



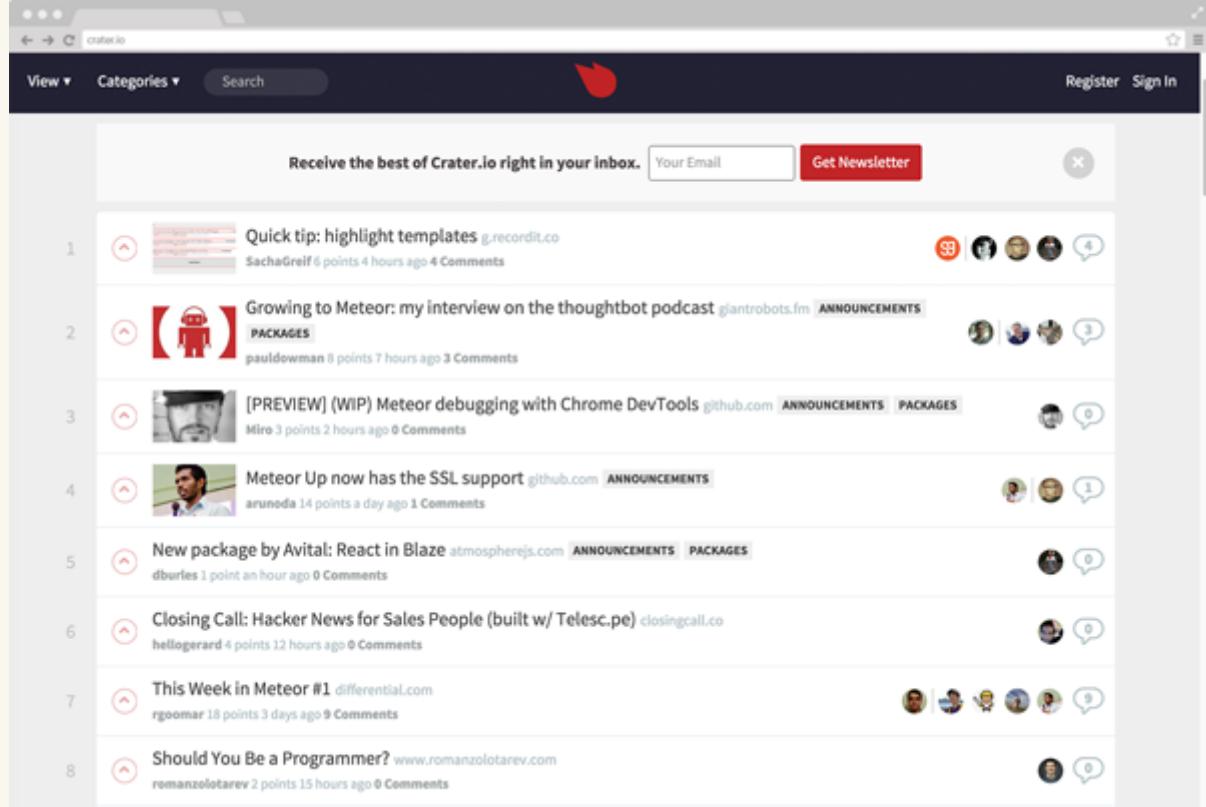
www.communitybuildingguide.com

Why do some communities thrive while others become ghost towns?

Building an audience is already tricky, but establishing a true *community* is even harder.

Setting up your blog, forum, or chat room is only the beginning. It's **what you do after** that will make all the difference. So in this guide, we'll look at nine "**bricks**" you can use to build up your community.

Let's get started!



The screenshot shows the Telescope app interface on a computer screen. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'View', 'Categories', 'Search', and a red bird icon. On the right, there are 'Register' and 'Sign In' buttons. Below the navigation, a call-to-action box says 'Receive the best of Crater.io right in your inbox.' with a 'Your Email' input field and a 'Get Newsletter' button. The main area displays a list of 8 posts:

- 1. Quick tip: highlight templates by SachaGreif, 6 points, 4 hours ago, 4 comments.
- 2. Growing to Meteor: my interview on the thoughtbot podcast by pauldownman, 8 points, 7 hours ago, 3 comments.
- 3. [PREVIEW] (WIP) Meteor debugging with Chrome DevTools by Miro, 3 points, 2 hours ago, 0 comments.
- 4. Meteor Up now has the SSL support by arunmeda, 14 points, a day ago, 1 comment.
- 5. New package by Avital: React in Blaze by dburles, 1 point, an hour ago, 0 comments.
- 6. Closing Call: Hacker News for Sales People (built w/ Telescopic) by hellogerard, 4 points, 12 hours ago, 0 comments.
- 7. This Week in Meteor #1 by rgoomar, 18 points, 3 days ago, 9 comments.
- 8. Should You Be a Programmer? by romanziolotarev, 2 points, 15 hours ago, 0 comments.

Each post includes a small profile picture, the title, the author's name, their karma, the time since posting, and the number of comments. To the right of each post is a row of user icons and a speech bubble icon indicating the count of new comments.

Telescope, an open-source community app.

Introducing Telescope

This guide was written for **Telescope**, a free open-source app that makes it easy for anybody to launch their own Product Hunt or Hacker News.

That being said it, it should be equally applicable to any other type of community.

The Author



Sacha Greif

I work on **Telescope**, an open-source community app that makes it easy for anybody to launch their own Product Hunt or Hacker News

I'm also one of the authors of **Discover Meteor**, a book about the **Meteor** JavaScript framework, and the creator of **Sidebar**, a daily newsletter of five great design links.

You can follow me on **Twitter** or learn more about me on **my site**.

Contents

Introduction

Why this guide exists, and what you'll learn in it.

Audience

Before anything else, make sure you're targeting the right audience.

Seeding

The importance of manually seeding your community with users and content.

Engagement

How do you get your members to actively participate?

Email

Email is your secret weapon. Learn how to make it work for you.

Promotion

Learn where (and when) you should promote your community.

Moderation

Should you limit access to your community, or open it to the world?

Recycling

You should aim to reuse and recycle every aspect of your community.

Value

How do you ensure your members are benefiting from the community?

Voice

How to give your community its own unique personality.

Conclusion

What to do next, and a list of useful resources.



Introduction

As long as the Internet has existed, virtual communities have always been around. In fact, they even predate the web.

It seems hard to imagine now, but there was a time when “going online” meant logging on to a BBS or newsgroup, not opening a web browser.

Of course, things have changed since. The arrival of the web also ushered in the era of discussion boards, which were then supplanted by blog comments, which were in turn overtaken by social networks.

Today, we’re living with a mix of traditional forums, comments, social media, as well as meta-communities like **Reddit**.

And new forms of communication pop up every day, as shown by the growing popularity of semi-public **Slack** channels (a.k.a. IRC 2.0) or the success of **Hacker News**-type sites like **Product Hunt**.

The screenshot shows the Product Hunt homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with a search icon, a user profile icon, and a 'Log in' button. Below the navigation is a header with 'Home' and 'Collections' tabs, where 'Home' is underlined. A call-to-action box encourages users to get summaries of new products every day, with an input field for an email address and a 'Join' button. The main content area is divided into sections for 'Today' (February 15th) and 'Yesterday' (February 14th). Each section lists several products with small icons, titles, descriptions, and interaction counts (comments and likes). A banner at the bottom of the page promotes 'Products for Mac Lovers'.

Product Hunt: the best new products, every day.

All this to say that one thing is clear: online communities are not going away.

Origin Story

The screenshot shows the Sidebar homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with a sidebar icon, the word 'Sidebar', and a search bar. Below the navigation is a date header showing 'Feb 20', 'Saturday, February 21st', and 'Feb 22'. The main content area displays five design links, each with a small icon, the title, the source website, and a share icon. The links are: 'Saving time in Sketch' (medium.com), 'Colorable: Test color combinations for readability' (jnblk.com), 'Why Samsung Design Stinks' (www.fastcodesign.com), 'URL Animation Experiments' (glench.com), and 'Testing Accordion Menu Designs & Iconography' (viget.com). At the bottom, there's a call-to-action box for getting Sidebar by email, with an input field for an email address, a 'Every day' button, and a 'Subscribe' button. A footer at the very bottom includes links for Twitter, Facebook, RSS, About, Sponsor, Suggest a link, and Sign in.

Sidebar: 5 design links a day

Back in summer 2012, I had a sudden realization: Hacker News was perfect for discussing startups and programming. But it wasn't so great for anything related to design. So why not create a "Hacker News for designers"?

After a few pivots, this wild idea ended up becoming **Sidebar**. But before I could get there, I had to solve a problem: unlike WordPress for blogs, there didn't seem to be any easy way to create your own Hacker News-type community.

So I decided to build it myself.

This was the start of **Telescope**, a free open-source project that lets anybody create and customize their own community. Since then, hundreds of people have deployed the app and thousands of users have created accounts.

Why This Guide

But I quickly realized that while Telescope could solve a lot of the technical challenges involved in launching a community, it couldn't make a community successful by itself.

After all, actually growing the community and engaging its users was still up to the community manager, and a lot of Telescope users were struggling with this new role.

This is why I decided to write this guide.

The screenshot shows the Crater.io homepage, which is a community built using the Telescope platform. The page features a dark header with navigation links for 'View', 'Categories', 'Search', 'Register', and 'Sign In'. Below the header is a call-to-action for a newsletter sign-up. The main content area displays a list of 11 posts, each with a small thumbnail, the post title, the author's name, the number of points, and the number of comments. The posts are as follows:

1. The Meteor Chef: For Hire – A new job board for Meteor developers [jobs.themeteorchef.com](#)
2. Meteor Blaze profiler [www.youtube.com](#)
3. Remote Meteor Jobs List + Weekly Email [remoteok.io](#)
4. Meteor Club Q&A with Workpop [youtu.be](#)
5. ccrcos/meteor-reactor [github.com](#) PACKAGES
6. Make sure you are wearing a diaper before opening this link [mongol.meteor.com](#) PACKAGES
7. Prisma for CC 2014 is here! (Meteor app as Photoshop extension) [www.codeadventure.com](#) ANNOUNCEMENTS
8. New Meteor accounts-ldap Package on Atmosphere [atmospherejs.com](#) ANNOUNCEMENTS PACKAGES
9. It's autopublish time! [plus.google.com](#) NEWS
10. Running Meteor JS on Raspbian on the Raspberry Pi [www.janbuildsapps.com](#)
11. This Week in Meteor #2 [differential.com](#)

At the bottom of the page, a banner reads "Crater.io: built with Telescope".

Credentials

So why should you trust me? Well first of all, because I've done my research. I've asked successful community builders such as **Product Hunt**'s Ryan Hoover, **#Nomads**'s Pieter Levels, or **Product**

People Club's Justin Jackson to share their experience with me, and featured their input throughout this guide.

I've also successfully built audiences a few times myself: both **Sidebar** and **Discover Meteor** have thousands of subscribers, and **Telescope** itself has quickly developed a vibrant open-source ecosystem.

But the best way to make up your mind about this guide is probably just to read it. It's free, it's short, and it's split into nine chapters that you can read as you please.

One More Thing

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a "Homework" box that gives a couple specific, actionable things you can do right now to put the chapter's lessons in practice.

You'll find the first box right below:

Homework

- Read the rest of this guide!



Audience

You don't want to suddenly announce to your weightlifting community that moving forward, you will be refocusing on ice skating.

That's why you'd better make sure you have the right target before you launch. When trying to narrow down your audience, you'll want to look for at least two of the following characteristics:

Well-defined

In this case, the larger the target, the harder it will be to hit. It'll be hard to foster an active and passionate community if you launch yet another site about "tech". But if you pick a specific framework or programming language, you're already dramatically increasing your chances of seducing at least a few die-hard fans.

Reachable

It also helps to pick an audience that's already well-connected and easy to reach. It's tricky to build a social network for fishermen when your audience spends half its time away at sea without Internet access.

And "people who hate avocado" might be a well-defined market, but there are no existing places where you can easily reach all avocado haters, making it harder to acquire members.



Avocados: the top issue facing the world today.

Passionate

And finally, it always helps to find a topic your audience truly cares about. Either pick something people truly love (like the Twilight saga) or really hate (like the Twilight saga), just don't choose something that leaves your audience indifferent.

As an example, many popular tech blogs have a massive audience, but their engagement in terms of comments is actually pretty low quality. The truth is that after the 30th “world-changing” new startup of the day, it’s hard to care much one way or the other.

Growing

Picking the right wave to ride is an art in itself, but if you can do it you’ll be well on your way to having a successful site.

After all, when it comes to communities, network effects matter a lot. So being the first to address a specific domain can often be enough to tip the scales in your favor.

We saw this with the success of [Discover Meteor](#), a book about the [Meteor](#) JavaScript framework written by Tom Coleman and myself. By being the first book to target a new platform, we were able to not only capture the lead (and keep it even as competing books launched), but also benefit from Meteor’s own meteoric (pun intended) growth.

Homework

- Say something controversial about your topic of choice on Twitter. See if people actually care or not.
- Use Google Trends to search for relevant keywords and get an idea of how fast your potential audience is growing.



Seeding

The first thing to realize is the importance of doing – as Paul Graham puts it – **things that don't scale**, especially the early stages of your site.

What I mean by that is that the Facebook team obviously doesn't invite every new user individually. But you might have to do just that to kickstart your community.

Individual Invites

When launching **Product Hunt**, Ryan Hoover personally invited dozens, if not hundreds of users. And that was after already doing the exact same thing for the now-defunct **Startup Edition**.

So don't be shy about inviting people one by one, and even specifically asking them to leave a comment, post a link, or submit a question.

Start with your closest friends, and progressively work your way up to prominent figures in your field. Most people will be happy to oblige, especially if it's to promote their own content.

See which people are very active in the early days and involve them. You can't do something like this alone.

Pieter Levels, #Nomads

An Invitation Blueprint

For example, you could:

1. Ask Friend A to post a link to an article.
2. Leave a comment on that article.
3. Ask Friend B to leave a comment as well.

4. Tell the article's author about the discussion, and invite them to contribute.

Sure, it took three emails, but in return you just created three happy users:

- Friend A is happy that his submission generated a discussion.
- Friend B is happy because Author X replied to their comment.
- Author X is happy because people are sharing and commenting on their work.

And of course, you're happy because your site is taking off!

Our goal was to have a history so that when we launched the website the first users would see an active website, and not realize they are actually our first real users.

Justin Kan, *The Drop*

Seeding Content

This strategy extends to content, not just users.

Nobody wants to be the first to leave a party. But you know that as soon as one person makes a move for their coat, pretty soon the whole place will end up empty.

Similarly, users don't like to be the first to submit a link, ask a question, or post a comment. This is why it's very important that you **seed** your community with the type of content you'd like to see.

The most success we have had is with manually reaching out to people who write sales content. Whenever I read a sales related blog post, I'll email the author about it, and suggest it'd be a great fit for the Closing Call audience so they should post it there. I've only had positive responses from each person I've reached out to.

Ryan Gum, *Closing Call*

Want people to post links? Start by posting links yourself. Want people to ask questions? Ask some yourself. Want people to leave comments? You get the idea.

Of course, after a while people will realize that you're posting every post, link, and comment yourself, and they'll be happy to leave it all up to you since you seem to be doing such a good job.

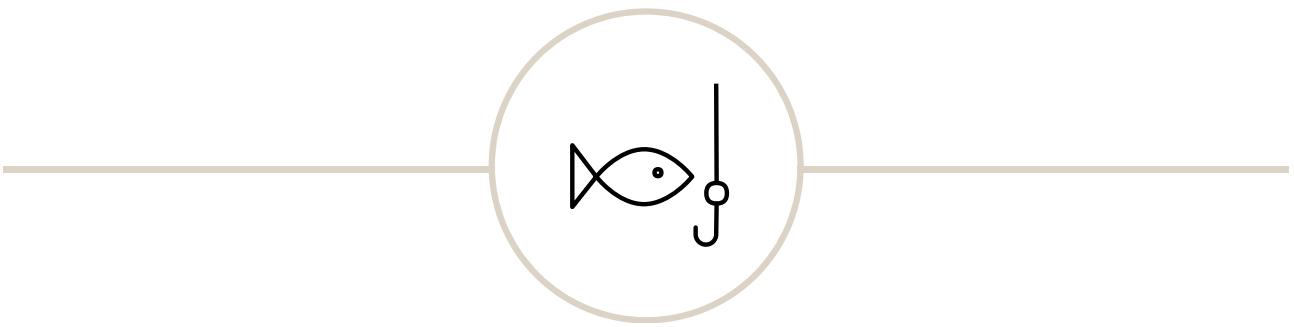
Every day, since I launched, I've been manually curating content to post on the site. There are some days, especially in the first few months, where no one will post an article.

Jean-Nicholas Hould, [Bootstrappers.io](#)

To combat this, remember to regularly ask your friends to participate, or even create a few extra accounts for yourself (as [Reddit's founders famously did](#)).

Homework

- Invite 10 friends and 10 “celebrities” in your field to your new community.



Engagement

Let's suppose you've managed to round up a few dozens smart people, who each have posted on your site a few times. Now all that's left is to lay back and watch the magic happen, right?

Wrong! If you stop here, you'll pretty soon see traffic and engagement slide back down to zero, as people's busy lives take over and they forget to visit your site.

This is why it's very important to actively **engage** your community. And the easiest way to do this is to get people to **ask questions**.

Letting members have the spotlight has been a very successful way of growing engagement. Every month, I ask the community what they are working on. Those threads attract a lot of comments and are a great way for newcomers to introduce themselves.

Jean-Nicholas Hould, [Bootstrappers.io](#)

Simple questions can result in extremely popular threads with dozens or hundreds of replies.

Examples include:

- What are you working on?
- How would you improve this community?
- Who would you like us to invite here?
- Can you introduce yourself?

You can even make these threads into monthly events. For example, Hacker News features monthly "Who's Hiring?" and "Freelancer? Seeking Freelancer?" threads to help members find jobs.

Ask Me Anything

Of course, the ultimate question thread is the “AMA”, for “Ask Me Anything”, where you get a well-known personality to answer your members’ questions.

Since the Bootstrappers.io launch in September ‘14, we’ve hosted more than a dozen AMA’s with inspiring business bootstrappers. The value created by those events is unbelievable.

Jean-Nicholas Hould, Bootstrappers.io

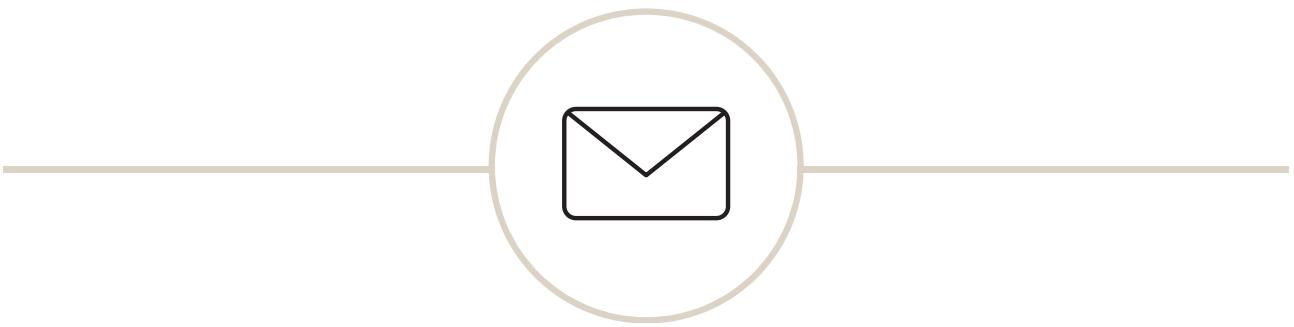
Not only is this a fantastic way to generate engagement, it’s also usually quite fun (not to mention a nice ego boost) for the person doing the answering, too.

A screenshot of a popular AMA on Bootstrappers.io. The post is by Dan Norris, Co-founder of WP Curve (0 to \$63k / month in 19 months), Helloify (live chat for teams), Black Hops Brewing and author of the #2 startup book on Amazon, The 7 Day Startup. The AMA link is dannorris.me/AMA. The post has 10 points, 12 days ago, and 131 comments. There are profile icons for other users and a speech bubble icon indicating 131 messages.

A popular AMA on Bootstrappers.io.

Homework

- Line up AMAs with three different people for your community.
- Start a recurring monthly question thread (e.g. “What are you currently working on?”).



Email

The worst mistake you can make is building an audience without having any way to reach it again.

You might be the top post on Hacker News today, but unless you can build some sort of connection with your newly-gained audience you'll be back to obscurity tomorrow.

The most reliable way to build this connection is also the simplest: **email**.

It's no coincidence if Product Hunt includes an email sign up field right on its homepage. In fact, the newsletter sign-up button is by far the most prominent call to action (Product Hunt doesn't even have a regular "sign up" button).

The screenshot shows the Product Hunt homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with a search icon, a user icon, and a 'Log in' button. Below the navigation, a large yellow banner features the text 'Get a summary of the best new products, every day.' followed by a text input field labeled 'Your email' and a red 'Join' button. Underneath this, there are two sections: 'Today' (February 15th) and 'Yesterday' (February 14th). Each section lists several products with small icons, their names, descriptions, and interaction counts (e.g., comments and likes). A promotional banner for Mac products is visible at the bottom of the main content area. At the very bottom, a large callout box contains the text: 'Product Hunt puts the newsletter front and center.'

This is also why Telescope includes an **email newsletter package** out of the box. That package automatically takes your site's top content, and generates a daily or weekly digest from it.

The automated newsletter [has been] a big winner, with pretty good open and click through rates.

Ryan Gum, **Closing Call**

Note that Telescope integrates with **MailChimp**. So while you can of course use Telescope's generated email newsletters, you're by no means limited to them. You can take advantage of all of MailChimp's features to send any kind of emails to your community's list.

A screenshot of an email inbox showing a message from Jean-Nicholas from Bootstrappers. The subject line is "Pieter Levels is bootstrapping 12 Startups in 12 Months while travelling the world. Ask Him Anything." The email body features a large bold headline: "Pieter Levels is bootstrapping 12 Startups in 12 Months while travelling the world. Ask Him Anything." Below the headline is a circular profile picture of a man with a backpack. A red button at the bottom left says "Learn how you can build your own product". At the bottom right, it says "THE AMA IS LIVE RIGHT NOW."

Bootstrappers.io often sends special announcements to its list.

For example, **Bootstrappers.io** sends its list custom email announcements for **upcoming AMAs**.

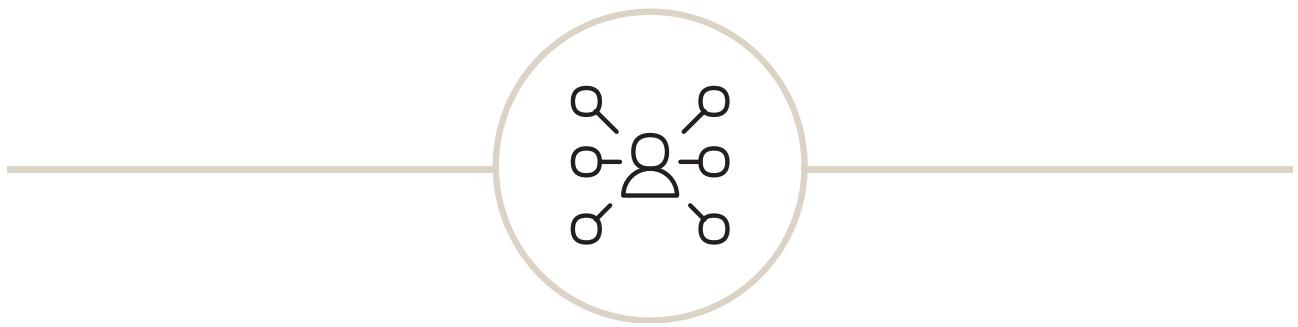
And once someone is signed up to your list, it can be a great idea to send them a pre-scheduled content sequence.

Emails could include your community guidelines, a “best of” guide pointing to a few classic posts, or even just a short welcome message.

Remember that new members won't have the habit of regularly visiting your site yet, so you'll have to go and find your users where they live: their inbox!

Homework

- Set up a weekly digest newsletter for your community.
- Set up an autoresponder sequence that introduces your site to new members.



Promotion

When it comes to marketing, the two most common mistakes are doing it too late, and doing it *too soon*.

Timing Is Everything

You definitely don't want to limit yourself to the "build it and they will come" strategy and passively wait for people to discover your site. And you don't want to wait too long lest your brand new community becomes old news.

But you *also* don't want to start telling the world before your community shows a minimum of engagement already. In other words, don't call in the food critics while your restaurant is still half empty.

So somewhere in between is the big launch sweet spot, and it's up to you to find it.

Complementary Communities

So where should you go to to promote your site? A good method is reaching out to another community to help seed yours.

Now while you could just try and poach a competing community's members, I believe instead that the best approach is to target a *complementary* community.

So if you're launching a forum about gardening, don't try to approach *another* gardening forum. Instead, reach out to gardening *chatrooms*, *blogs*, or *mailing lists*. Try to create two-way relationships between you and these other channels. They talk about you, and you in turn will promote their content to your members.

At first I had to spend time every day getting posts up on Crater, because no one knew about it. Slowly, through interactions on Twitter and a few postings on the official Meteor-Talk Google Group, a small user base started forming. I started cross posting discussions from Crater to r/Meteor on Reddit as another way to draw in new readers.

Josh Owens, Crater.io

If the other community allows it, cross-posting can also be a good way to increase awareness. You can sometimes even use tools like **IFTTT** to automate the process.

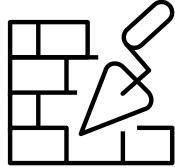
And don't forget to take advantage of social media as well. Even if you don't always point people back to your site, link-sharing is a great way to build up your audience and brand, and people will gravitate back towards your community eventually.

The other way we've grown is through Twitter. We make an effort to manually Buffer every article, mentioning either the blog author or the company, and the person who shared it.

Ryan Gum, Closing Call

Homework

- Find three complementary channels on which to promote your community.
- Plug your community into some kind of auto-tweeting service (such as **Buffer**).



Moderation

Moderation also plays a big part in shaping a community's voice. Large communities like Reddit or Hacker News possess an array of moderation tools, from flagging a post to lower its place in the rankings, to banning users altogether.

All In Moderation

So it's up to you to highlight the type of content you want to see more of, and downplay (or outright remove) items that don't match your vision, and generally speaking you shouldn't be too shy about laying down the law. As much as we'd like them to be, online communities are not democracies: not every voice is equal, and not everybody deserves to be part of them.

We are always actively shaping the community through both positive (rewards) or negative (banning, etc.) actions.

Kelly Sutton, Designer News

These issues usually become more salient as your community grows, but it pays to be mindful of them from the start.

As long as you stay polite and do your best to be transparent with your decisions, the majority of members will appreciate your efforts to steer the ship.

We've had to be pretty decisive about setting the right culture. For example, sexism is rampant in tech and this is also a very tech-enabled community. So we've had multiple occasions where we've had to tell people to behave or leave. I don't like doing that but that's what happens when it becomes bigger.

Pieter Levels, #Nomads

Exclusive Communities

Another common strategy is to simply restrict access to your community in some way.

Given most startups' obsession with growth at all cost, one might reasonably wonder why you'd ever want to restrict sign-ups to your community. But it turns out there are a lot of good reasons to do so.

After all, it's the oldest trick in the book: limit supply to drive up demand. If it works for diamonds, maybe it can work for you?

The screenshot shows the homepage of draft.im. At the top, the site's name "draft.im" is displayed in a bold, lowercase font. Below it is a short tagline: "Whether you have a dribbble invite to give away or need one yourself, we got you covered. Browse shots on draft.im and invite, or submit your own and get invited!" A navigation bar follows, featuring buttons for "sort by", "filter by", "all", "prospects", "drafted", "about", and "+ submit shot". The main content area is a grid of nine thumbnail images, each representing a different user-submitted design. The designs include a laptop setup, a Polaroid camera, a dashboard interface, a dark-themed clock face, a pug dog illustration, a colorful candy collage, a logo for "STONESMITH", a landscape scene with a house, a promotional image for an "Unsplash unofficial client" app, and a vibrant, abstract illustration of a character.

Draft.im: Share your work here to get a chance to share your work on Dribbble.

Exclusivity alone probably won't be enough to make your community successful, but exclusivity combined with actual value can work wonders though.

Dribbble has always been an invite-only site, and its invites are so sought-after that people hold contests to win them and have even set up **entire parallel communities** dedicated to getting invited.

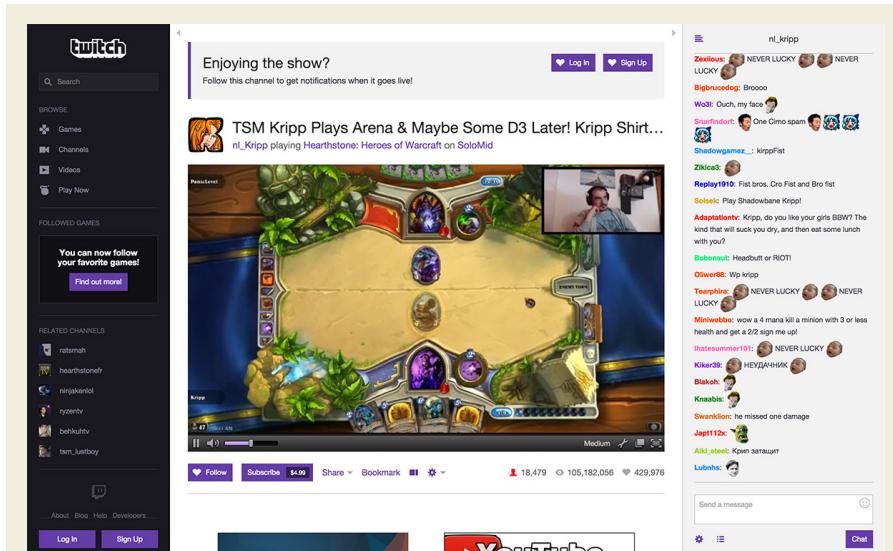
Quality Control

There's also cases where restricting access is necessary just to maintain a reasonable level of quality. Some communities tend to attract vocal minorities, and things can quickly get out of hand.

So in many cases, it might be easier to close down access and approve suitable users individually, than open up the floodgates and hunt down offenders.

From Twitch.tv, I learned that when you have a popular platform people will join to abuse your platform for personal gain, or just do things to make the experience worse for everybody. Learning from that experience, we decided to have a moderated website like Reddit. The moderation helps avoid spam and ensures we only have quality music on the site.

Justin Kan, *The Drop*



Twitch.tv: a very active – if a bit unruly – community.

Setting An Example

Exclusivity has other advantages, especially in the first months of your community. Newer users tend to model their behavior after current members, so by filtering sign-ups you can make sure your initial batch of users sets the right tone for your community.

By keeping things invite only, we were able to cultivate the personality of the site before bringing in the masses. I believe that if you have a high-quality community, growth will come naturally.

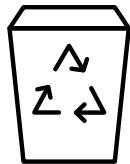
Kelly Sutton, *Designer News*

So unless your audience is very narrow to begin with, limiting registrations is worth considering.

Hopefully, the sign-ups you forfeit in the beginning will be offset by increased attention down the road thanks to your community's higher quality.

Homework

- If your community is already exclusive, set up a contest to win some invites.
- If it isn't, close registration down for a few days to see how people react.



Recycling

Just like Native Americans used every part of the bison, you too should aim to use every part of your community.

(Although, even the nose? What in the world are you supposed to do with a bison nose?!)

Reinvesting Content

To pick a concrete example, let's say you've just held an AMA with some famous expert, and managed to generate a decent amount of content. Don't move on just yet!

Why not write a blog post compiling the best questions and answers? Or even package together some kind of eBook you can give out when people sign up for your community?

Stats Sell

And even without special content, your community itself can be a source of news and data. You can blog about the most popular domains, talk about traffic stats, or publish monthly user rankings.

OKCupid got huge amounts of free publicity by **publishing elaborate analysis of their own statistics** on their OKTrends blog.



Dating Research from OkCupid

Join us!

The Best Questions For A First Date

April 20th, 2011 by Christian Rudder

[Tweet 3,402](#) [Share 24k](#)

First dates are awkward. There is so much you want to know about the person across the table from you, and yet so little you can directly ask.



This post is our attempt to end the mystery. We took OkCupid's database of 275,294 match questions—probably the biggest collection of relationship concerns on earth—and the 776 million answers people have given us, and we asked:

Dataclysm

Welcome to OkTrends! If you like this blog, you'll love this book: *Dataclysm*. It's a look at the human side of so-called Big Data, and brings in stuff from Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, Google, in addition to lots of data from OkCupid. Order a copy!

[Buy Now](#)

About OkTrends

OkTrends is original research and insights from [OkCupid](#). We've compiled our observations and statistics from hundreds of millions of OkCupid user interactions, all to explore the data side of the online world.

Sex and stats, a winning combination.

Compiling Collections

Product Hunt also employs the recycling mechanic perfectly: their “Collections” feature lets members create their own lists of products organized around a theme: this not only gives members a sense of ownership and engagement with the site, but it’s also a great way to help resurface older content for new members.

Product Hunt
The best new products, every day

Home Activity Collections

Featured Collections
Delightful product collections, updated daily.
How do I make a collection?

Just Write
Apps, extensions, books and other resources to help you write better and encourage you to write more.
By Evan Sims

Things for your Desk
Be the envy of the office with these products

Product Hunt's collections.

Member Interviews

If you're lucky enough to have a lot of active members, why not highlight them? **LayerVault** takes

advantage of their **Designer News** community to regularly **interview leading figures** in the design community.



"Why are you looking at my nose like that?"

Homework

- Take inventory of all the content byproduct you've accumulated.
- Come up with 3 new ways to make use of it.



Value

So far we've talked about getting users and engaging them. But how do you keep them coming back over the long term?

The key is *providing value*.

Or, as **GroupBuzz**'s Alex Hillman **puts it**, "your job [as community manager] is to help members participate at a level that balances **the value they receive** from the community as well as **the value they provide** to the community".

In some cases, providing a place for members to engage in conversation will be enough to balance out the equation. But in other cases, you might have to go the extra mile to keep your members happy.

I think the network effect is a thing here. The access to lots of people in the same niche is value added.

Pieter Levels, #Nomads

The Power Of Listening

One simple way to provide value is simply to **listen**. It turns out it can sometimes be surprisingly hard to get people to pay attention to your work. Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit might sometimes prove themselves useful allies in spreading the word, but they can also have the inverse effect and bury any new initiative under a mountain of memes and cat pictures.

So having a place where you know people will pay attention can be hugely valuable in itself. As always though, your job is to keep things balanced to prevent your community from devolving into a self-promotion shouting match.

Helping Out

A membership to Justin Jackson's **Product People Club** costs \$199 per year. That's a high entry fee, but it's worth it because of the extra value Justin provides. Members can ask for advice, get his feedback on their projects, and benefit from his own network and audience.

One of the biggest perks for members has been the “co-promotion” we do as a group whenever someone launches something. We all help by tweeting, sharing, etc. when someone launches something cool. Most folks really struggle with promoting their own stuff, so this solves a huge problem for them.

Justin Jackson, Product People Club

Homework

- Come up with an extra perk (free eBook, video, etc.) to give out to your community members.
- Ask your most active users what value they get from being part of your community.



Voice

Successful blogs usually have their own special voice. And so do successful communities, even if they're made up of hundreds – or thousands – of different individuals.

But finding that voice isn't always easy. Many communities form around a topic, but without any common culture holding them together they dissolve as soon as something better comes along.

So don't make the mistake of wanting to please everybody. A strong voice might turn away some people, but it will make the ones who stay a lot more passionate about your community.

Design Matters...

A common way to express your voice is through design.

Designer News offers the perfect case study: although the site's design might outwardly seem bare and minimalist, it's filled with the kind of small details that designers appreciate.

As an example, some posts automatically get special badges when they include specific keywords. Showcase posts get the "Show DN" badge, the "iOS" keyword triggers a badge of the iconic turtleneck and glasses... and for a while, any posts mentioning "flat design" would get the special "beating a dead horse" badge.

The screenshot shows a list of 10 stories on the Designer News homepage. Each story includes a small circular badge with a letter icon (e.g., 'AMA', 'Show', 'Ask') followed by the story title, a brief description, and the number of points and comments. The badges are color-coded: red for 'AMA', green for 'Show', blue for 'Ask', and grey for others.

- Join us right now for an AMA with @bdc :) — Courtesy [Kelly S.](#)
- Facebook Launches Origami 2.0** ([facebook.github.io](#))
44 points and 16 comments • 13 hrs ago from [TylerHoughart](#), Designer at Pusher
- AMA: I'm Benjamin De Cock, user interface designer and front-end developer at Stripe.**
37 points and 59 comments • 16 hrs ago from [Benjamin De Cock](#), UI Designer at Stripe
- "FYI, I'm a graphic designer".** ([youtube.com](#))
36 points and 26 comments • 20 hrs ago from [Gábor Roska](#), Designer at infinito
- Wake: Design Collaboration** ([youtube.com](#))
30 points and 23 comments • 16 hrs ago from [Jeff Keen](#), Product Designer @ thoughtbot
- Pebble Time** ([kickstarter.com](#))
27 points and 20 comments • 17 hrs ago from [Giulia Michelini](#), Designer @ 81Lab
- Offer DN: I'll build you Android UI prototypes for free this and next week**
25 points and 1 comment • 12 hrs ago from [Liam Ho](#), Founder at Jimbo Labs
- Show DN: Introduction to Sketch (Keynote/PDF Presentation)**
8 points and 2 comments • 13 hrs ago from [Alex Mariano](#), Designer at illustratedLabs
- Color Safe - Create accessible color palettes** ([colorsafe.co](#))
7 points and 2 comments • 13 hrs ago from [Patrick Wong](#), Product Designer @ Lyft
- Ask DN: Best Designers to follow on Twitter?**
2 points and 1 comment • 3 hrs ago from [Add Maia](#), UI/UX Designer & Co-Founder at Student Voice
- Origami 2.0 vs Framer**

Designer News' colorful badges.

Designer News also lets its member create their own avatars through a simple in-browser pixel art editor. But the Designer News team went one step further by matching up avatar colors with specific criteria.

Colors

- Earned for having 100 Karma.
- Earned for having 200 Karma.
- Earned for being an Inaugural Member of DN.
- Earned by joining DN before open registration.

Where's my "Wrote about DN in a community building guide" color?!

Reach 100 karma, and you'll unlock blue. Reach 200, and you'll get green. There's even colors for attending real-life Designer News meet-ups.

Early on, we would spend our Fridays hacking on Designer News, so most of the time you would see discrete projects pop up, like the badges or the avatars. Both were meant as ways to add character to the site, and I think they do a good job at that.

Kelly Sutton, Designer News

All this contributes to a strong sense of community: getting an orange avatar on Designer News means something in a way that uploading a new Twitter profile pic simply doesn't.

...Or Not

So what about communities like Hacker News or Reddit, who are often criticized for, shall we say, their lack of aesthetic sense? Well in some cases, “un-design” can be just as powerful to give a community its voice.

I think it would be an error to try to force the community culture you envisioned because you will end up alienating your users.

Justin Kan, *The Drop*

Hacker News’ bare-bones, 1998-style design conveys a strong sense of function over form: it’s not pretty but it works, and that’s what ultimately matters. So it’s no coincidence if Hacker News attracts a majority of technical, DIY hacker types. In this case, the medium and the message match up perfectly.

The same goes with Reddit. Its design might not look like much, but this simplicity makes it much easier for individual subreddits to customize their layout. Reddit values freedom and self-expression above all, and here too design (or the lack of it) serves to reinforce the community’s voice.

As much as you try to shape a community’s voice and culture, it will always arise organically. That being said the culture that arises depends a lot on the infrastructure you build for them. So in the end you build the infrastructure that you think will foster the type of community you want to have, but once you build the platform you lose control and the culture evolves naturally.

Justin Kan, *The Drop*

Homework

- Find a way to spruce up your community’s design with a unique design element (logo, icon, animation, etc.).
- Ask your most active users how they perceive your community’s voice. See if it matches up with what you expected.



Conclusion

So what now?

The recurring theme behind every conversation I had while researching this topic was that communities only thrive when you put in the time and effort to care for them.

That work often happens behind scenes and – if you’re doing it right – probably won’t ever be noticed by your members, which can make it unrewarding, or even frustrating at times. Yet it’s still a necessary condition to a successful community.

No Rush

The other lesson I took from this is that things can take a while. When it comes to building communities, time is measured in months, not days.

You can’t rush things by buying ad traffic or purchasing likes on Facebook. If you truly want to build a great community you’ll simply have to provide value, engage with members, and repeat the process day after day after day.

No Easy Task

All this to say that growing a community is no easy task, but it’s certainly worth it. Beyond the cool factor of building something popular and any revenue you might derive from monetization tactics, communities can also become amazingly useful platforms, both for yourself and your members.

[#Nomads] has been a free focus group for me. Thanks to #Nomads, I now know instantly what people's problems are while they're traveling and working. And I can build products for them. Then when I finish them, I can launch them to a pre-existing audience. That's like every maker's dream.

Pieter Levels, #Nomads

So the road is long, but hopefully the lessons I’ve shared here will help point you in the right

direction. The best you can do now is take it one day at a time, and try to improve things bit by bit.

Homework

- Apply this guide's recommendations, one chapter at a time.
- **Let me know** if it made a difference for your community!

One More Thing...

Enjoyed this guide?

If so, [a quick tweet](#) or [Facebook share](#) would be much appreciated!