



The **Community Canvas** Guidebook

The guide to building meaningful communities

May 2017 – Version 1.0



How can we help people create more meaningful communities?

We have spent the last 15 years building and participating in communities and found tremendous joy in them. And we have come to realize that while every community is as unique as the humans in it, many of them share a similar, underlying structure.

Based on our own experience and with the generous help of leading community builders, we have identified the first version of this structure and turned it into an openly accessible framework: the Community Canvas.

We hope this will provide a template for people to build more meaningful communities and bring as much joy to your lives as communities have brought to ours!

Fabian Nico Sascha

A Sincere Thank You

The Canvas would never have been possible without the countless hours of insights provided by so many community builders across the world - we are incredibly grateful for your contributions. We owe this Canvas to your generosity and the amazing work you all do! [More](#).

The Authors



Fabian
Pfortmüller



Nico
Luchsinger



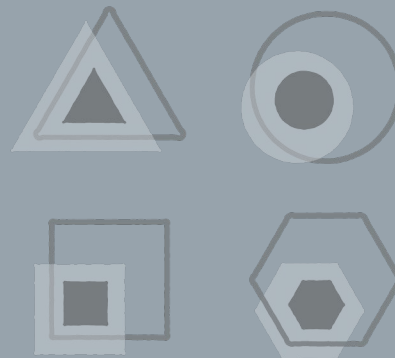
Sascha
Mombartz

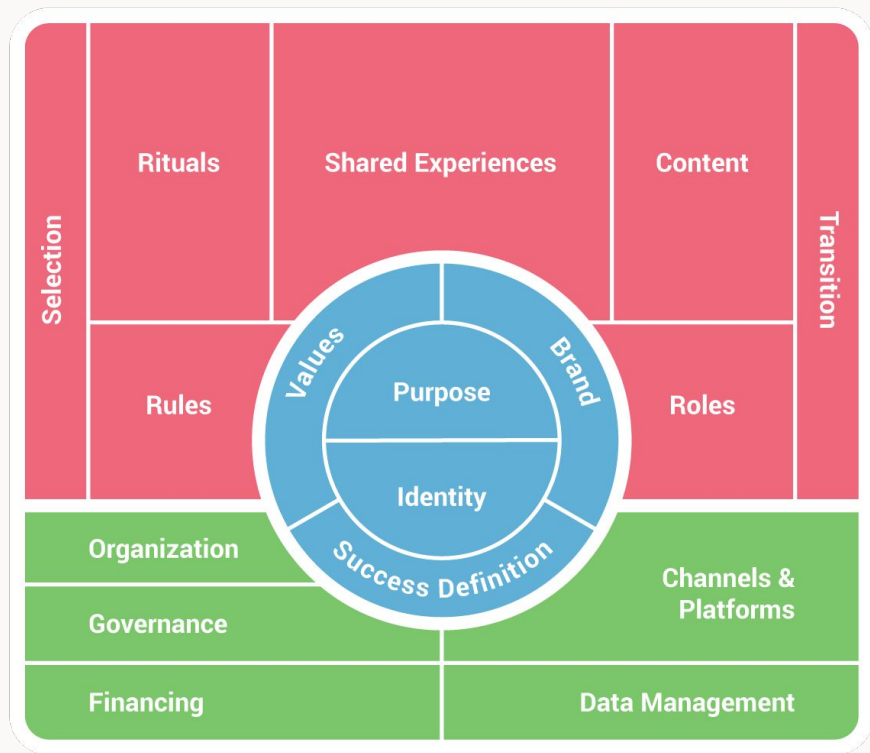
More about us [here](#).

Who is this for?

For us, a community is a type of organization that brings people together and makes them feel like they belong. It ideally gives them an identity that they proudly share. And it provides a framework to trust each other more, support each other more, collaborate more and build more meaningful relationships.

We have developed the Canvas for anyone who brings people together with the intention of creating meaningful, long-lasting relationships. We hope this framework will be useful for people running a diverse set of organizations, from fan clubs, to HR departments, alumni organizations, startup incubators, fellowship programs, weekly meetups of outdoor enthusiasts, and much more...





The Community Canvas has

3 Sections

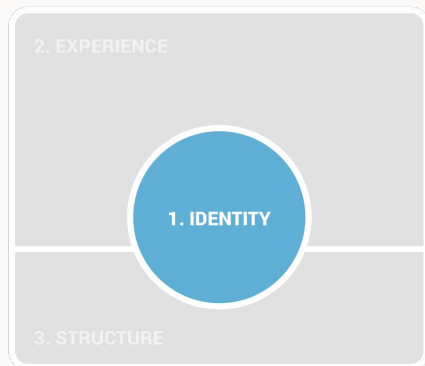
Identity, Experience, Structure

which in turn are divided into

17 Themes

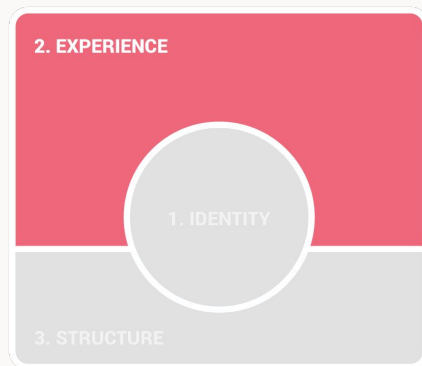
The 3 Sections

1. Identity



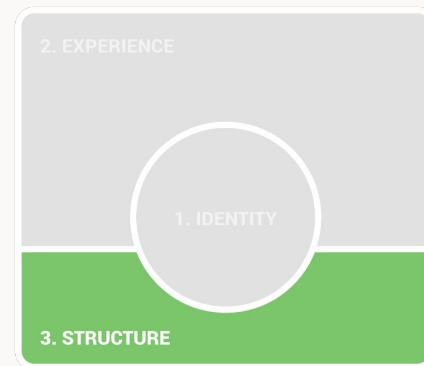
Strong communities have a clear and explicit sense of who they are, why they exist and what they stand for. These questions influence all other parts of the community and that is why Identity is the first section, but also visually at the core of the Canvas. [Explore Identity](#)

2. Experience



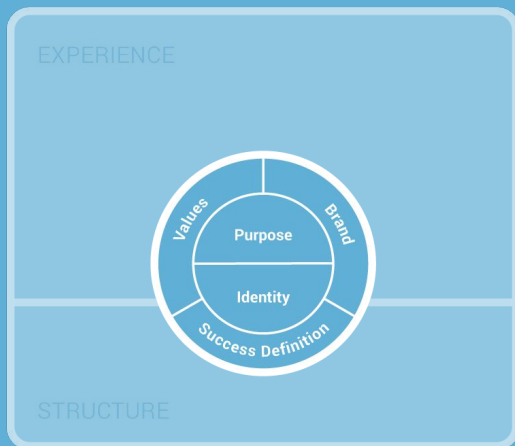
In the second part of the Canvas we explore the community from the perspective of the members: what does actually happen in it and how does it translate its Identity into concrete activities that create value for the members? [Explore Experience](#)

3. Structure



The third part of the Canvas focuses on the operational elements of running a community. And while many communities start enthusiastically, only few survive in the long-term. This section asks: what gives the community stability and helps it run smoothly? [Explore Structure](#)

Identity



At the core of everything is the Identity. It involves questions of belief and influences all other parts of the community: who are we and what do we believe in?

Themes

Purpose

Member Identity

Values

Success Definition

Brand

Why does the community exist?

- What does the community hope to achieve?
- How will the world be different by having this community?
- How will the world be worse off if this community doesn't exist/ceases to exist?
- How will it affect the lives of members if they are part of this?



Purpose

Reflections

Ideally, everything in a community - its members, its activities, its processes, its values - point back to and strengthen the same thing: the organization's purpose.

Two kinds of purposes: Communities either have an internal purpose, an external purpose or both. An internal purpose is only concerned with the community itself and its members - it may be about helping each other or exchanging knowledge (imagine for example a community of neighbors living in the same building). An external purpose wants to have a collective effect on the world outside of the community - for example by advancing a certain cause, a product, a lifestyle, a particular interest, a business or a movement.

Internal purpose: Communities that only have internal purposes very often do not explicitly define and state them; they derive it implicitly from forming the community. It is helpful to be more precise in stating what the objectives are, as it helps align members' expectations.

External purpose often with internal purpose: Almost all communities with an external purpose also automatically have an internal purpose, but the internal one often stays unnamed. It is important for a community with an external purpose to reflect how it creates value for the members. While an external purpose might be important and essential to the organization's existence, we have observed many people joining such communities just as much for their internal purpose, and the value it creates for them, as their interest in the external purpose. For example, many leadership organizations with the mission to improve the world around them create most value for its members not necessarily through the pursuit of their external mission (even though that mission is a crucial part of its reason to exist). For members, the biggest value often comes from the relationships they get to build with peers within the organization.

Purpose

Reflections

Influencing purpose: It's worthwhile to reflect on who can influence the purpose of the community. Sometimes communities are not independent, but part of a larger organization's mission. In that case, while the community might have their own purpose, they ultimately are part of a larger mission. For example, when corporations launch communities, the corporation's interest might be different from the community's own objectives. It is important at the outset and throughout the experience to ask if the two interests are aligned and to identify potential conflicts.

Who is the community for?

- What are the traits that its members share?
- How does the community describe its members?
- What is the profile of the community's most active members?
- How does the community take special care of them?
- How is diversity defined and what is its role?
- How is diversity enacted in all parts of the organization?



Member Identity

Reflections

Communities are always “for” someone - a group of previously disconnected people who share one or several commonalities: a shared identity.

Examples of commonalities

- Geographical: people living/working in a specific place.
- Ideological: people sharing a specific view of the world.
- Experiential: people having gone through similar experiences, or having shared experiences.
- Social: people belonging to the same or similar social group, e.g. ethnic minorities or working in the same industry or being part of the same age group.
- Affinity: people having passions or interests for the same topics, e.g. being fans of the same music group.
- Personal: personal traits, e.g. being afflicted by the same medical condition, or scoring similarly on the Briggs-Meyer scale.

In smaller communities shared identities are easily guessed. But as communities grow in size, it is important to be explicit about what defines the identity of the members.

Not every commonality is equally well-suited to form the basis of a community's identity. In order for the community to come together, the commonality (or set of commonalities) has to be part of every member's self-identity - they have to define themselves at least partially through this commonality. Thus, it would be hard to build a community of people wearing black-rimmed glasses, because for most of the people wearing glasses is not an important part of their identity. Often, a community's identity is defined by a combination of commonalities.

Member Identity

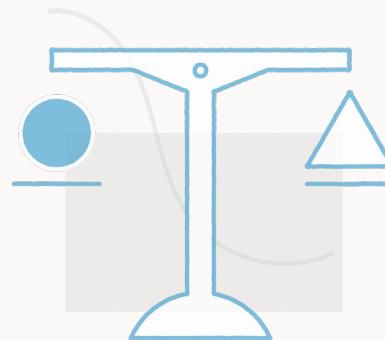
Reflections

Super users: Every community has people who are more actively engaged than the average. These are the most valuable members, because they are the community's most active supporters, its early adopters to new initiatives and its biggest fans to the outside world. Their energy and enthusiasm feeds all parts of the community, and their disengagement can be dangerous for the stability and health of the group. That is why both young and mature communities profit from understanding their profiles and motivations, and finding dedicated ways to take special care of them. This can be through involving them in building the community, giving them special roles (→ [Experiences > Membership Roles](#)), or communicating with them more closely (for example with a dedicated Facebook group where they receive news before the general membership hears about them).

Diversity: We have found mature communities to be intentional about the diversity of their members. Most communities gain significant strength and value from a more diverse pool of members (as long as they still retain their commonalities and shared identity). However, diversity often doesn't happen naturally or easily. Strong communities design their selection processes with diversity in mind, but a true dedication to diversity goes further: making sure that a diverse group of people actually feels comfortable and welcome in the community, and creating event formats and rituals that speak to the strengths of all types of members. Ideally, diversity is an integral part of all aspects of the organization.

What is important to us as a community?

- How do we want our members to treat each other?
- How do our values help fulfill the community's ultimate purpose?
- What is the “vibe” of our community?
- What is the aspirational way of life our community promotes?
- How do we capture and communicate our values, both internally and externally?



Reflections

A community is a unique opportunity for a group of humans to treat each other in a special way, maybe in a better way than they would without the existence of the community structure. But in order for that to happen, the community has to first agree on what it believes in.

A shared set of values is incredibly powerful. It represents an aspirational way of life for the community and provides a north star for all actions and interactions in the community. Ultimately, knowing that they believe in similar values will help members create deeper and longer lasting bonds.

Defining values: We believe that there is a huge upside to making the values explicit. However, defining values can be tricky: usually they can't just be mandated from above and often they don't naturally emerge from the community itself. Successful communities find a balance between modelling the values from the top and co-developing it with the larger membership base. Even though this process of formulating values is not straightforward and can be painful - especially if co-developed with a larger group of people - ultimately the community will gain strength by collectively discussing what it stands for and it will plant the seeds for the development of a shared identity.

Values

Reflections

Embedding values: Ideally, values are not just nice sounding statements, but consciously embedded and highly visible throughout the organization. To do so, successful communities have found ways to break the values down into practical and applicable pieces.

For example, we have seen communities ask prospective members to explicitly commit to their values (through a shared experience or ritual). Just like businesses ask new users to sign off on their terms and conditions, communities can ask new members to sign off on their values.

Making values tangible: Some organizations decide to display their values in the form of a manifesto. Others turn them into “principles”, which are not as intangible as values, but also not as obligatory as rules. They represent an aspirational commitment made by everyone in the community to live by a certain way of life. Examples for this code of conduct can be found in the [10 Principles of Burning Man](#), the [12 Principles of Alcoholics Anonymous](#), or the [7 Unitarian Universalist Principles](#). Other organizations embed their values in guidelines for gatherings, like for example the [Circle of Trust Touchstones](#) by the Center for Courage and Renewal.

How does the community define success?

- What does the ideal community look like?
- What kind of membership in the community is considered a success?
- What kind of value does the community create for its members?
- How does the community measure success?



Success Definition

Reflections

A lot of what a community does and stands for is intangible. But in the end, it will only succeed if it has a clear and unified goal it keeps consistently aiming for over time. That is why it is crucial for communities to spell out what an ideal membership experience looks like, what value it wants to create for its members and to turn that into a measurable definition of success.

Defining success is often not straightforward. For communities with a clear external purpose, success might be tied to a measurable form of “impact”, but communities with internal purposes often have very soft success criteria.

Measuring trust: Trust among the members is one of the most important success criteria in communities with internal purpose, but it is also among the hardest to measure. A possible approach is to define a proxy - an action or interaction that happens regularly in the community as a result of increased trust - and measure that. One could, for example, measure how often

community members are invited to fellow member’s weddings, or how many community members stay at each other’s places when they travel - both potential proxies for closeness. In reality, however, it’s very hard to collect data points.

Measuring activity: Another important success criterion is sustained activity levels over time. Most communities see high engagement at the beginning of a membership which then dwindle. Successful communities find ways to keep their members engaged over longer periods of time and make that retention explicitly part of their strategy.

Defining KPI: Even though measuring success is tricky, we believe it is valuable to define success indicators from the very beginning and start tracking them. These will likely evolve and become more sophisticated as the community progresses. And there is a positive re-affirmative cycle that can happen as a result of it: if members know what the success criteria are and see them being tracked, they know that the organization takes them seriously and in return they take the organization more seriously.

Success Definition

Reflections

Often the different success indicators don't exist in a vacuum, but in relationship with each other. For example, if the success criteria are 1. people paying membership fees and 2. people showing up to events, is it still considered a success if people pay fees, but never show up (as experienced for example in certain religious communities)?

Examples of success criteria for communities with internal purpose

- Member activity & retention
 - Attendance at events
 - Online activity
 - Newsletter opening rates
 - Website traffic
 - Volunteer engagements by member
- Member growth (by location, overall)

- Member experience
 - Trust felt
 - Number of members hosted at own place
 - Responsiveness: how quickly do members respond to other members?
 - Generosity of support: how much do members support one another?
 - Celebration of birthdays and other meaningful moments
 - Shared intimacy: display of laughter/tears in public, shared vulnerability
- Fundraising
 - Yearly/monthly fees raised from members
 - Fees raised from alumni

How does the community express itself?

- How does it use language, visuals and objects to strengthen its identity?
- What is the community's esthetic?
- How does the community's brand reflect its values?
- How does the community communicate its identity to the world?



Reflections

This is an area with a tremendous potential impact many communities overlook. A carefully chosen brand is more than just packaging, but represents how the community expresses its purpose, values and overall identity. While the community is a very abstract thing, its brand and experiences are the visible manifestations.

A strong community brand can further unite the members, as it is something that the members collectively own and proudly share amongst each other.

Language: Carefully chosen words matter a great deal. Organizations naturally tend towards professionally sounding corporate language. Successful communities don't sound like corporations, they consciously communicate like the humans they consist of and they mirror their style, tone and approach. They consciously reflect their values through the kind of language and words they use. A great example is Daybreaker - an early morning dance movement for millennials in different cities - and their use

of language, particularly the word "mischief", emoticons and their conscious choice of visual imagery that both represents their mission and their young urban audience.

Defining language in a community

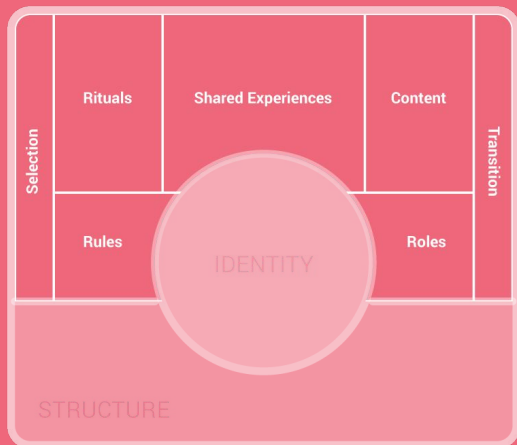
- What words are important and act as anchor? Does the community consistently use them in its communication?
- What tone of language reflects the values? How can the tone of conversation bind the members further together?
- How does the communication reflect a real human member?
- Who is the communication coming from? Is it a real person or a dehumanized "info@community.org" address? Is the person's name in the communication? The person's signature?
- With what words does the community describe itself? What words does it use to describe its members? Do these match the community's values?

Reflections

Design identity: Some communities think of design as an unnecessary luxury, but we find strong communities to have a clear sense of their esthetic and their own design identity. While today, many interactions with a community's brand are online, traditionally, communities would reflect their brand through artifacts, physical objects, that further strengthen their sense of purpose, their values and their overall brand. Examples include uniforms, badges, rings, clothing items, hats, necklaces, stickers, notebooks and other merchandise.

Storytelling: An important element of a community's brand is how it shares its own activities. How does it capture the events, gatherings and people in the community? Does it use photography, video, podcasts, text or other media to capture it? What style of storytelling reflects the organization's values? Its brand identity influences the content the community creates (→ [Experiences > Content](#)) and the channels it uses (→ [Structure > Channels & Platforms](#)).

Experience



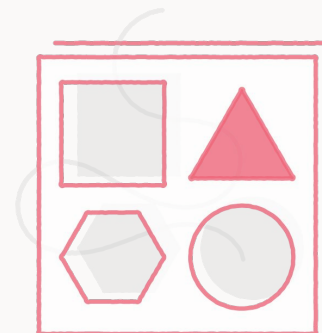
The second part of the Canvas explores the community from the perspective of the members: what happens in the community and how does it create value for the members?

Themes

- Member Selection
- Member Transition
- Shared Experiences
- Rituals & Traditions
- Content
- Rules
- Roles

How do people join the community?

- Is this an open or a closed community?
- For open communities: what marks the difference between a member and a non-member?
- What is the onboarding process for new members?
- How are the people identified who should be part of the community?
- How actively does the community want to grow and add people?



Entry Point - Member Selection

Reflections

Open vs closed: Anyone can join open communities, while closed communities employ some sort of selection process. If a community is completely open, an important question becomes what the difference is between a non-member and a member, and how a member even knows that they are a member. An open selection process can make a membership experience more inclusive, but at the same time more fuzzy, as the overall frame is less defined. It therefore can be beneficial - in both open and closed communities - to have members join explicitly and possibly in connection with a shared rite of passage.

Closed communities sometimes have an air of “elitism” due to their selective nature. A transparent selection process can partly offset that.

Selection process: There are a different ways of structuring it.

- Invitation/nomination: People are invited to join the community, either centrally or decentrally.
- Application: Potential members have to apply to become members, and are evaluated by a committee. The committee might be internal or external to the organization, people from dedicated staff, or organized in a decentral way.
- Referral: People have to be referred by current members (or a subset of them) in order to apply.
- Geographic restrictions or time restrictions: Applications/new members are only accepted from specific places and/or during specific time windows.

Entry Point - Member Selection

Reflections

Onboarding: We have observed successful communities to be intentional about how they not just select, but then carefully onboard new members. A strong onboarding process includes the following elements:

- Making the new person feel welcome and safe in this new environment.
- Actively familiarizing them with the community's core beliefs, purpose, rules and guidelines.
- Clarifying what commitment is expected from them.
- Showing them how to make most out of the community.
- Directing them towards a clear first few steps that will set them out on the right path.
- Helping them make first connections within the group.

We find that onboarding works best if it is as personal as possible: A call or even face-to-face meeting with the new member(s) are preferable to a standardized email.

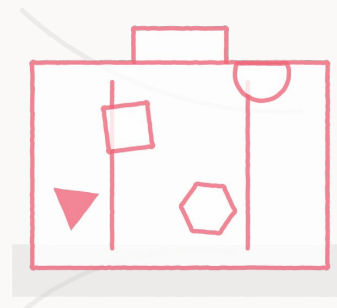
Growth: A surprising number of communities don't have a conscious plan for growth and continued renewal of the membership base. If the community thinks growth is important, what measures does it take to achieve it?

Identifying potential members

- Inbound identification: Potential members self-identify and then actively seek out the community and membership in it.
- Outbound identification: The community, or its governing organs, identify potential members. This can happen centrally (e.g. through research) or decentrally (by letting existing members, or parts of them, extend invitations or make referrals).

How do members leave the community?

- Is there ever an end to the experience or does membership continue on indefinitely?
- Is there a separate structure or experience for people who have left the community (e.g. an alumni community)?
- How does the community handle inactive members?



Exit Point - Member Transition

Reflections

Most communities think about how the experience starts, but many do not have a plan how the experience ends. Limiting the membership experience might feel like a disadvantage, but we have seen many communities use it to their advantage: it makes the actual experience more intense and increases activity levels and retention during that core phase, it provides a clearer narrative for the experience with a start and an end point, as well as defined moments in between.

Defining the end: There are different ways of setting boundaries for a community experience: based on time, based on achievements or milestones, based on adherence with guidelines and rules, based on other criteria (e.g. if they pass a certain age, or are not based in the same location anymore, or if a majority of members feel a membership should be terminated).

Alumni: People leaving successful communities often have a strong sense of shared identity that can last for many years beyond their actual membership. This can be further enhanced and empowered by channeling members into a alumni community. The alumni community can operate on a spectrum from being completely independent from the original community to being a core pillar of it.

Inactive members: Most communities have a core group of very active members, a group of somewhat active members and then some totally inactive members. Ideally, a community has rules in place that clarify what defines a member as “inactive” and processes for how to either re-engage them or transition them out.

What experiences do members share in the community?

- How do the individual experiences connect to the community's overall goals?
- Why are certain experiences more important than others?
- How are shared experiences organized: is everything organized top down for the members? Or do members organize experiences for each other?
- Do the shared experiences speak to a diverse group of members?



Shared Experiences

Reflections

From the perspective of a member, the shared experiences are what makes up the core of the community. These experiences lead to more interactions which lead to more trust among the members. There are endless possibilities how humans can come together, both in real life and virtually, from a monthly dinner hosted at one member's apartment, an annual summit, a weekly group video call, a weekend retreat at a big house outside the city, a bi-monthly support group meetup, a Wednesday morning 6am group workout, a joined trip to a new city, a pitch event in front of an audience, a weekly group meditation or a 6 week incubation program.

Consistency is everything: More than specific formats, we have found that rhythm and a reliable sense of repeatability play a huge part in making shared experiences more effective. Consistency gives members a sense of safety and signals to them that the community and the relationships are something to invest in for the longer term.

Top-down vs bottom-up: Shared experiences can either be organized top-down, by the people running the community, bottom-up by members of the community or by both. This distinction is on the one hand about scale and logistics. But on the other hand it is an important part of signaling to what extent running the community is a shared responsibility. If everything is provided from the top, members will get used to the fact that everything is served to them and expect that going forward. Designing shared experiences purposefully with members in charge can have larger implications across the whole organization and its overall mindset of shared responsibilities.

Simplicity wins: In general, younger communities tend to create rather sophisticated and complicated formats, while more mature communities tend towards simple and repeatable formats. In the long-term simplicity leads to consistency and repeatability.

Shared Experiences

Reflections

Diversity: Smartly designed experiences keep in mind the diversity of the group and speak to all members. Many communities tend to design more heavily for extroverted members, while introverted members or minority members often feel less welcome and included.

Further questions for developing shared experiences

- How do the different formats represent and strengthen the community's values?
- In what rhythm do these formats happen?
- Is there a chronological order between the different formats? Does one start with experience x and then move to experience y?
- Are all members invited to all experiences or just to some?
- Are all voluntary or some/all mandatory?
- Whom do the different formats serve? Between hyper local to totally global, what is the reach of each format?
- How do the formats empower or hinder the diversity of members and diversity of thought?

Which rituals enhance the community experience?

- Which rituals deepen the bonds among members?
- Which rituals embody the community's values?
- Which rituals mark specific milestones in the membership experience?
- Which rituals happen online?
- Which rituals happen in person?



Reflections

Rituals and traditions are recurring actions designed to strengthen a sense of belonging and, well, community. In contrast to *shared* experiences, rituals have primarily a symbolic value, and can be very personal. Often, their goal is to add deeper meaning and significance to “administrative” actions in a community, such as adding new members for example.

Choosing rituals and traditions: As the saying goes, there is only a choice between tradition and bad tradition. Traditions will come up naturally, so a community ideally sets them consciously. Thoughtful communities design these rituals with the community’s purpose and values in mind, initiate them from the top, and keep insisting on them, until the members naturally enact them themselves.

Rituals and traditions within a community fall roughly into three categories

- Rituals that exist to continuously strengthen the bonds among members
- Rituals that exist to embody the community’s collective values
- Rituals that mark milestones in the membership experience

Rituals to strengthen bonds among members: There are many small yet powerful ways how we, as a group, can signal that we care for each other, that our relationships matter and that new people are welcome. For example, some communities have a tradition to announce the birthdays of its members. This gives members a reason to reach out and celebrate each other. Some communities always make sure that everyone says hello to each other at an event, no matter who is there. This makes any newcomers automatically feel welcome and shows a dedication to taking care of everyone. We observed one ritual in a community of cyclists who meet every Saturday early morning to go on a ride together. They have a tradition that they will wait for anyone who

Reflections

has posted a brief “good morning” on their Whatsapp group that morning. This tiny action shows both the dedication of the individual to the group activity, but also that the group will take care of the individuals in it.

Rituals to embody the community’s values: Values can be a very abstract thing. Rituals are one way of making them tangible. For example, we have observed communities with the value of “presence” to live a tradition that encourages people at their events to turn off their phones and put them in a box at the entrance. Or another community encourages its members not to bring business cards and not to talk about work, as it values “informality and genuine relationships, not transactions”. Some communities choose to keep certain rituals a secret, as a way to increase the value of the ritual and strengthen the bonds of members.

Stages of membership: Rituals are also powerful tools to ceremoniously mark different phases of a membership experience. They become a rite of passage as the member passes from one stage to the next.

Examples

- Rituals marking the beginning of the community experience. Examples: welcoming new members online and asking them to introduce themselves, commencement event, initiations, hazing, welcome dinners, 1:1 welcome Skype call with the community organizer.
- Rituals marking growth or progress in the community. Examples: communion when people turn 16, weddings, birthdays, rites of passage.
- Rituals marking the end of the community experience. Examples: graduation, final demo day.

What content creates value for the community?

- How can the community tell the stories of its members?
- What content will create deeper bonds among members?
- How do members contribute valuable content to the community?



Reflections

Every community inevitably produces and consumes large amounts of “content”: knowledge, insights, stories. Many communities use content as an important tool to shape their members’ experience and bring members closer together.

Value of content: Content and its distribution within the community (→ [Structure > Channels & Platforms](#)) can create different kind of value for the members:

- Exposure to peers: featured members receive exposure among a trusted group of peers with their ideas, projects, lives.
- Inspiration by peers: members appreciate the community more, because they are inspired by other people who are part of the same community.
- Inspiration by activity level: members appreciate the community more, because they see how much is happening within the organization.
- Intimacy: members feel closer to each other, due to learning personal, behind-the-scenes stories about each other.
- Learning: members learn from the experiences, stories or best practice of other members or other geographical hubs within the community.
- Collaboration potential: members identify an opportunity to collaborate thanks to a story about another member.
- Pride: members feel a stronger sense of pride to be part of the community thanks to the kind of stories that are told about the community itself.
- Cross pollination: members are more likely to connect with a member from a very different geographical area, industry or background.
- Non-hub engagement: members feel part of the community, even though they are geographically not in one of the hubs of the community with a critical mass of people.

Reflections

Examples

- A foundation with fellows distributed all over the world shares news from its own members and their progress in a monthly email. Even though members don't have many chances to connect in person, this email strengthens their sense of shared identity and creates reasons for members to reach out to each other, even if they don't know each other yet.
- When hosting our 2012 Global Summit with Sandbox, we co-created a book ([The Sandbox Playbook](#)) with everyone attending about what people had learned at that summit and published with Bloomberg Businessweek. This became a proud symbol of collective achievement and a manifestation of the diverse minds within the organization.

- Daybreaker, a monthly event series happening in different cities across the world creates [a video](#) about one event where a community member asked his girlfriend to marry him during the event. This video makes you realize that this is not just an event you're attending, but this is a community that cares about each other on a more profound level.

Membership Rules

What are the community's rules?

- What does the community expect from each member?
- What can the member expect from the community?
- What is considered “out of bounds” misbehavior?
- What are the rules for online interactions?
- What are the guidelines for in-person gatherings?
- How does the community deal with inactive members?
- What happens if someone doesn't follow the rules?
- Which entity has the authority to create, change and enforce rules?



Membership Rules

Reflections

Communities are mini-societies and a clear set of rules makes the interactions easier and the overall organization more stable. While governance (covered in section 3: Structure) focuses on decision making for the overall organization, this section looks at the rules that guide the membership experience.

Setting expectations: Successful communities explicitly define what the expectations are towards each member. If every member knows what is expected, they can contribute accordingly (or choose not to). The member will also take the organization more seriously if they know that everyone has signed up to the same expectations, thereby making it more likely that they will be met. The community's success definition (→ [Identity > Success Definition](#)) offers a great starting point for defining these parameters.

Conflicts: Enforcing these rules isn't always easy. Many communities tend to be conflict-shy, as they hope to optimize overall trust and social cohesion. Even more so it's important to define in advance if the rules get enforced and if yes, by what entity (→ [Structure > Governance](#)).

Setting member expectations - three areas are especially important to define:

→ **Commitment**

- Is there a definition of what it means to be an "active" member?
- What duties does a member have?
- Is there a minimal engagement for a member to stay part of the community? What is it?

→ **Etiquette**

- How do members agree to interact with and treat each other?
- Does the etiquette relate to the community's values, and if yes, how so?

→ **Accountability**

- What happens if someone breaks the rules?
- Who keeps the group accountable?
- What makes people take the rules seriously?

Membership Rules

Reflections

Inactive members: Many communities have inactive members. It's a good idea to have rules and processes in place to either re-engage them or transition them out. To do so requires the community to define what "active" means - and members need to be aware what level of activity is expected from them.

Examples of expectations to members

- Commitment to show up at least 3 out of 4 times.
- No sales to members.
- Confidentiality about what is being said within community.
- Confidentiality that the community exists (secret society).
- Showing up prepared to monthly meetings.
- No phones, laptops, distractions during conversations.
- Members can't give advice, only share their own experience.

Self promotion: Many communities - especially ones with an internal purpose - want their members to actively share what they are working on or what they need help with. This exposure creates value for the member sharing their project. However, there is a danger that the community becomes a platform for self promotion. Mature communities find a balance and set clear rules for when and how members can share their initiatives and ask for help. One example that stood out to us comes from a community, where members are asked not to promote their own things, but instead have to find another member to post it for them.

Embedded rules: Ideally, the expected member behavior isn't just a written rule, but built into rituals and experiences. For example, if the guideline is to create a technology-free space at events to give full attention and respect to fellow members, a ritual can encourage members to put their phones in a box when they first arrive at an event. This is a simple and repeatable application of the rule. And it not only makes living up to the community's values

Membership Rules

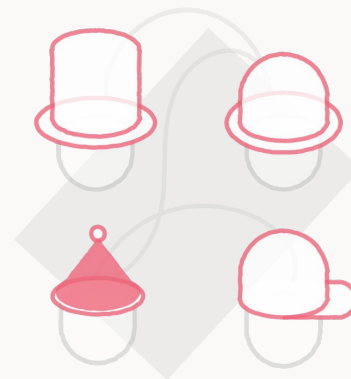
Reflections

easier, the ritual also allows members to transition from the outside world to the inside community with its own set of values.

Agreeing to rules: We have seen successful communities develop a tradition of members not just being informed of the rules, but having to explicitly agree to them (similar to a user agreeing to the terms and conditions of a service). Some communities choose to do this once, at the beginning of the membership experience. Some do this regularly, for example once a year, asking the member to confirm they are still committed to them. This acknowledgement of rules can be packaged in traditions and rituals, such as the signing of a “social contract” or by asking members to swear on them.

What roles can members play in the community?

- Why do the different roles exist?
- What are the expectations for each role?
- What are the rules for how handovers and transfer of responsibilities happen?



Membership Roles

Reflections

As members navigate their way through the community experience, often their roles change.

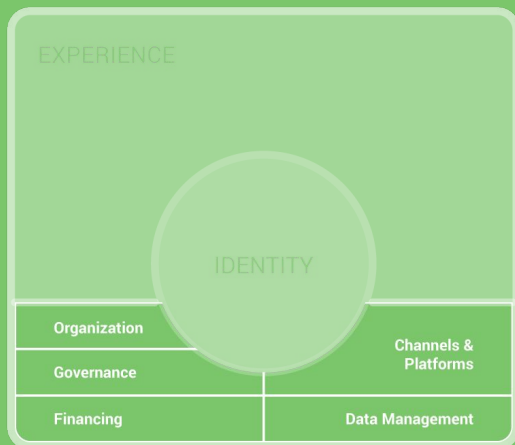
Some examples of roles

- Freshly accepted member, to be inaugurated
- Member receiving mentorship
- Member providing mentorship
- Leader of a local chapter
- Leader of a certain topic or area of expertise
- Community manager
- Online community manager
- Committee member
- Senior member, about to graduate
- Alumni

Setting expectations: Similar to the membership rules, it is beneficial to be explicit about expectations, duties, rights and benefits that come with each role. In particular it is important to set clear expectations on how long a certain commitment lasts. We have found successful communities to write actual detailed job descriptions with clearly spelled out responsibilities, benefits as well as time commitments.

Knowledge transfer: Communities often struggle with preserving collective knowledge over time attached to certain roles. A clearly defined handover process and a dedication to write down best practice can help with that.

Structure



The third part of the Canvas focus on organizational questions:
What gives the community stability in the long-term?

Themes

Organization

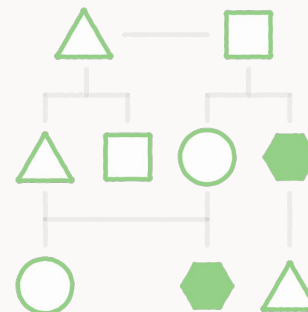
Governance

Financing

Channels & Platforms

Data Management

- How is leadership organized?
- Who does what?
- How is leadership incentivized for their work?
- Who hires and manages staff?
- What functions are considered critical for survival?
- What is the legal entity of the community and what requirements come with it?



Reflections

Every community faces the same questions as most other types of organizations. But because the focus in communities is often so intensively on the members and creating an amazing experience for them, structural and managerial questions often remain unaddressed.

Beyond the traditional management questions that apply to every organization, there are a few organizational areas that deserve special attention for the long-term stability of a community:

Knowledge transfer: because many communities are volunteer run, leadership changes more frequently than in other organizations. The transfer of knowledge from one generation of leadership to the next is often poor or non-existent, which creates instability and leads new leadership to reinvent the wheel every time. Mature communities address that by fostering a culture of documenting knowledge and sharing best practice across the whole organization.

Incentives for leadership: Many communities are volunteer run and that's part of the beauty of the model. But while running a community is enriching, it is also a lot of work and can be exhausting. That's why assuming that leadership will work without any rewards, incentives or reimbursements is not a sustainable plan in the long-term. At some point, people burn out and need to be replaced, or simply don't have the financial liberty to volunteer their time for free. It is in the community's best interest to empathize with their leadership and reward them for the work they are doing. This doesn't necessarily have to be monetary: there is a wide range of options that go from symbolic expression of gratitude to more pragmatic rewards such as supporting them with a coach or mentor, giving their own stories more exposure or collectively supporting their work outside of the community.

Board vs. management: Similar to what is common in most corporations, communities profit from splitting day to day operational and long-term, strategic responsibilities by creating different entities for it.

Reflections

Defining minimal critical activities: Many communities experience ups and downs. When a generation of highly motivated new members come in and provide fresh leadership, the community thrives, more financial resources are found and the portfolio of activities the community offers is expanded. However, once that cycle of excitement cools down, the community suddenly finds itself with less resources to keep up all of those services and is forced to scale back. This happens to many communities and is part of the natural evolution. Mature communities are aware of that and have defined what their critical core activities are that they need to sustain for the community to survive in the long-term. And once resources get tighter, they focus on ensuring those activities. Some examples for core issues include: the selection process, the support of the volunteers who run the community, the digital gathering platform, a few simple but very consistent shared experiences.

Examples for traditional community management roles:

- Selection process
- Onboarding of new members
- Administration of member data and membership fees
- Internal communication
- External communication
- Support of ambassadors / chapter leaders / volunteers
- Concierge functions for the members: helping members meet new members
- Organization of key shared experiences, like an annual summit

Legal entity: While communities can easily exist without any form of entity in the short-term, more formal ones are usually built on top of a legal entity, for example a non-profit. If this is the case, it is worthwhile to consider who owns and/or controls the entity, and if there are obligations to stakeholders of the entity who are not members of the community.

How are decisions made in the community?

- What are the community's decision-making bodies?
- How is decision-making power distributed or concentrated within the community?
- What gives the decision-makers their authority?
- How are conflicts handled within the community?



Reflections

When communities start out, their decision-making is often very ad hoc. As communities mature, their decision-making becomes more structured.

Concentrated versus distributed decision-making: A central question for many communities is how much decision making power should be located in one central entity (founders, board, full-time staff) versus the overall membership base. Centralized, top-down decision making tends to be more efficient, consistent, faster and clearer. Decentralized, bottom-up decision making tends to scale better, get more buy-in from members and increase overall excitement and trust of the members into the overall organization - but it also tends to be messy and slow. Mature communities find a good balance between the two, clearly defining what kind of questions are addressed centrally, what decisions best made decentrally and how the two are combined.

Examples for mixed decision-making:

- Local chapter leaders have the power to run the community independently within the formats provided by the central global organizers.
- Once a year the members are surveyed on strategic questions, the leadership then makes the final decisions based on the inputs from the members.
- The chapter leaders survey their local members and then all meet globally together with the community's leadership to decide and vote on strategic questions.

Different approaches for defining decision makers:

- Birthright: being the founder of the community.
- Earned: through seniority or merit.
- Democratic: decision makers were chosen as representatives of the group.
- Hired management.

Reflections

Conflict resolution: Conflicts among members of the same community are not uncommon. However, many communities are conflict-shy and they try to avoid them at any cost. Mature communities usually have put processes in place before an actual conflict arises, so that a clearly defined procedure can be followed in that uncomfortable situation.

These questions are important to define a conflict resolution strategy:

- If a conflict arises among members, who will deal with it and how?
- If a conflict arises between a member and the hired staff, who will deal with it and how?
- If a conflict arises among the decision makers, who will deal with it and how?

What is the community's plan to be financially sustainable?

- How is the community financed?
- How does it generate revenue?
- Non-profit vs. for-profit: Does the community have a profit motive?
- Does the community rely on revenue from its members (internal), or other sources (external)?



Reflections

Most communities in the world operate without any structured funding and are powered through the unpaid work of its volunteer members. For the communities that operate with a budget, finding a sustainable business model isn't straightforward.

Examples for revenue streams:

- **Internal revenue streams:** Membership fees, buy-ins, donations, internal crowd-funding.
- **External revenue streams:** Revenue generated through community assets (consulting, sharing intelligence and data from the community), through marketing-based partnerships (sponsorships, advertisement), charity-based partnerships (grants, fellowships) or other revenue, unrelated to the community.

Internal revenue: We have observed modern communities to be cautious about raising internal revenues from members and opting for external revenue. This seems counterintuitive, as traditionally, most communities have been financed almost exclusively through internal membership contributions and it is the most obvious channel to pursue. Internal revenue can have the advantage of being more stable over time than external revenue and it has an added positive effect that it makes members more aware - and maybe more critical - of the value they receive from the community. Raising membership fees is a direct measure of success and a manifestation of how much the experience is worth to its member. If members are not willing to pay membership fees, it's a clear indicator that the organization is not creating the right kind of value.

Reflections

Equality and diversity: The revenue model is often connected to questions of equality and shows how serious it is about its commitment to diversity: Does the organization want to exclude people that can't afford membership fees? Are there ways the community supports people that can't afford membership fees (for examples through patrons or fellowships)?

An increasing number of communities are exploring a “pay as much as you want” approach to membership fees to address issues of inequality and get a direct feedback mechanism on value created for the community.

Long-term funding strategies: For communities with long-term timelines (with the aim to exist for more than 100 years), other models are worthwhile exploring such as creating an endowment and tapping alumni for financial support. US universities have successfully pioneered some long-term revenue models in this regard. Some communities are experimenting with their own venture funds.

For-profit vs nonprofit: the most natural financial structure for a community is a nonprofit entity, however with the rise of social entrepreneurship we see an increasing number of community builders exploring the avenues of a for-profit and at the same time we see for-profit corporations start communities of their own. Our experience and observations have shown, that the for-profit structure can be dangerous if expectations are not managed very carefully and everyone's expectations are aligned. In the end, the members' trust is the most valuable asset the community has, and a for-profit motive can endanger that in the long-term. This can be a reason for for-profit organizations to consider making their community a protected nonprofit within their larger organization, to long-term ensure and protect the trust of the members.

What channels does the community use to communicate and gather?

- What are the core digital needs of the members and which platforms can fulfill them?
- What is the existing digital behavior of the members and how can the community integrate into that?
- Where does the community meet regularly - physically or digitally?
- How does the community communicate internally? With the outside world?
- What are the requirements of the community towards their physical spaces?



Reflections

Community first, platform second: we regularly see community organizers start their endeavours by as a first act selecting a platform and then building a community around that. Our experience has shown the opposite: the community's needs and existing behaviors need to be understood first, then in a second step the right platforms and channels can be found for it.

Understanding existing behavior and needs:

- What needs do members of the community have that digital tools could address?
- What tools do members naturally use outside of the community already?
- What kind of platform will create the most value for them?
- What tool will ensure the highest level of activity levels?

Activity levels trump smart features: often there is a trade-off many communities face when it comes to their platforms. The community can either develop their own technology with tailor-made features that perfectly fit the member's needs, or they integrate into larger, existing platforms that the community already uses, but with much more basic technological features. The existing platforms, however, often see much higher activity and retention levels than the more sophisticated tailor-made ones, and we have observed many communities abandon their costly developed own platforms to join simpler existing ones. In the end, it is more important for the community to provide channels and platforms that are heavily used, even if their functionalities are poor. Platforms with existing user behavior, such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Slack or LinkedIn, tend to create more active and lively groups.

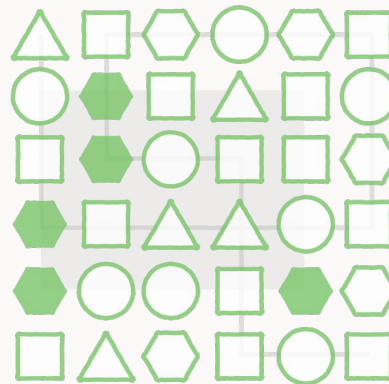
Reflections

Consistency before technology: we have found that while a clear understanding of the channels and platforms is important, what matters even more is rhythm and consistency, similarly to Shared Experiences (→ [Experience > Shared Experiences](#)). It matters less how the community communicates and what is communicated, as long as communication happens regularly in a reliable manner.

Convergence of online and offline: Most communities start in one medium (for example offline), but then over time tend to add the counterpart. Offline groups that meet regularly will want to exchange online as well. Online-only groups will want to meet offline once they reach critical mass.

How does the community manage the data of its members?

- How does the community keep its member contacts up-to-date?
- How can members search for other members within the community?
- What insights are critical for the community to regularly derive from its members?
- How does the community capture insights and knowledge generated in the community?



Reflections

Data management seems at first like a minor point, but as communities mature, this point becomes crucial. The kind of data a community decides to collect will shape the future form of the community. Many communities struggle to find a consistent system and repeatedly re-do their data management efforts again and again.

Search: One of the key needs of many community members is to find ways to look up other community members based on background, experience, location, interests, etc. This creates a lot of value for members, but isn't easily executed. Most communities doing this still use very basic tools, such as a shared Google Sheet.

Capturing insights: Many communities are treasure troves of insights. When members share best practices, ask each other for their favorite books on topic x or discuss philosophical topics, they create information that would be valuable for other members, of this and later generations. However, most communities don't have the capacity nor tools to capture those collective insights.

Download Worksheets

Summary

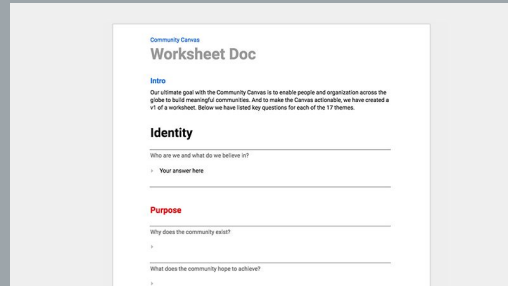
This visual overview contains all 17 themes and the most important question for each theme. This PDF is optimized for printing the whole Canvas on one page.



Download

Comprehensive Doc

This Google Doc lists each of the 17 themes with all of the relevant questions. This doc is for people looking to select the relevant themes and create their own community strategy.



Open

Get involved

Join our Community

We created a Facebook group for people building communities. Join us if you're looking for peer advice, support and best practice ideas.

[Community Builder Group](#)

Sign up for updates

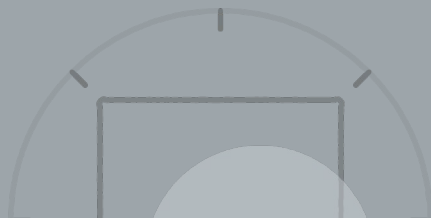
Leave your email if you'd like us to message you when we have a new version available, when we publish case studies for the themes or other community building tools.

[Sign Up](#)

More about the Canvas

If you're curious to learn more about the Canvas and why we created it, check out our website.

community-canvas.org



A Sincere Thank You

The development of this Canvas would never have been possible without the countless hours of insights and feedback provided by so many community builders across the world - we are incredibly grateful for your contributions and we continue to learn so much from you. We owe this Canvas to your generosity and the amazing work you all do!

We hope that by making the Canvas freely accessible to any community builder - aspiring or existing - we get to share your knowledge and kindness with the world.

Lastly, we look at the Canvas as work in progress and we are truly thankful for any feedback or advice you might have on how we can improve future versions. Please reach out to us, our contacts are on the next page. And thank you!

Special thanks to Christine Lai, Casper ter Kuile, Angie Thurston, David Spinks, Alex Simon, Daniel Ospina, Mathias Jakobsen, Scott Shigeoka, Anton Chernikov, Ryan Fix, Michel Bachmann, Nettra Pan, James McBennett, Konstantina Zoehrer, Omri Bauer, and all participants of the Community Canvas workshops!

Let us know what you think!

We'd love to know what you think about the Canvas and how we can help your community. Please also reach out to us if you have any suggestions on how we can improve future versions of the Canvas! Email us at team@community-canvas.org or get in touch with us individually below.

About The Authors



Fabian Pfortmüller is an entrepreneur and community builder based in NYC and Mumbai. He runs COMMUNITY, an advisory firm that helps organizations build meaningful communities. Together with Nico and others he co-founded the community Sandbox, a global community for entrepreneurial people in their twenties. Most recently Fabian co-founded the lifestyle brand Holstee, known for its Manifesto and monthly subscription.

pforti@gmail.com
[@pforti](https://twitter.com/pforti)
pforti.com



Nico Luchsinger is a Zurich-based entrepreneur and journalist. He co-founded Sandbox with Fabian, and led the organization until 2013. Currently, he heads up strategy and programming at Asia Society Switzerland, a think-tank focused on exploring Asia's role in the world.

nico.luchsinger@gmail.com
[@halbluchs](https://twitter.com/halbluchs)
medium.com/@halbluchs



Sascha Mombartz is a designer and founder of the Office for Visual Affairs – a branding and user experience design studio in New York. Previously he worked at the New York Times and at Google's Creative Lab, before co-founding startups in retail, tech and finally his own studio to work with early stage companies.

s@officeforvisualaffairs.com
[@supermombartz](https://twitter.com/supermombartz)
officeforvisualaffairs.com