How Grafana Labs builds and sustains communities

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RichiH

Show of hands

- Who knows what Grafana is?

- Who knows what Grafana Labs is?

- Who knows what Prometheus is?

Definition and distinctions

What is "community"?

"A community is a social unit (a group of living things) with commonality such as norms, religion, values, customs, or identity."

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"Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft"

- Gemeinschaft, i.e. "**community**"
  - Based on roles, values, and beliefs based on shared interactions
  - Driven by *intrinsic* motivation
- Gesellschaft, i.e. "**society**"
  - Based on indirect interactions, impersonal roles, formal values
  - Driven by *extrinsic* motivation

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The other translation of "Gesellschaft"

- Gesellschaft, i.e. "**corporation**"
  - It is fundamentally based on *formalized roles* and has an *inherent structure*
  - Part of why you are here is literally called *compensation* (for the time and effort you are not spending on hobbies, which often have communities)
  - Still: Any healthy company relies heavily on its internal culture and thus internal community

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What is community not?

- Communities are *not a sales channel*
- Communities are *not a marketing target group*
- Communities *reject outside commercial interest*
- Communication with and within communities follows its own rules and it is very easy to get things wrong

Why do we care?

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Why do we care?

- A large, arguably the largest, part of **Grafana's success** comes from its community
- Grafana Labs *honestly* tries to treat the community well
- The community repays Grafana with *engagement, evangelism, and organic adoption*

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Why do we care?

Healthy communities around Grafana Labs are a **strategic requirement** for our **continued growth**.
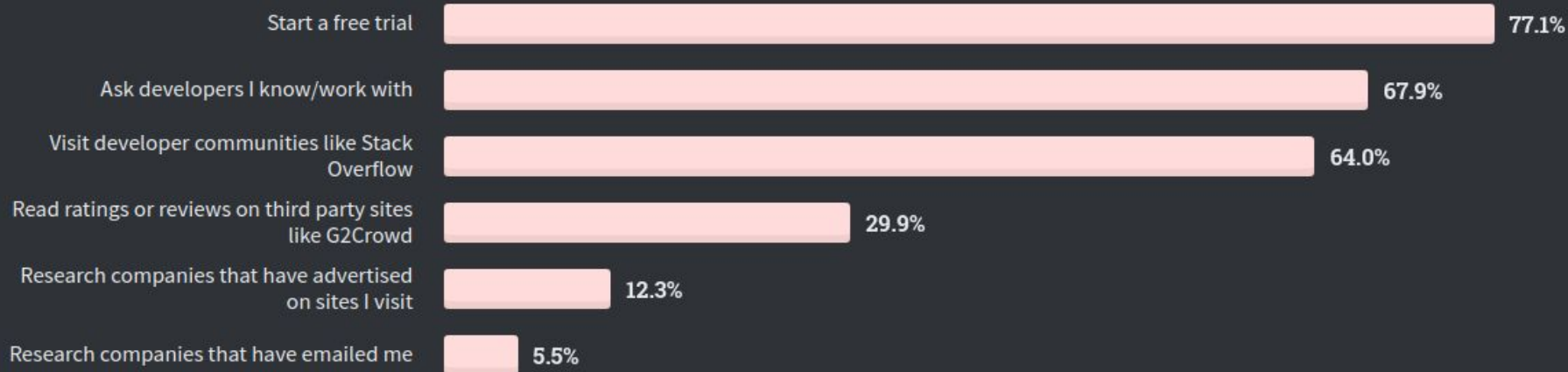
If done right, they are integral part of both sales channels and marketing outreach.

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2020 Stack Overflow developer survey

"How do you choose tools?"

Start a free trial — 77.1%
Ask developers I know/work with — 67.9%
Visit developer communities like Stack Overflow — 64.0%
Read ratings or reviews on third party sites like G2Crowd — 29.9%
Research companies that have advertised on sites I visit — 12.3%
Research companies that have emailed me — 5.5%

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Personal example

- Prometheus has a built-in dashboarding solution called "PromDash"
  - Prometheus-specific, hard to use, still exists today
- In late 2015 or early 2016 I suggested to Prometheus-team to deprecate it in favour of Grafana
- Prometheus has been a substantial growth component for Grafana ever since; and the other way around

This happened without any monetary interest on my side, I didn't know, or remotely expect, that I would ever join Grafana Labs. It happened solely because Grafana was open source and because Carl acted in a consistently positive way. Prometheus and myself trusted Grafana and Carl.
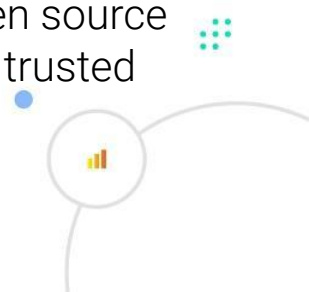
What makes a healthy community?

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Common cause

- Every community forms around a **common cause**
- Communities can co-exist and work together
- Causes tend to remain long-term
  - E.g. Grafana was started around Graphite, there is little overlap between "originally Graphite" employees and "originally Prometheus" ones community-wise even though there is significant overlap within Grafana Labs' structure
  - It is important to be aware of this, and to respect every community on its own
- If you join a community, it's important to respect and foster that cause

Respect, trust, and emotional/mental security

- Humans are herd animals, we are optimized for social interaction (to varying degrees)
- If you do not feel respected, you will not want to interact
- If you can not trust your environment, you will have significant mental overhead in interactions
- If you are not accepted as you are, social interaction will feel emotionally draining and not mentally secure

We want, and need, to create and maintain save spaces in which our communities can flourish.

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Caveats

- We are hard-wired for fight-or-flight; automatic process when exposed to negatives
- If you do not feel secure, you will act more insecurely and/or more aggressively than you normally would
    - This is also true for everyone else
    - This can easily lead to a vicious cycle, a downward spiral of "reacting" to others
- Communities tend to live on or whither, they are *very unlikely to change due to external factors*

Iron law of institutions: "The people who control institutions care first and foremost about their power within the institution rather than the power of the institution itself. Thus, they would rather the institution "fail" while they remain in power within the institution than for the institution to "succeed" if that requires them to lose power within the institution."

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Safeguarding community

- Being social animals, we are good at detecting social situations which don't feel right
- Children are good at externalizing this, but adults learn not to
- Communities depend on open, honest, and reliable communication
- You can only safeguard communities from within

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Growing communities

- Basics, like safe spaces, empowering environment
  - Open Source has come a long way in the last 20 years
- Create framework for self-sustaining social interactions
  - Self-organizing help & chat
  - Meetups
  - Create spaces in which long-lasting friendships can be built
- Attach social status to doing good, remove the joy from doing bad
  - Game of incentives
- Lead by example

Verifying the safeguards & culture canaries

- For any given community, we suggest you create **culture canaries**
- What is unacceptable to you?
- Is this dealt with in a manner you agree with?
- If not, are you able to influence the situation for the better?
- Write the canaries down and review them regularly
- This avoids *being in the situation* or *moving goalposts* by lifting to a meta level
- Think *about* complicated situations, not *within* them; take a mental step back
- **Never ever** tell anyone your canaries. If you share canaries, you need new ones

Goodhart's law: "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

(This might be why OKRs are not tied to comp & perf directly)

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Formalizing communities

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Structure

- Most communities have at least informal roles
- As they grow they need to rely on formalized roles
- Visible and transparent structures make it easier for new members to join
- Some structures are a signal as much as they are a tool in and of themselves
- E.g. a Code of Conduct (CoC) is as important as a signal than tool
  - It gives something to align to
  - It helps resolve, or avoid, conflict informally
  - It signals enforcement is a valid option
  - A pathological community will ignore its CoC
  - Due to its existence, less overall enforcement is required
  - When enforced: Visibly, quickly, and consistently, while maintaining privacy.
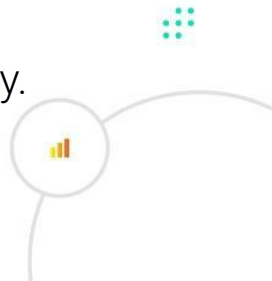
Limits of communities

- Communities exist within a context, **within a society**
- Your Dungeons and Dragons group will not be able to overthrow government, i.e. society
- If the Grafana community decides on a default pink unicorn theme for Grafana, Torkel and thus Grafana Labs would simply not follow
- Communities have limits in their impact and it's important to be aware of them

Application

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Focus on projects

- Most of our products are based on projects
  - Communities don't really care about products; put projects first
- Open governance, not tied to Grafana Labs
  - Modelled on the Prometheus governance
  - Open communication on GitHub / mailing list
  - Membership open to everyone
  - Membership is personal, never tied to company affiliation!

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Project-first

- Every project has a community lead
  - Identify the people who like doing this work
- Community calls
  - Monthly call
  - Everyone can join
  - Everyone can bring topics
  - Meeting notes world-editable
  - Recordings on YouTube

Content

- Meetup series "Grafana and friends"
  - In cities in which we have 1-3 dedicated people
- Public speaking
  - Big conferences, or small
- Blog posts
  - Written by engineers
- Webinars

Resources

- Engineers are expensive
- Travel is expensive
- If you "only" have non-engineering resources, you lose authenticity

The wide availability of engineering time for community work is one of the reasons why Grafana is so successful

Final words of warning

- Keep normal marketing & sales mechanisms away from community

- You will mess up
  - When you mess up, be honest about it

If you are dishonest or treat your communities like any other sales channel, they will turn away

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Thank you

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