
- OZ/NZ Educators**
oznzeducators.ning.com
- Tribes**
www.tribes.com