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Community Building for Newsletter Companies

JAN 21, 2023 | by Ethan Brooks



Trends

Welcome to chapter three of our guide the newsletter industry.

In this section, we'll be looking at how newsletter businesses build a strong sense of community among their readers, and why that's important.

We've talked to founders, writers, and editors across the industry, including deep dives with our team here at *The Hustle*, early hires at *Morning Brew*, and the teams behind third-party products like Substack, Pico, Sparkloop, and more.

We've distilled their advice into a few simple lessons. In this sections, we'll unpack:

- What community building REALLY means and how most get it wrong

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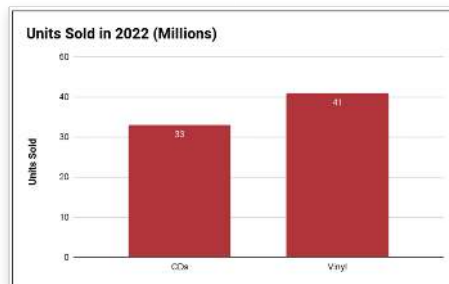
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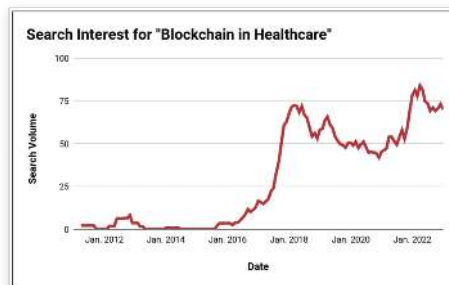
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What's Old Is New Again



- Tactics for building community both in and out of the newsletter
- Examples from publications of all sizes
- And much more...

When you finish here, you should understand the key steps you need to start taking today in order to foster a sense of community among your readers.

[See more](#)

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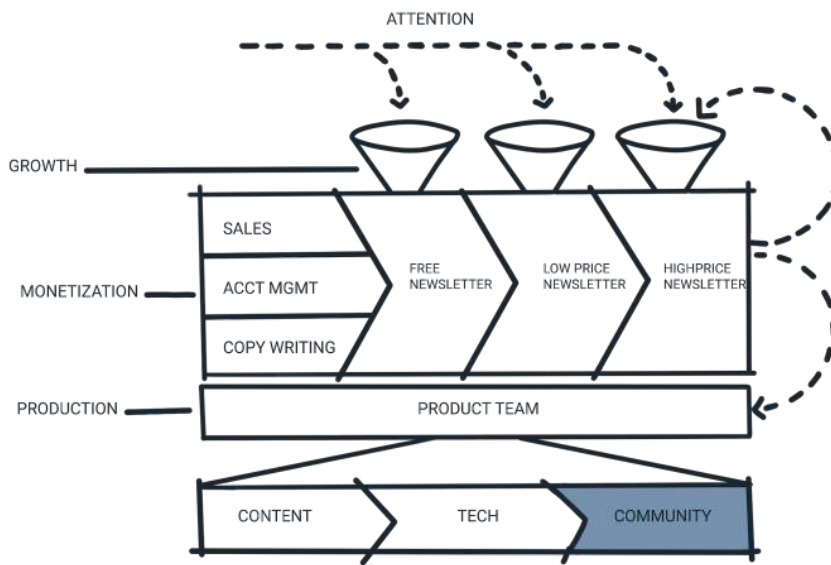


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If your unique voice is the beacon that attracts people to your newsletter early on, then the sense of community you build in and among your readers is what keeps them around long-term.

It's a retention play, and a strong community protects you from competitors while increasing the value of either free or paid newsletters.

Would they ever switch teams just because a rival's jerseys were on sale?

Absolutely not.

Die-hard sports fans illustrate why community building is so important:

When people find an authentic community that they identify with, they'll stick with it even if they have options that cost them less, pay them more, or are more prestigious.

Knowing how to build a real sense of community around your newsletter is crucial to its long-term success.

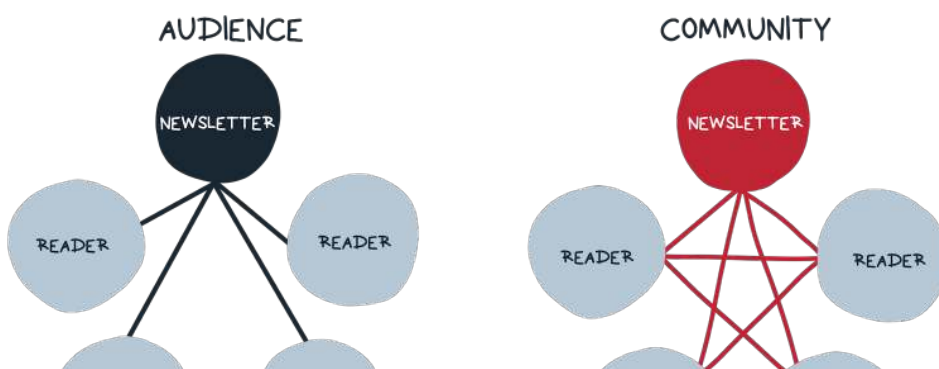
What is community building, really?

The term "community" is thrown around a lot today, and as with most overused terms, its meaning has gotten muddled.

Many people mistake audience building for community building, but there's a key difference.

An audience is a one-to-many communication pathway: you broadcast a message to lots of people, and they have the ability to respond to you, but they don't really know or care about each other.

A community, on the other hand, goes one step further, actively fostering relationships between readers:



Fostering these connections takes time and effort — community building can't be gamed or hacked. But that's exactly why it remains such a successful tool for both retention and growth.

Community building is rare — even large newsletters with millions of readers don't necessarily have strong communities — but anyone willing to put the effort in can reap the rewards.

As Jarrod Dicker of *The Washington Post* told us, these strong bonds offer smaller newsletters a leg up when it comes to retaining their audience.



When we talk about building a community, we're really talking about doing two things at the same time:

- Creating a space where people can gather, often done through the use of digital platforms (like Facebook or Slack) or in-person events
- Creating a shared sense of identity among those people through the use of language, symbols, and rituals

Together, you have the power to both retain your audience and bring in new readers.

And while community work is definitely slow going in the beginning, if you do it right, your community will begin to pull in outside members and its size will grow exponentially.

You have opportunities to do both of these inside and outside of your email, in

Understanding Your Audience

As you go through these early stages of growing organically, one of your main goals should be to develop an understanding of your audience based on individual interactions with them.

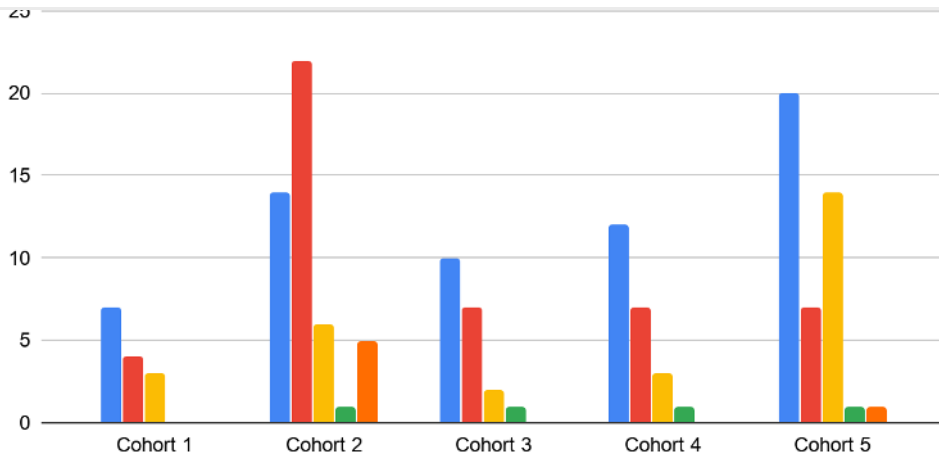
Gather audience insights by:

- **Talking to readers:** It would be hard to overstate the value of a 15- to 20-minute call with one of your readers. Anuj Abrol, founder of the *Witty Wealth* newsletter, has talked to more than 100 of his subscribers since launching in May 2020, using their insights to shape the direction of his product. We also do this frequently at *Trends* (see below for some of our favorite questions).
- **Running surveys:** If used properly, surveys can be great tools to gather demographic data and insights on your readers' content preferences. The trick: use them sparingly, and only to *supplement* your existing data. **Never ask a survey question your other analytics tools can already answer for you.**

For example, your ESP will tell you exactly who opens your newsletter, and how often. So you wouldn't want to ask that question in a survey. Instead, try to collect data that you don't have yet, but that would offer a more interesting picture of your audience if added to your existing data.

In a 2020 survey of our *Trends* community, we asked readers about their favorite *Trends* feature. Then we correlated those responses with data we already had about when each reader had joined.

We found that many early members weren't aware of new features like AMAs, lectures, and databases. We were then able to take action on this data, raising awareness of those features, and improving people's feelings about the overall product.



- **Studying user behavior:** Understand how people actually consume your content.

What do they click on? How engaged are they? Ask them to be part of beta and focus groups to help you improve your product.

One of the first things Cory Brown, a former audience insights manager at *ProPublica* and independent audience consultant, asks people he works with: Will you let me talk to your subscribers?

A structured conversation with your readers can reveal gaps and opportunities you didn't even know existed.

Here are some of our favorite questions to ask subscribers of our paid newsletter, *Trends*:

“Tell me the story of the day you decided to pay for *Trends*.”

Forget asking people *why* they subscribed; instead, get them to tell you a story.

Their mind will travel back to the day they joined, and they'll surface details they otherwise may have never mentioned.

“Since joining, what has surprised you most (good, and not so good)?”

Surprises are great because they reveal a difference between expectations and reality. If people tell you about a pleasant surprise (e.g., “There are so many interesting people commenting on your articles”), then you've found something



On the other hand, if they share a negative surprise, you now have something your team can work on fixing.

Be sure to encourage both — tell them you need constructive criticism in order to get better. Then, when they tell you about your weaknesses, just listen and try to understand. Don't try to defend yourself, or convince them they're wrong.

“What kinds of challenges do other people in your industry face?”

It can be tricky to get people to talk about challenges they're facing, especially if it's the first time you're talking. If you come straight out and ask, you're likely to get answers that are predictable, incomplete, or inaccurate as they try to answer your question without appearing weak or flawed.

A better lead-in to that conversation is to get them to think about other people who are like them. It's easier to think of challenges others are struggling with — structuring the question in this way offers some room for interviewees to project their own experiences onto some unnamed “other.”



Building Community Inside the Email

People love to see their name in the content they consume, and one of the simplest ways to build a sense of community is to go out of your way to mention them in your newsletter.

In our inaugural *Trends* email, our founder Sam Parr found a clever way to mention the names of new readers right away:

Trends

Online healthcare hits its stride, while a surge of VPNs keep you from



Dear reader,

Tell personable stories and mention people by name

I got dozens of calls this week after my personal cell number was accidentally attached to some Trends receipts.

Apparently, people call the number on receipts for no reason other than to say hello. So **a big shout out to Joe from Houston and Vickie in Fort Myers**. Was lovely speaking with you. And sorry if I was a little short...I thought you were just another scam robocall!

But anyway, **welcome to Trends!**

.. . . .

These kinds of callouts are similar to what late-night hosts like Jimmy Kimmel do when they interview random tourists on the street.

When people know they're going to be on TV, they tune in, they tell their friends to tune in, and it forever changes their relationship with that show.

Writing about the people who read your newsletter does the same thing. It also forges connections between members of your audience who were previously unaware of each other, reminding every reader that they're part of something bigger.

This doesn't need to take a lot of time. For example, look at the way Packy McCormick welcomes new readers of the *Not Boring* newsletter each week:

Bill-A-Bear

How a bad product experience uncovered one of 2020's most overvalued stocks

Jan 4

Check out how Packy welcomes newcomers, and acknowledges the whole community.

Welcome to the 2,422 newly Not Boring people who have joined us since the last 2020 email! If you aren't subscribed, join 29,257 smart, curious folks by subscribing here:

[Subscribe now](#)

To get this essay straight in your ears: listen on Spotify (in about 30 minutes).

many people read it.

On their own, these callouts might not have a huge impact, but they humanize your newsletter (you can bet Joe and Vickie noticed).

One interesting and useful opportunity is answering community questions right inside the newsletter. *Morning Brew* does this with a segment they call “Mail Bag”:

Q&A

Mail Bag

Q from Beth in Indiana: When thinking about your weekly reading, how often do you read non-news, like fiction or brain candy?

Jamie's A: I recently (finally) got a Kindle, and have subsequently upped my intake of fiction dramatically. Luckily, *Morning Brew* appreciates a creative metaphor, so I can tell myself that staying up late reading fantasy novels *improves* my writing the next day. And yes, I'm on a fantasy kick right now. I usually read one “prestige” fiction book and one “fun” title simultaneously, not that the two can't overlap.

- This year, I set a goal to read 100 books because I'm a “shoot for the moon when my only mode of transportation is a pogo stick” kind of goal setter. You can follow my reads [here](#).

I know there are plenty of other non-news readers at *Morning Brew*, too, because we have 1) a recurring reading recommendation series called *Brew's Bookshelf* and 2) an internal book club. If you want to read along with us, the last book we read was Elena Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults*, and now we're reading *A Children's Bible* by Lydia Millet.

For more book recs, Retail Brew writer Halie LeSavage reviews her reads [on Instagram](#).

Want to ask the Brew Crew something else? [Click here](#).

As David Cohn, co-founder of Subtext, told us, answering common user questions inside your newsletter actually accomplishes three things:

- You answer the person (or people) who asked the question.
- You answer the people who *wondered* about the same thing but never asked about it.
- Most important — you show you're paying attention to your community.

To this, we would add that you take a small step toward building that sense of community that's so important in retaining readers.

If you're willing to invest time and energy into creating unique content focused on members of your community, there's really no limit to what you can do. But two other versions of this that are worth thinking about include:

- Highlighting individual members of the community
- Publishing guest posts from members of the community

The key to a great community member highlight is to make the information as useful as possible to the rest of your readers.

For example, when the stock market crashed at the beginning of the pandemic, we surveyed our audience of business owners to learn how they survived the last economic recession.

We turned their answers into a series of posts and highlights that shared interesting data, quick snippets, and even longer profiles of real readers, all of which were helpful to other business owners.

The furniture makers

Mary Ann Hesseleinz and Scott Baker at their furniture business.

When Scott Baker met Mary Ann Hesseleinz at first sight, it was the beginning of a love story. Baker had been building high-end fashion design for 20 years in New York City. Hesseleinz had launched **Baker Hesseleinz Studio**, a luxury furniture business. The business catered to a wealthy clientele, with a \$17,641 couch, or a \$22,137 chair. But when the recession tanked the economy, the business was in trouble.

The florist

Nic Fallos at his flower shop in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, NYC. (Photo courtesy of Nic Fallos)

For Nic Fallos, the path to flowers began as a punktail rebellion. In 1994, he was working as a stockbroker on Wall Street — a position that required him to wear a suit every day and banned him from growing out his flowing mane. At the time, he was also a small flower shop in a low-traffic bedroom community on Long Island. Fallos began to study the retail landscape for flowers in NYC and spotted a gaping opportunity in the \$20B space. "Fortune 500 companies needed flowers for their offices and employees," he says. "But most flower people couldn't make a spreadsheet to save their lives. These businesses wanted someone who spoke their language."

So, he launched **Starbright Floral Design**, cold-called HR departments all over the city, and established himself as a go-to for corporate flower orders. By the end of the year, he was making \$180K/year.

The creative agency owner

Ernest Montgomery, owner of a creative agency.

How Great Recession business survivors fared

Which best describes your financial state during the 2008 crisis?

Revenue went down a lot	26%
Revenue went down slightly	13%
Revenue stayed constant	21%
Revenue went up slightly	21%
Revenue went up a lot	18%

Data: The Hustle survey of 212 small businesses that survived the Great Recession of 2007-09 (April 1-5, 2020)

HUSTLE

The same goes for guest posts by community members.

Codie Sanchez and the team over at *Grow Getters* does an excellent job of leveraging the intelligence of their community through guest posts, as the

A couple of weeks ago, we got a comment from Roman Beylin, who runs a newsletter called [The Business Inquirer](#) that highlights business acquisition opportunities:



Encourage guest posting

The rest, as they say, was history. He reached out with a post that we thought y'all would love. If you're reading this thinking, HEY I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY - do it. Shoot us an email at gg@growgetters.co and if it's a good fit, we'll consider including it in an upcoming newsletter!

As you can see, this goes way beyond the simple one-to-many broadcast structure of building an audience.

In the example above, Sanchez uses her platform to help one of her readers build his own audience. That's the kind of thing people never forget.

Not only is Roman likely to be a longtime reader of *Grow Getters*, but he will also likely follow Sanchez into other projects she tries in the future, and may even spread the word to his own audience.

That's the power of dedicating a little effort to building a real relationship with people and leveraging your newsletter to bolster it.

Building Community Outside the Email

Each of the methods above is worthwhile, and there are doubtless many more, but at some point, in order to foster strong ties among readers, you'll need to step outside the inbox and create a space where they can interact.

The biggest question on everyone's mind when they start focusing on community

We'll discuss specific platform options in a moment, but before we do, it's important to understand two things:

- Just like the rest of your tech stack, there are lots of options out there, and none are perfect. Rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution, we'll give you frameworks and examples for assessing your own needs.
- Even with a great platform, an active community doesn't happen on its own. The effort you put in as the leader will make all the difference, and we'll outline three key pieces of that equation.

Platform Options

There are tons of community-building platforms out there, with more emerging every day as companies wake up to the importance of community building.

Popular options can be broken into a few main categories:

- **Social media platforms** like Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube
- **Messenger platforms** like Slack, WhatsApp, and Telegram
- **Integrated platforms** like [Mighty Networks](#), [Circle](#), [Disqus](#) and [Discourse](#), which tie in to your website

Each has its own benefits and drawbacks...

Popular Community Platforms Brands Can Use		
Product	Pro's	Con's
Facebook or LinkedIn	Large user base and people already spend their days here, so they participate in conversations more readily.	You're beholden to their algorithms. Some members won't join due to strong feelings about these platforms.
Slack, Telegram, or WhatsApp	Less controversial than Facebook/LinkedIn. Slack offers multiple channels for organizing, and is a complete archive of past conversation.	Some of these platforms, like Telegram, can be overwhelming for large conversations, especially on mobile.

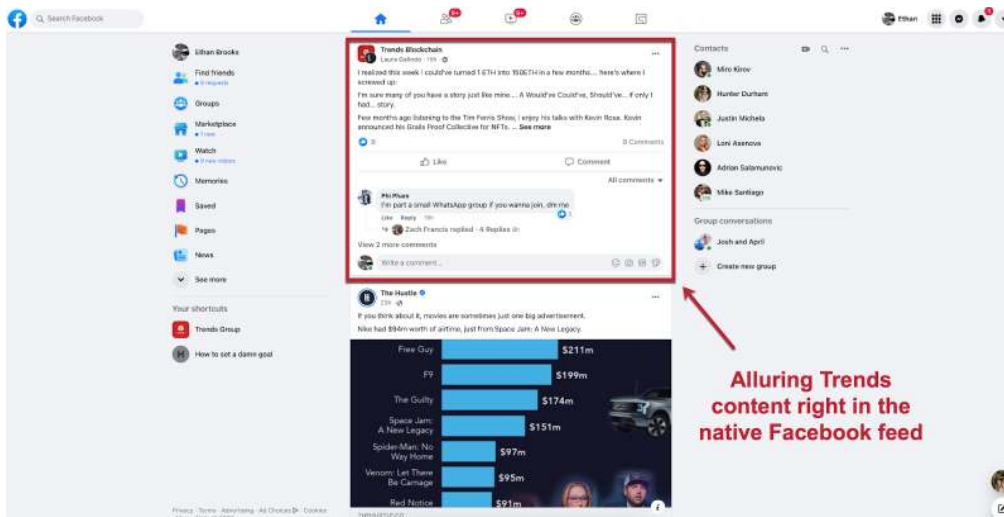
The most important question you can ask yourself...

... is “Where do your readers naturally gather already?”

If you want your community to be active, then participating in the daily conversation needs to be easy and natural for them. The ideal solution is to build on a tool they’re already using.

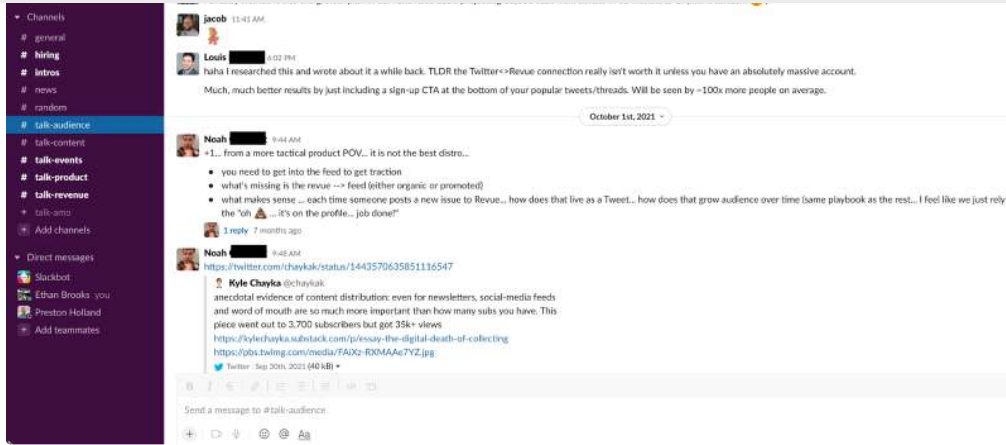
For years, we’ve used Facebook at *Trends* because, historically, Facebook was a website people in our audience had open all day already. **Joining the conversation inside our community didn’t represent any new work or learning on their part.**

People see *Trends* posts in their native feed and are pulled into the conversation without even trying. Facebook is also asynchronous — people can chime in on a discussion days, or even weeks, after it starts. This is much harder on platforms like Telegram or Slack.



However, after the widespread adoption of remote work during the pandemic, other tools like Slack are now more popular than ever, making them more viable as community-building platforms.

Founder of *A Media Operator* Jacob Donnelly, for example, runs his community on Slack.



Later, we'll see some of the diverse examples used by other newsletters.

But first, here are three more questions you'll definitely want to consider before choosing a platform for your community:

1. How will you keep track of everyone?
2. How will you communicate with them?
3. How will they communicate with each other?

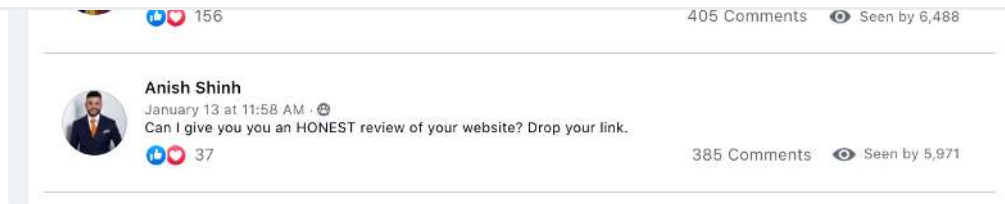
1. How will you keep track of everyone?

You're investing time, effort, and resources into attracting people to your community. Protect that investment by making sure new members don't fall through the cracks.

The platform you choose should make it easy for you to see an overview of all your members, and, ideally, give you some sense of who is active and who may need some attention in order to be more active.

For example, one thing that's frustrating about Facebook is that they don't really give you granular control over your data; Slack does a much better job of giving you insight about activity inside your community.





2. How will you communicate with everyone?

How will you share important information? Do you need to be able to contact people individually? Decide how you want to interact with your community, and let that inform the platform you choose to build around.

3. How will they communicate with each other?

As we said, the key difference between an audience and a community is that an audience is primarily a one-to-many communication stream. Brands talk to audiences, and members of that audience talk to the brand.

Communities, on the other hand, are all about connection.

The goal is not just to talk to your tribe, but to get them talking to each other. Therefore, when considering your platform, be sure to pick one that will make it possible for members to hold group conversations, DM each other, and see the history of the group's chat.

Basics of Community Building

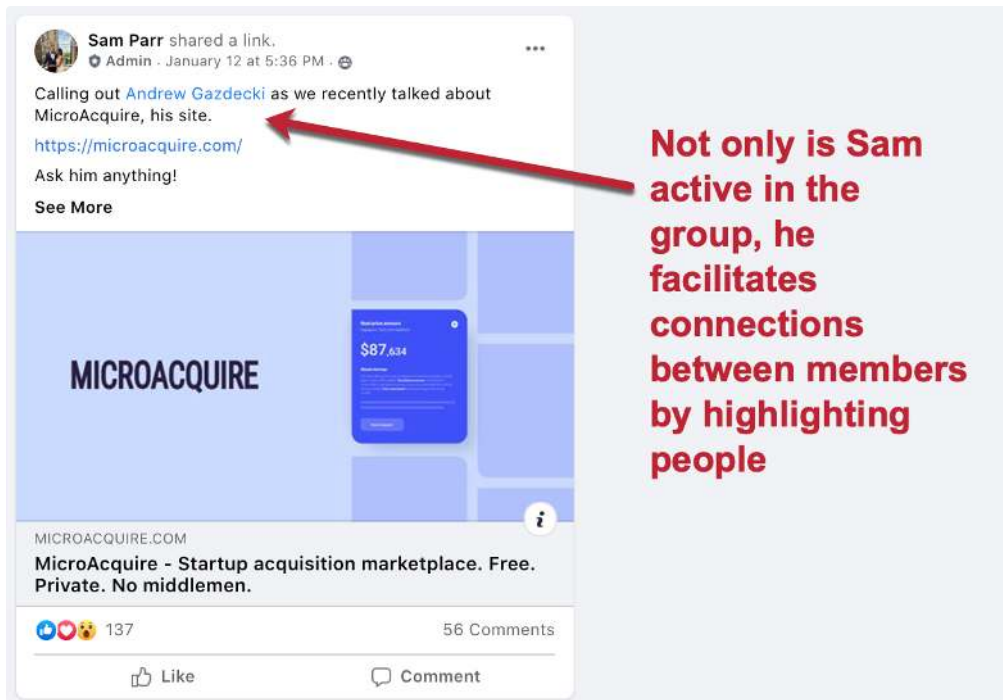
In the end, the platform you choose will be less important than how you use it. So let's turn our attention to some of the key things you'll need in order to give your community the best chance at success:

- Active leadership
- High-quality conversations
- A code — clearly communicated and enforced

Active Leadership

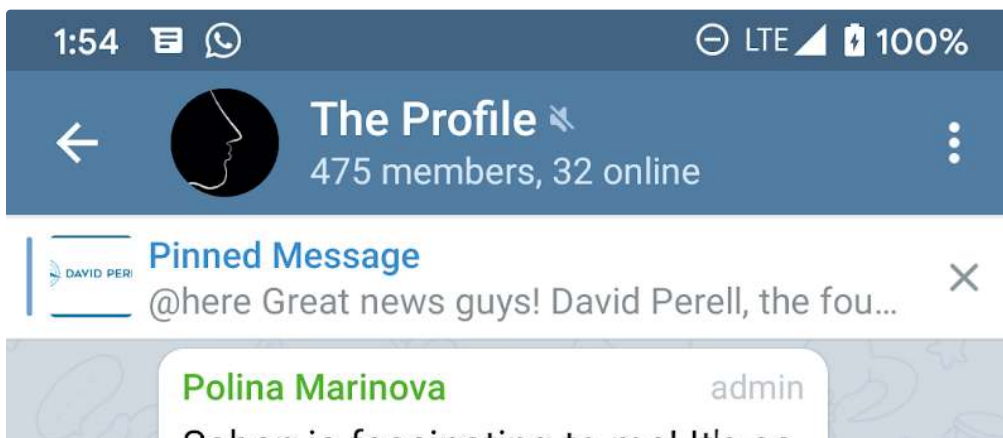
example. Rather than asking people to behave in a certain way, you need to do that thing yourself, early and often.

Sam is always posting inside our *Trends* community, along with other members of the team, and it builds strong connections between people, not just readers and a brand.



It's important that you're not just posting, but being part of the conversation — replying to people, offering your opinion, and engaging with other posts the way you would want people to engage with yours.

Polina Marinova, author of *The Profile* newsletter, does a great job of this in her private Telegram community for premium subscribers.





Notice how this isn't rocket science — it's just having conversations with real people. Many people overcomplicate community by trying to find some unifying theory to guarantee success.

Keep it simple — just talk with people. Ask them what they care about, and show them the things that interest you. Help them get to know one another. That's a community at the end of the day. Here are a few go-to conversation starters that

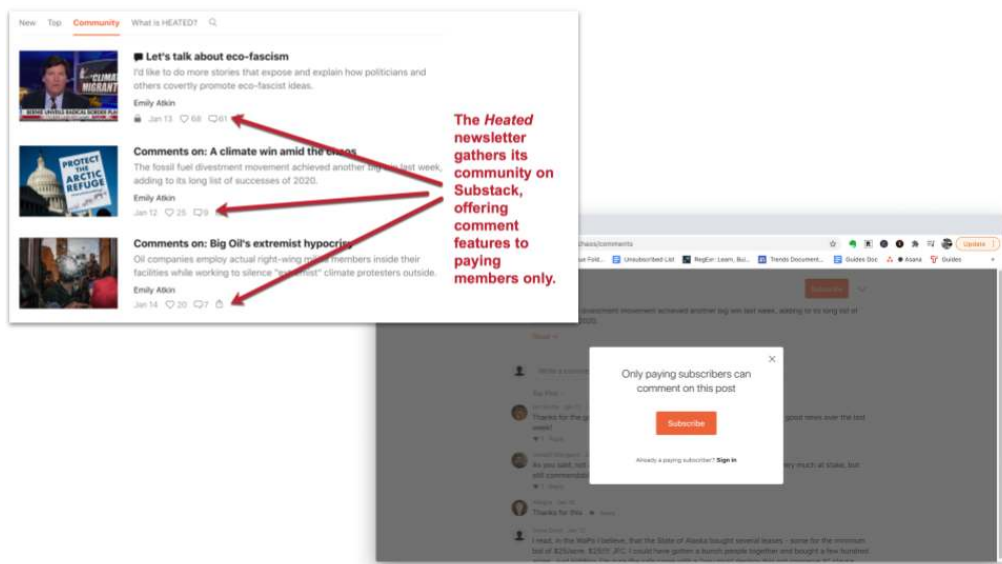
- Intro new users who've joined in the last week
- Highlight an expert member and let them give advice to other members
(organizing AMAs is a great way to do this)
- List job openings or help-wanted posts

High-Quality Conversations

One key to building a community people rave about is to make sure you have high-quality conversations going on inside.

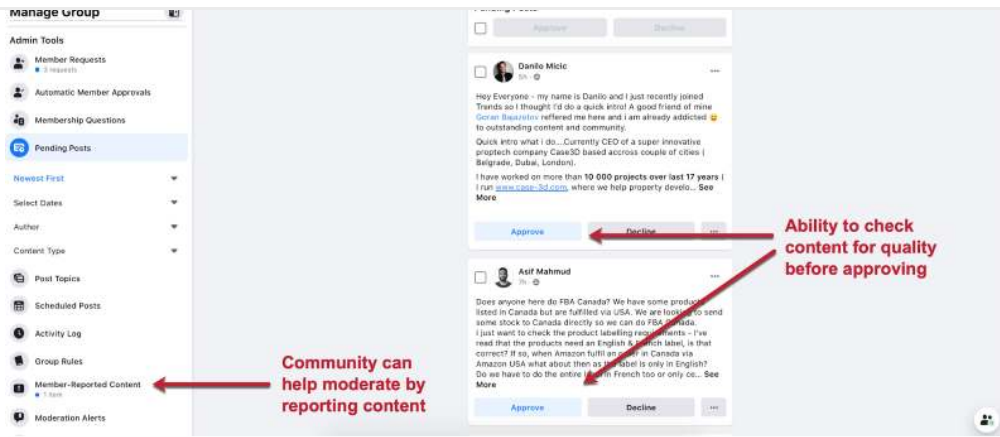
You don't want drive-by traffic or trolls jumping in to cause a ruckus. One way to do this is by limiting who's allowed to comment in the first place. Only people who are invested in the success of your community should be part of the conversation.

Some platforms make this easier. Substack, for example, makes it easy to limit commenting to paying subscribers only.



Facebook also offers features that allow you to moderate posts. You can allow everyone to post freely, or change the settings so that posts from certain users have to be approved before going live.

Facebook also allows you to require that all posts be approved and lets members report posts they feel aren't aligned with the group's purpose.



This ability for the group to help moderate itself is key in growing any community, which brings us to our next point...

You Need A Code

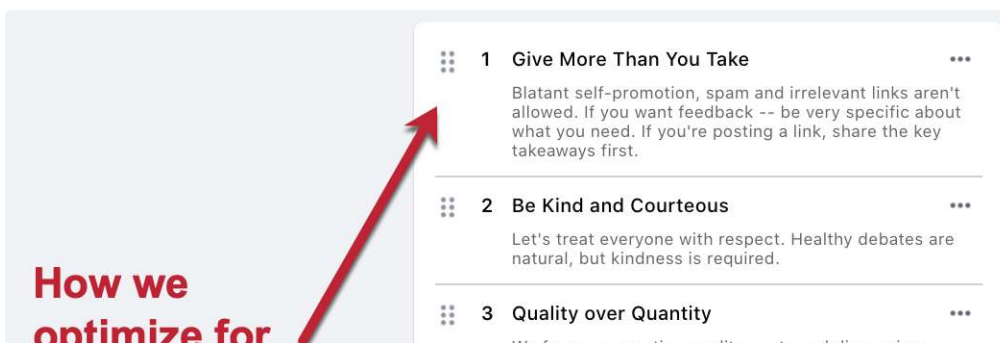
Even if you're careful about who gets into the group, things can get complicated quickly any time you bring a group of people together to discuss something they care deeply about.

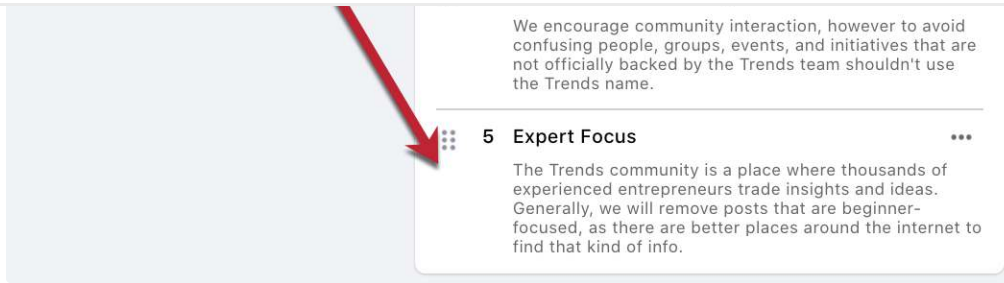
Inevitably, you'll run into situations where you need to make decisions about what behavior is allowed, and what's not. So it's important to set some rules for what you expect from people, communicate them clearly, and enforce them.

Recall that we said building a community is partly about building a shared sense of identity through language, symbols, and rituals.

The code you create contributes to that identity by helping members understand what's expected and how they can uphold their side of the bargain.

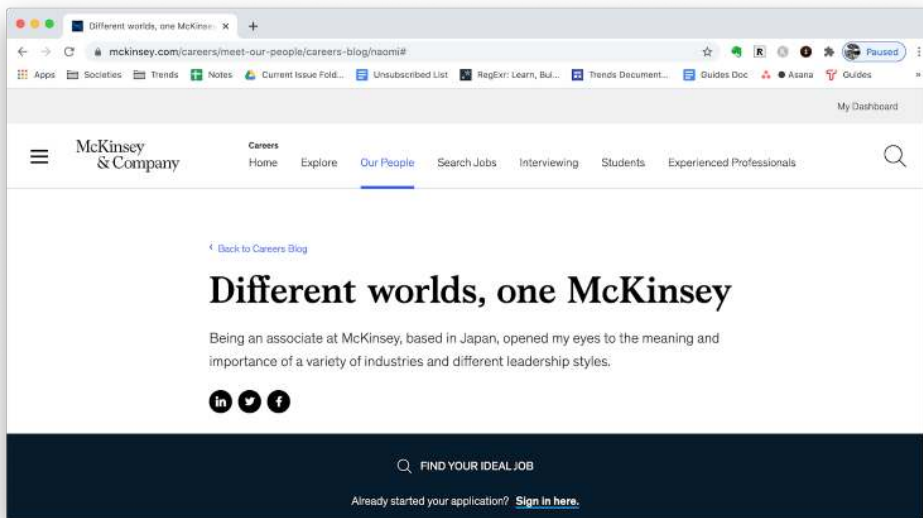
For example, our rules at *Trends* look like this:





You can call this set of rules whatever you like — community guidelines, a code of ethics, commandments, etc. — but no matter their name, their purpose is to codify the group’s understanding of what it means to be a member.

The consulting group McKinsey has a saying that every employee learns: “One McKinsey.”



What it means is that, even though there are lots of different branches and offices, they’re all part of the same company and, therefore, they’re all expected to help each other succeed.

If a McKinsey office halfway across the country calls you with a problem at 8pm on a Sunday, the unwritten rule — “One MicKinsey” — is that it’s the same as having *your* office call with a problem.

Having a shared value system is what empowers community members to make

Going Beyond the Code

You can also build this shared sense of identity through symbols, which allow community members to recognize each other and define status within the group.

Some interesting examples of this include *Morning Brew*'s use of the 🍷 emoji on Twitter.

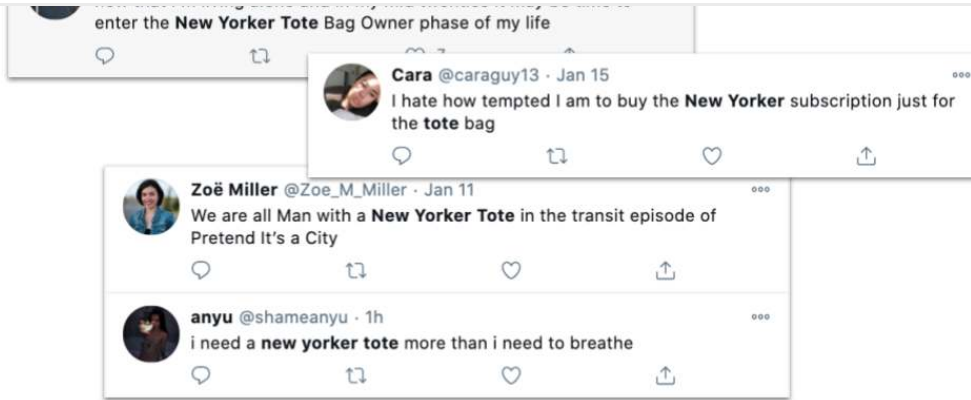


Employees add it to their Twitter handle, and members of their ambassador program are also invited to use it to mark themselves. For more on this, be sure to check out our *Morning Brew* case study later in this guide.

The New Yorker has a similar example, applied in the real world: the famous *New Yorker tote*, which has become a cult fashion icon taking on a life of its own:



Source: @NewYorkerTote / Instagram



The study of how to create a shared sense of purpose goes somewhat beyond the boundaries of this guide, but below are three of the best resources for this:

- **The Culting of Brands:** This book by Douglas Atkin (who led community at both Meetup and Airbnb) explores the psychology behind cults, and shows how some brands have adopted their principles in order to create lifelong die-hard members.
- **Building the Minimum Badass User:** This fun talk from technologist Kathy Sierra teaches you the most important thing you need to know about building a raving fan base.
- **This Is Not a T-Shirt:** Bobby Hundreds' fashion brand has such a strong following that he literally runs an incubator in their office for future competitors. For more on how they built their following, read Bobby's book.

You can also find notes on community building in each of our case studies, and check out our bonus resources on how to build a strong brand community, as well as this five-part framework for building your brand community.

About the editor



Ethan Brooks



Trends

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