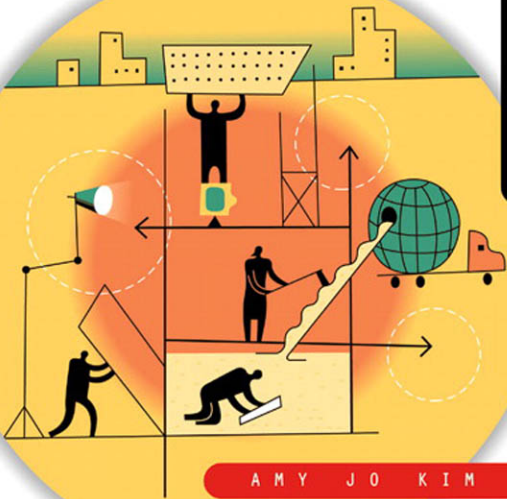


# COMMUNITY BUILDING

SECRET STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITIES

# ON THE WEB

THE PEACHPIT GUIDE TO WEBTOP PUBLISHING

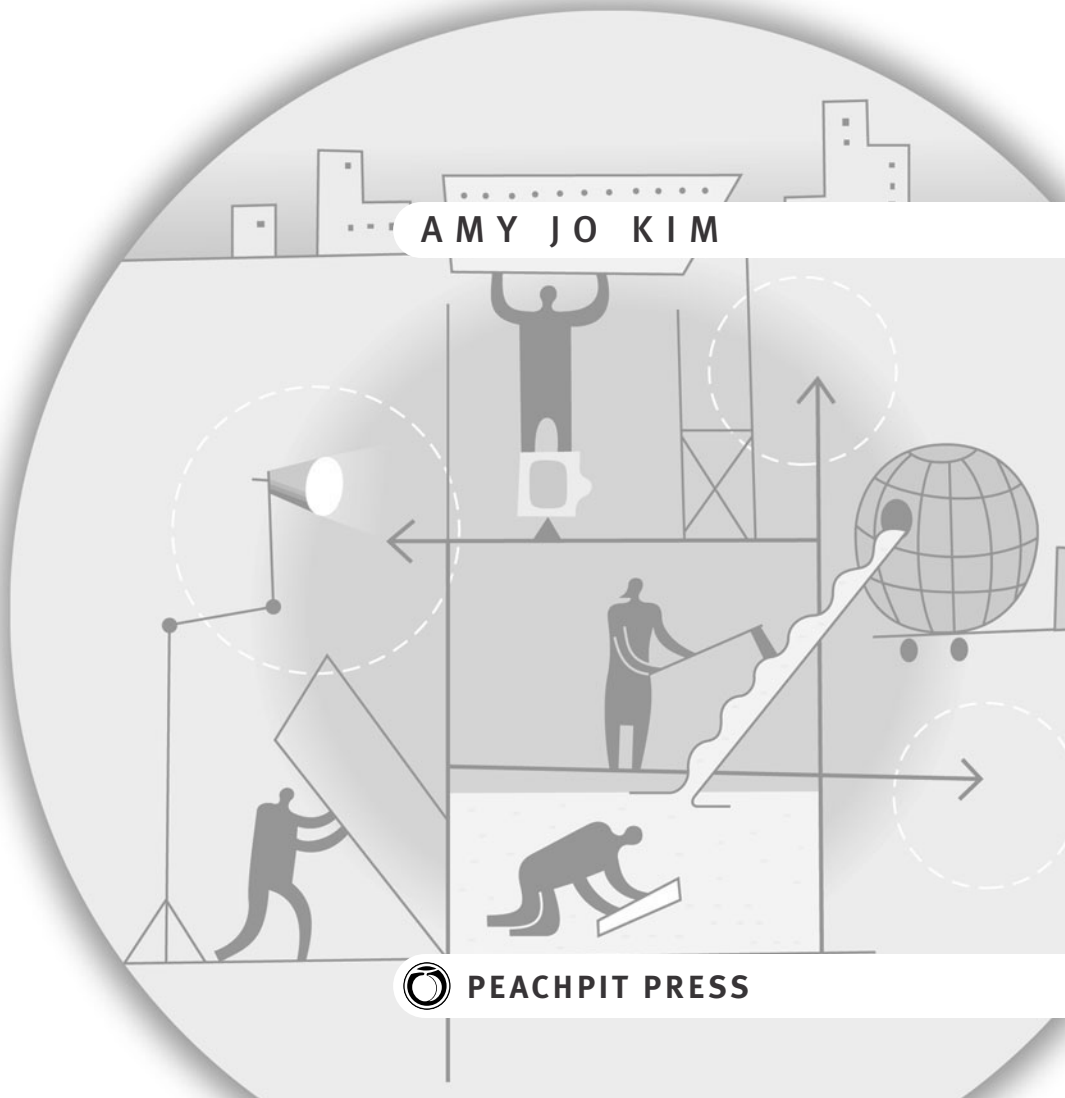


AMY JO KIM

# COMMUNITY BUILDING

## ON THE WEB

AMY JO KIM



PEACHPIT PRESS

## Community Building On the Web

Amy Jo Kim

### PEACHPIT PRESS

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to  
Scott and Gabriel Kim,  
AKA “The Championship Sleep Team.”



Without their undying love, ongoing patience and (most importantly) long and frequent naps, I never could have completed this project. Through it all, their devotion to their craft has been nothing short of inspiring. I salute you, boys!

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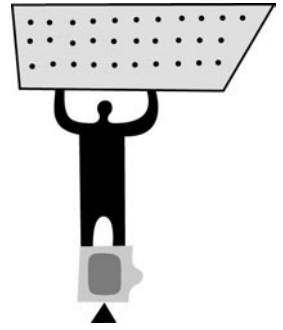
# Table of Contents

○	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>1</b>	○ <b>PURPOSE</b>	<b>1</b>
	Building a Successful Community	2
	<i>Case Study: The Planning Exercise in Action</i>	12
	Articulate Your Vision	18
<b>2</b>	○ <b>PLACES: BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER</b>	<b>27</b>
	People Are Talking	28
	Mapping the Territory	51
	Zoned For Growth	65
<b>3</b>	○ <b>PROFILES: GETTING TO KNOW YOUR MEMBERS</b>	<b>75</b>
	Why Profiles?	76
	Your Member Database	86
	Creating a Persona	95
	Evolving a Social Identity	106

<b>4</b>	○ <b>ROLES: FROM NEWCOMER TO OLD-TIMER</b>	<b>115</b>
	The Membership Life Cycle	117
	Welcome Your Visitors	120
	Instruct Your Novices	133
	Reward Your Regulars	139
	Empower Your Leaders	144
	Honor Your Elders	147
<b>5</b>	○ <b>LEADERSHIP: THE BUCK STOPS HERE</b>	<b>155</b>
	What's a Leader?	157
	Unofficial Leaders	168
	Official Leaders	177
	<i>Case Study:</i>	
	<i>Power to the People: The Slashdot Moderator System</i>	178
	Manage Your Leaders	188
<b>6</b>	○ <b>ETIQUETTE: RULES TO LIVE BY</b>	<b>201</b>
	Develop Your Ground Rules	202
	Enforce Your Policies	217
	Evolve Your Rules	226
<b>7</b>	○ <b>EVENTS: MEETINGS, PERFORMANCES AND COMPETITIONS</b>	<b>233</b>
	Event Planning 101	234
	Meetings: Bringing Groups Together	242



	Performances: Up on Stage	252
	Competitions: Members in the Spotlight	262
<b>8</b>	<b>○ RITUALS: HANDSHAKES, HOLIDAYS, AND RITES OF PASSAGE</b>	<b>277</b>
	The Power of Ritual	278
	Personal Acknowledgments	279
	Community Holidays	288
	Passages and Transitions	299
<b>9</b>	<b>○ SUBGROUPS: CLANS, CLUBS AND COMMITTEES</b>	<b>309</b>
	Why Subgroups?	310
	Setting the Stage	320
	Developing Your Official Program	330
	<b>○ EPILOGUE</b>	<b>351</b>
	<b>○ INDEX</b>	<b>353</b>



# Introduction

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*It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change*

—CHARLES DARWIN

---

## Calling all Community Builders

We're living in fluid and dynamic times. It's easier than ever to travel the world and stay in touch electronically with people who live far away. As a society we're working harder, juggling more roles, and spending more of our free time at home—exhausted from our multifaceted lives, fearful of the violence that we see in movies, TV and video games, and physically removed from our family, friends and neighbors. So we go online—to shop, play games, trade collectibles, argue politics, or just shoot the breeze. The Web is becoming our collective town square—more and more, people are turning to Web communities to get their personal, social and professional needs met. This translates into a tremendous opportunity for Web community builders.

I first felt the power of online communications while working at Sun Microsystems in the mid-1980s. Soon after joining the company, my boss asked me to name my computer, and I impulsively chose “Naima”—the title of a beautiful, haunting jazz ballad by John Coltrane that I'd learned the night before. My public identity on the Sun intranet became “amyjo@naima”; and within a few weeks, I started to get email from Coltrane fanatics all

around the company. They invited me to join a private mailing list, and jam with them after hours. Because of my online identity, I'd found people who shared my passion, and that changed my life for the better.

How is a Web community different than one in the real world? In terms of their social dynamics, physical and virtual communities are much the same. Both involve developing a web of relationships among people who have something meaningful in common, such as a beloved hobby, a life-altering illness, a political cause, a religious conviction, a professional relationship, or even simply a neighborhood or town. So in one sense, a Web community is simply a community that happens to exist online, rather than in the physical world.

But being online offers special opportunities and challenges that give Web communities a unique flavor. The Net erases boundaries created by time and distance, and makes it dramatically easier for people to maintain connections, deepen relationships, and meet like-minded souls that they would otherwise never have met. It also offers a strange and compelling combination of anonymity and intimacy that brings out the best and worst in people's behavior. It can be near impossible to impose lasting consequences on troublemakers, and yet relatively easy to track an individual's behavior and purchase patterns—which makes Web communities notoriously difficult to manage. To complicate matters further, the legal issues involving privacy, liability and intellectual property on the Web are just beginning to be addressed, and will evolve rapidly over the next few years.

Although the focus is on Web communities, this book also illuminates deeper and more fundamental aspects of community building—the social and cultural dynamics, the power of a shared purpose, and the roles, rituals and events that bind people together into a group.

## **Why I Wrote This Book**

I've been building online communities for ten years; I've worked on AOL sites, Web zines, technical-support message boards, Java chat room interfaces, online trading posts, and a variety of high-end gaming environments. Again and again, regardless of technology, I've found myself bumping up against the same basic issues in my work—issues like persistent identity, newcomer confusion, etiquette standards, leadership roles, and group dynamics.

So about five years ago, I summarized these issues into a set of design guidelines, and started using them in my consulting practice. Through conversations with community leaders, both on and off the Web, I learned that the patterns I was seeing in virtual communities were echoed in physical communities, and that all communities are ultimately based on timeless social dynamics that transcend the medium of connection. In other words, people are people, even in cyberspace.

This is the book that I wish I'd had when I was first starting out. I've found it incredibly useful to have a framework to help me address the basic design, technical and policy issues that arise in community building. This framework has helped me become a more effective and creative community designer; my hope is that it will do the same for you.

## **How to Use This Book**

If you're engaged in producing, designing, programming, or maintaining communities that are based on the Web, you've come to the right place. This book is a strategic handbook for community builders; it summarizes the "best practices" of successful Web communities, and brings them to life with behind-the-scenes stories from some dynamic and influential sites. Here, you'll learn about the key issues that every Web community designer faces, along with guidelines for addressing these

issues within the context of your own community. You'll also learn which communications tools are most appropriate for your community, and which technologies are necessary for a large-scale Web community to truly thrive.

What you *won't* find here is an in-depth account of how to program a Web community, configure specific community-building tools, create a business plan, obtain financing, or develop an advertising or subscription strategy. The focus is on teaching you how to grow a thriving community that will attract and sustain members, and on how to address the design, technical and policy issues that will inevitably arise if your community becomes a success.

All you need to enjoy and make use of this book is familiarity with Internet basics and a desire to create or improve your own online community. You don't need to be an expert programmer, a sophisticated Web designer, or a savvy businessperson—although if you are, you'll get even more out of the ideas presented here.

If you're preparing to launch (or redesign) your Web community, you can use this book as a planning tool to help you formulate your vision, identify your audience, prioritize your feature set, and plan your staffing needs. Community building is a team effort; and accordingly, this book is written to be useful to people in management, marketing, production, programming, and design—all of whom will have input during the strategic planning phase.

If you're running an existing community, you can use this book as a general source of ideas and inspiration to help you meet your goals, improve and develop your community, and better serve the needs of your members.

If you're involved in teaching or lecturing on community design, you can use this book as a teaching tool. On the companion Web site you'll find some examples of class outlines, exercises and projects to complement the book.

## ***Nine Design Strategies***

The book is organized around nine timeless design strategies that characterize successful, sustainable communities. Taken together, these strategies summarize an architectural, systems-oriented approach to community building that I call “Social Scaffolding”:

- **DEFINE AND ARTICULATE YOUR PURPOSE**

Communities come to life when they fulfill an ongoing need in people’s lives. To create a successful community, you’ll need to first understand why you’re building it and who you’re building it for; and then express your vision in the design, technology and policies of your community.

- **BUILD FLEXIBLE, EXTENSIBLE GATHERING PLACES**

A community can begin to take root wherever people gather for a shared purpose and start talking among themselves. Once you’ve defined your purpose, you’ll want to build a flexible, small-scale infrastructure of gathering places, which you and your members will work together to evolve.

- **CREATE MEANINGFUL AND EVOLVING MEMBER PROFILES**

You can get to know your members—and help them get to know each other— by developing robust, evolving and up-to-date member profiles. If handled with integrity, these profiles can help you build trust, foster relationships, and deliver personalized services, while infusing your community with a sense of history and context.

- **DESIGN FOR A RANGE OF ROLES**

Addressing the needs of newcomers without alienating the regulars is an ongoing balancing act. As your community grows, it will become increasingly important to provide guidance to newcomers while offering leadership, ownership and commerce opportunities to more experienced members.

- **DEVELOP A STRONG LEADERSHIP PROGRAM**

Community leaders are the fuel in your engine: they greet visitors, encourage newbies, teach classes, answer questions, and deal with trouble makers who might destroy the fun for everyone else. An effective leadership program requires careful planning and ongoing management, but the results can be well worth the investment.

- **ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE ETIQUETTE**

Every community has its share of internal squabbling; if handled well, conflict can be invigorating. But disagreements often spin out of control and tear a community apart. To avoid this, it's crucial to develop some groundrules for participation, and set up systems that allow you to enforce and evolve your community standards.

- **PROMOTE CYCLIC EVENTS**

Communities come together around regular events: sitting down to dinner, going to church on Sunday, attending a monthly meeting or an annual offsite. To develop a loyal following and foster deeper relationships among your members, you'll want to establish regular online events, and help your members develop and run their own events.

- **INTEGRATE THE RITUALS OF COMMUNITY LIFE**

All communities use rituals to acknowledge their members and celebrate important social transitions. By celebrating holidays, marking seasonal changes, and acknowledging personal transitions and rites of passage, you'll be laying the foundation for a true online culture.

- **FACILITATE MEMBER-RUN SUBGROUPS**

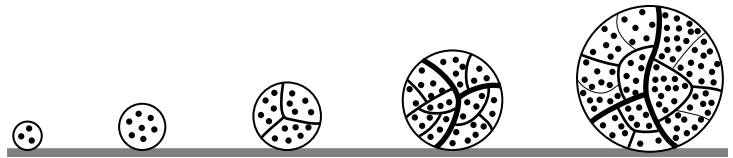
If your goal is to grow a large-scale community, you'll want to provide technologies to help your members create and run subgroups. It's a substantial undertaking, but this powerful feature can drive lasting member loyalty, and help to distinguish your community from its competition.

Each chapter explores a design strategy in detail, and offers guidelines and tactics for applying that strategy to your Web community. Each strategy builds on the previous ones, and so the chapter order corresponds to a recommended planning process (or teaching order) for community design.

### ***Three Underlying Principles***

Before we plunge ahead, I want to introduce to you three basic community design principles that underlie the ideas in this book. The first one is: Design for growth and change (Figure 1). This might sound simple, but watch out, it's harder than it looks. As a community designer, one of the most damaging mistakes you can make is to over-design your community up front and invest too heavily in a design paradigm or technology platform that can't easily be changed and updated. Successful, long-lasting communities almost always start off small, simple and focused, and then grow organically over time—adding breadth, depth and complexity in response to the changing needs of the members, and the changing conditions of the environment.

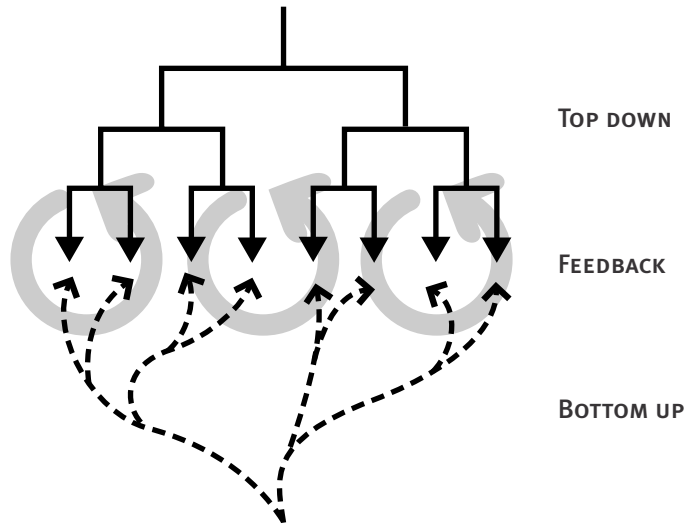
FIGURE 1  
DESIGN FOR GROWTH AND CHANGE



Closely related to this idea is the second principle: Create and maintain feedback loops (Figure 2). Successful community building is a constant balancing act between the efforts of management (that's you) to plan, organize and run the space, and the ideas, suggestions and needs of your members. To manage this co-evolution, you'll need to keep your finger on the community pulse—and you'll do this by creating and maintaining feedback loops between members and management. These loops will keep you in touch with what your members are saying and doing, and give you the information you need to evolve and update your features and platform.

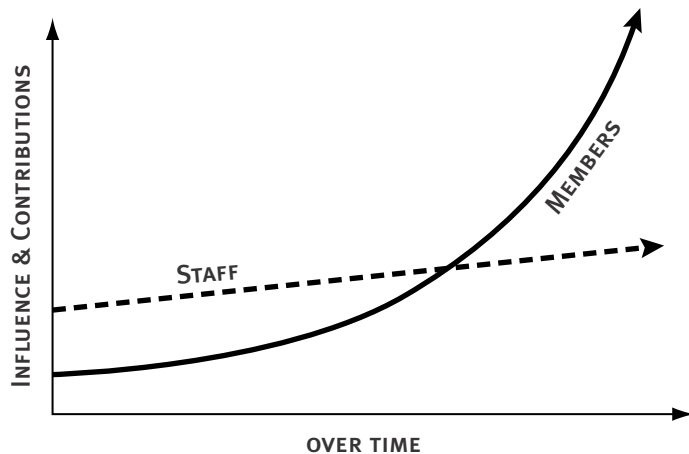


FIGURE 2  
CREATE AND MAINTAIN FEEDBACK LOOPS



This brings us to the third principle: Empower your members over time (Figure 3). Initially, it's up to you to define your purpose, choose your feature set, and set a particular tone, but as your community grows and matures, your members can and should play a progressively larger role in building and maintaining the community culture. If you want to grow a large and thriving community, you'll need to develop a progressive strategy for leveraging the ideas and efforts of your members.

FIGURE 3  
EMPOWER YOUR MEMBERS OVER TIME

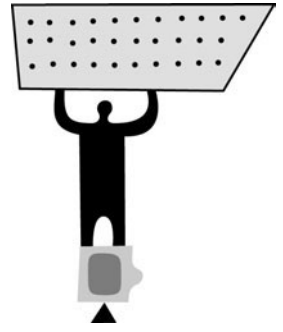


## Going Further

Because the Web is ever-changing, keep in mind that the scenes and situations presented in this book may not match what you find. Screenshots were captured during the development of the book; upon publication and thereafter these images may no longer be current, so check the individual Web sites for the most current information. Be aware that practices and policies of the companies mentioned may also have changed.

I've created a companion Web site ([www.naima.com/community](http://www.naima.com/community)) to accompany this book where you can get up-to-date community building resources, and discuss the issues raised in this book. I invite you to log on and share your stories, ideas, and experiences with other community builders. Good luck with your project—see you online.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Purpose

A successful community serves a clear purpose in the lives of its members and meets the fundamental goals of its owners. Whether you're creating a new Web organization or refining an existing one, you'll be more successful if you can define and describe what type of community you're building, why you're building it, and who you're building it for.

Because communities evolve, your purpose will change along with the shifting social and economic landscape of the Web. Nonetheless, articulating your purpose up front will help you focus your thinking and create a coherent, compelling, and successful Web community.

# In this Chapter

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY

ARTICULATE YOUR VISION

## Building a Successful Community

What is a successful community? Is it a big, bustling city filled with citizens of all ages and backgrounds doing all sorts of interesting things? A collection of rabid fans gazing at the object of their admiration? A gathering of true believers holding hands and lifting their voices in song? A group of women seated in a circle, speaking in hushed, sympathetic tones? Subscribers to an email list, sitting alone staring at words on a computer screen?

Any of these communities could be called successful or not, depending on how the people who create, manage, and participate in that group define success. A book club, support group, or mailing list might only have a dozen members, yet be considered a great success by everyone involved because it does everything they need and expect it to. A large church or Web portal, on the other hand, might attract thousands of members and develop a robust social scene but be forced to shut down for not meeting the financial goals of the sponsors.

To attract members and keep them coming back, your community must serve a clear purpose in their lives. And to get the support and resources to keep it running, your community must deliver a satisfactory return on the investment of those who fund and maintain it.

### Define Your Purpose

Communities arise for different reasons. Some form around a vision or cause, such as Earth First, Jews for Jesus, or the anti-war movement. Others form around a charismatic figure such as Elvis, L. Ron Hubbard, or Jesus. Other communities arise organically,

such as the folks who gather on Saturday nights at the local pub for a game of darts.

Regardless of how your community gets started, everyone involved will find it more satisfying if its purpose is clear. Ask yourself these questions:

- What type of community am I building?
- Why am I building it?
- Who am I building it for?

Because successful communities must keep pace with the changing needs of their members and owners, you'll need to ask these questions periodically as your community grows and matures. For example, a group of professional women might start getting together monthly for networking and support and evolve into a national organization that focuses on career counseling and continuing education. Or a scientist might create a mailing list to help plan a conference and then see it evolve into a way for far-flung colleagues to stay in touch, gossip about each other, and discuss the latest findings in their field.

---

*Successful communities evolve to keep pace with the changing needs of members and owners*

---

### **Find a Need and Fill It**

Your community's purpose will evolve, but you need to start somewhere. Plant a stake in the ground and define your initial purpose as clearly as you can. To kick-start your thinking, see if you can identify an ongoing, *unmet* need that your members have in common and which your community is uniquely suited to address. Participating in this kind of project takes time and effort, and unless you fulfill a real need, your members won't be motivated to keep coming back. As you ponder this, you may find it useful to refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see page 8), which can help you focus on the basics, while keeping up with the evolving needs of your members.

The founder of GeoCities, for example, chose to address the need of inexperienced Net users who wanted to create their own Web pages. Back in 1995, David Bohnett noticed that a growing number of Netizens lacked the technical skills to create a Web page, and provided the tools and infrastructure necessary to offer free home pages in a supportive environment. Geocities soon became one of the largest and fastest-growing communities on the Web (Figure 1.1). Now owned by Yahoo, GeoCities continues to focus on making page building easy and accessible to everyone.

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**BUILDING A HOME PAGE AT GEOCITIES**  
[geocities.yahoo.com/members/build.html](http://geocities.yahoo.com/members/build.html)  
 GeoCities pioneered the service of offering free home pages in a supportive environment. Building Web pages is still the core activity at GeoCities.



This story illustrates an important point: people will flock to a place that delivers something they need and can't find elsewhere. This basic truth might seem obvious, but the Internet is littered with ghost towns that fell prey to over-hyped expectations, cutting-edge technologies, and an overall lack of purpose.

### ***The Needs of Your Members***

People rely on communities in all areas of their lives (Figure 1.2). As you define your community's purpose, think about which areas of your members' lives it will serve. Is it primarily about work and career, like a professional organization? Or is it for recreation and play, like a weekly card game? Does your community touch on

family and civic issues, like the PTA? Are spiritual, political and social concerns part of the community's purpose?

FIGURE 1.2  
TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

People participate in communities to fulfill a variety of needs in different areas. Some communities focus on one particular area—for example, a professional organization addresses work issues—while others might function in several. Which type of community are you building? And which needs will your community fulfill?

<i>Area of Life</i>	<i>Type of Community</i>
<i>Family</i>	<i>Extended Family Play group PTA</i>
<i>Work</i>	<i>Workplace Professional Group</i>
<i>Play</i>	<i>Games Hobbies Sports Fan Club</i>
<i>Spirituality</i>	<i>Church or temple Meditation group Bible study group Support Group Drumming Circle</i>
<i>Politics</i>	<i>Political campaign Environmental group</i>

Asking yourself these questions will help you understand the core value your community provides. And while you can't control what your members do, you *can* reward actions that advance your purpose. In a religious community, for example, the leader might publicly praise a member of the congregation for starting a task force to feed the homeless. By contrast, the leaders of an online investing club might post a quarterly top-10 list of the members whose portfolios rose most in value—something that would seem out-of-place on a church message board.

You can further clarify your purpose by categorizing your community according to what the members have in common. In their book *Net Gain*, John Hagel III and Arthur G. Armstrong defined three types of communities, and I've added a fourth:

1. **GEOGRAPHIC**, defined by a physical location like a city or region
2. **DEMOGRAPHIC**, defined by age, gender, race, or nationality
3. **TOPICAL**, defined by shared interest, like a fan club, hobby group, or professional organization
4. **ACTIVITY-BASED**, defined by a shared activity, like shopping, investing, playing games, or making music.



If you look around the Web, you'll find communities whose basic purpose maps to each of these categories (and often encompasses several). At Talk City ([www.talkcity.com](http://www.talkcity.com)), a group of local and expatriate Filipinos gets together each week to speak Tagalog (their native tongue), argue about politics, and swap recipes. Over at NetNoir ([www.netnoir.com](http://www.netnoir.com)), black singles join Club NetNoir to find that someone special. On eBay ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com)), doll collectors meet every Monday evening to discuss doll repair with a renowned expert. In Ultima Online ([www.owo.com](http://www.owo.com)), fantasy game players join medieval guilds, engage in spirited battles, and run their own frontier towns.

### ***Change Happens***

You may feel sure of what your community's about, but you need to be prepared for it to evolve over time, too. Sometimes communities change categories as they find their core audience. For example, NetNoir started out calling itself "The Soul of Cyberspace," a topical community for anyone interested in worldwide African culture. As its membership grew, the community managers discovered that most of their active members were people of African descent. NetNoir gradually evolved into "The Black Network," aimed squarely at the worldwide black community, and developed a more focused business model (Figure 1.3).

iVillage went through a similar evolution after it launched Parent Soup, a support community for parents. Not surprisingly, iVillage found that most of their members were women, and that advertisers and sponsors were used to marketing to a narrower demographic (specifically, women between the ages of 25 and 45) than to parents in general. So iVillage renamed itself "The Woman's Network," and developed topical "channels" aimed at women that include parenting, health, relationships, and money (Figure 1.4).

No matter how you categorize your overall community, one thing that's certain to happen as it grows is that subcommunities will emerge that fall into different categories. The larger

FIGURE 1.3

NETNOIR—THE BLACK NETWORK

www.netnoir.com

NetNoir started out as “The Soul of Cyberspace,” a topical community aimed at anyone interested in worldwide African culture. Over time, NetNoir found its audience and became “The Black Network,” a Web community targeted squarely at people of African descent. Notice how the tag line, the club member photo, the May spotlight issue, the headlines, and other elements explicitly communicate this site’s identity.

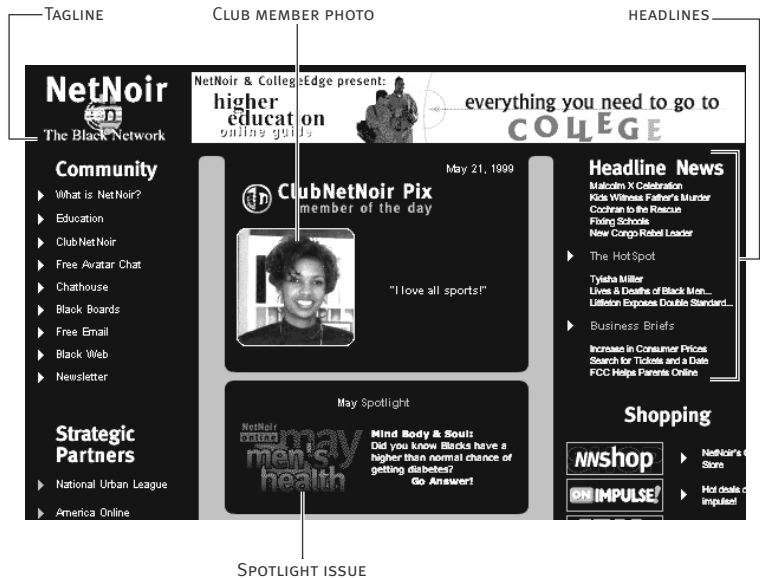


FIGURE 1.4

iVILLAGE—THE WOMEN’S NETWORK

www.ivillage.com

iVillage started as a focused support site for new parents but grew to become “The Women’s Network,” a demographically targeted community with channels designed to appeal to the different issues, interests, and concerns that women have.



and more general your community, the more likely it is that such subgroups will arise. At iVillage, for example, the topical channels function as subcommunities—and smaller subcommunities crop up within each channel (See Figure 1.13). Some

are organized around shared activities, such as book clubs or investing groups; others are based on stages of life, such as pregnancy groups, play groups, and retirement planning; still others are based on shared goals such as losing weight, quitting smoking, or creating a family.

Similarly, some of the 41 Geocities “neighborhoods” (the basic metaphor by which the Geocities community is organized—see [www.geocities.com/neighborhoods](http://www.geocities.com/neighborhoods)) are based on a topic or activity like cars, games, politics, or investing; others on a geographical location like Tokyo or Paris; and still others on a demographic group such as kids or women.

### **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

The community builders I’ve worked with have often found it useful to refer to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1.5) when trying to clarify their goals and prioritize their feature list. The Hierarchy of Needs is the brainchild of Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology. He believed that people are motivated by the urge to satisfy needs ranging from basic survival to self-fulfillment, and that they don’t fill the higher-level needs until the lower-level ones are satisfied.

FIGURE 1.5

#### **MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

This model for understanding human motivation was developed by Abraham Maslow ([www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html](http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html)), a humanistic psychologist who believed that until lower-level needs are met, people can’t pay attention to their higher-level needs. You can use these ideas to help you prioritize the features in your Web community and to make sure you’re meeting the most basic needs of your members before offering “higher-level” features.



The following table, arranged from basic to abstract, suggests some of the forms these needs take in both offline and online environments.

NEED	OFFLINE	ONLINE
<i>physiological</i>	Food, clothing, shelter, health	System access; the ability to maintain one's identity, and participate in a Web community
<i>security and safety</i>	Protection from crimes and war; the sense of living in a fair and just society	Protection from hacking and personal attacks; the sense of having a "level playing field"
<i>social</i>	The ability to give and receive love; the feeling of belonging to a group	Belonging to the community as a whole, and to subgroups within the community
<i>self-esteem</i>	Self-respect; the ability to earn the respect of others, and contribute to society	The ability to contribute to the community, and be recognized for those contributions
<i>self-actualization</i>	The ability to develop skills and fulfill one's potential	The ability to take on a community role that develops skills and opens up new opportunities

## Clarify Your Goals

Now that you have a good idea of why you're building a community, and what kind of community it should be, it's time to focus on what specific benefits you and your members will get out of it. A successful community must attract and keep enough members to make it worthwhile. It must also deliver a satisfactory return on investment to whoever is funding and/or maintaining it. If either one of these standards is not met, the community will eventually fail. As a community builder, therefore, you have to pay attention to both the needs of the members and the goals of the owners.

The phrase "return on investment" can obviously mean a financial investment and return, but the principle also applies to a mailing list being run out of a private passion. In general, the form of the investment indicates the kind of return expected. For example, someone running a not-for-profit Web message board is investing time and good will and wants appreciation in return. It's important to be clear about what's being invested, and what is the expected return.

## ***Needs and Goals: A Three-Step Planning Exercise***

The following exercise will help you identify the standards of success for your community and come up with a list of goals that will help you focus your efforts, coordinate your team, and prioritize your features. You can use the exercise before launching a new community, when preparing to make changes to an existing community, or simply to update your thinking and refine your goals.

### **STEP 1: MEMBERS' NEEDS**

- **UNDERSTAND YOUR MEMBERS.** Set aside all thoughts of business models, technology, and brand identity, and think about your (current and potential) members. Who are they? Are they homogeneous or varied? Are there distinct subgroups? What are their interests, habits, and affiliations? What other communities do they belong to? Don't worry if you can't answer these questions completely; you can collect more information later (see "Understanding Your Audience") and refine your thinking. What's important at this stage is to start seeing your community through the eyes of your members.
- **MAKE A LIST OF THEIR NEEDS.** Next, consider members' needs and desires. Why are they coming to your community? Are they searching for something specific? What can your community do for them? This is a brainstorming phase, so don't censor your thoughts; the purpose is to write down everything you can think of that your members might look for and possibly find in your community.
- **PRIORITIZE YOUR LIST.** Now it's time to sort your list. Which of the items on your list are most central in your members' lives? Which would they value most highly? During this process, consider what you can actually deliver to your members: do you have access to unique resources? Can you provide them with something that's not offered elsewhere? Try to select the top five or six needs that your community can meet.

### **STEP 2: OWNERS' GOALS**

- **UNDERSTAND YOUR OWNERS.** Now, turn your attention to the people who will be funding and/or running your community (which,

of course, might be you). Who are they? Are they developing this community as a business venture? A labor of love? A PR stunt? A research experiment? Understanding the motivations of your funding source will help you get the support and resources you need to succeed.

- **MAKE A LIST OF THEIR GOALS.** Next, think about what your community's owners are hoping to get out of it. What kinds of results will they be expecting, and how soon? How will success be measured? If you don't know the answers to these questions, ask people. Bear in mind that you may not get complete answers, and the motivation and measurements of success may very well change over time.
- **PRIORITIZE YOUR LIST.** As before, it's now time to sort through your list, select the top five or six goals, and prioritize them from the owners' point of view. Which are most highly valued? Which are fundamental to success? Do some goals depend on other? Are some critical for the continued support of the community? Be prepared to update this list periodically, as your community goals come into sharper focus. What's most important at this stage is to raise these issues with whoever is funding the community.

### **STEP 3: CREATE A "MASTER LIST" OF YOUR COMMUNITY GOALS**

- **COMPARE AND CONSOLIDATE THE TWO LISTS.** Now that you've identified what's most important to both your members and owners, it's time to combine them into a master list of community goals. Do any issues appear on both lists? If so, consolidate them into a single goal. Are there contradictions? If so, take it as a signal to reconsider your plan and make some adjustments in either your audience profile or your business model.
- **CREATE AND DISTRIBUTE THE MASTER LIST.** Finally, distribute the list of community goals to everyone on the team and ask for feedback. You'll continue to refine this list as you learn more about who your members are and what value your community provides to them. You'll also want to adjust this list whenever your business model or community ownership changes (a common occurrence in the Web community biz).

## The Planning Exercise in Action

Let's go behind the scenes at a successful online gaming company, Origin Systems, and see how they used this exercise to kick-start a major redesign effort.

Origin's Web site, [www.owo.com](http://www.owo.com), had been designed to support their popular multiplayer fantasy game, Ultima Online. While that site had been appropriate for marketing and launching the game, Origin felt that a more community-focused site would better serve their players (Figure 1.6). So they put together a community design team (which consisted of myself as an outside consultant, and several in-house staff members), to see what it would take to set up such a community.

### Step 1: Their Members' Needs

Because the community's purpose was to both support and promote an existing product, it had to offer something to both current and potential subscribers. Some, but not all, of the latter group might already have played UO.

From both email and surveys, Origin knew that better customer support was high on players' wish lists, along with a desire to have more contact with the UO design team. Less was known about potential subscribers, but it was clear that they would need information about the game, and to be shown why it was worth a subscription fee.

Using Maslow's Pyramid for inspiration, the community design team decided that providing game-specific support and information to the existing players was the most basic community need they had to meet. A player who can't access the game because the servers are down, or who logs in to find that his settings have been corrupted, won't care about anything else until that issue is resolved.

### Step 2: Their Owner's Goals

As Community Manager, Carly Staehlin was responsible for running the Origin Web community. Since she had to justify her budget and staffing needs to the Origin executives, it was crucial that she understand their goals for the project.

Carly met with the executives and asked them to describe their vision for the UO Web community, paying particular attention to timelines and performance expectations. She also met with the "UO Live" team, who would be maintaining the multiplayer game, and with representatives from Origin customer support and public relations. From these meetings, she compiled a list of goals, including some of her own based on her past experience with Web communities.

Carly also met with David Koslowski, the head of Origin's in-house Web development team, to find out what kinds of tools were available for

building the community, and for measuring success. Armed with this information, Carly and her team created a prioritized list of the top five goals for the Web community. They gave this list to the Origin executives, and revised it based on their feedback.

### Step 3: Their Community Goals

Finally, the community design team sat down and compared the two lists. They noticed that both members and owners wanted to hear stories about what was happening inside the game. They noticed that the owners wanted to develop a large community, while the members wanted “small community” features such as personal attention from customer support and direct contact with the UO design team.

With input from the team, Carly made a master list of community goals and distributed it to everyone they’d interviewed. As expected, every department wanted its issues to have top priority, but generally, everybody was happy to see their needs addressed as part of the community plan. Carly and David now had a document that would help them choose which features and programs to implement in the Origin Web community.

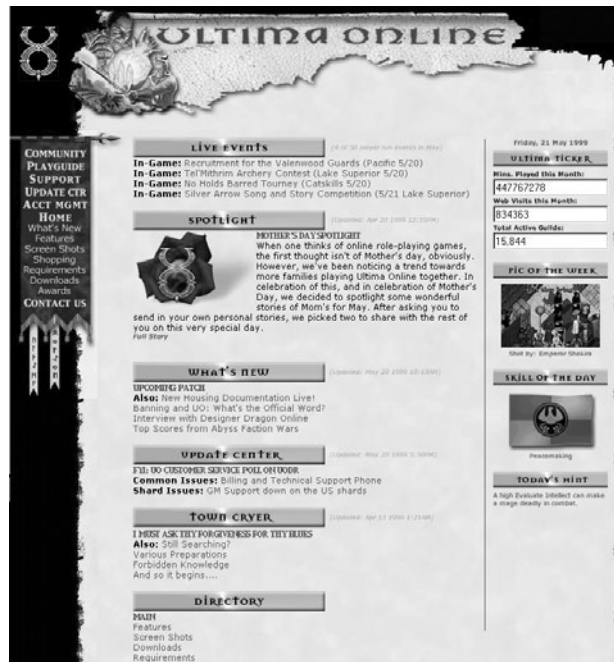


FIGURE 1.6 ULTIMA ONLINE WEB SITE (www.uo.com)

The original owo.com site was developed to support a multiplayer game (Ultima Online) before, during, and after its launch. After the game had been running for awhile, the needs of the subscribers—and the company—were different, so Origin redesigned the site (shown here) to include more of a community focus.



## Understand Your Audience

Knowing who you want to reach is not the same as understanding your audience. To create a community that engages your intended audience, you need to understand what makes them tick. That's something professional market researchers do, employing a variety of tools to get inside people's heads.

Among the most common and useful market research tools are surveys and focus groups. I strongly recommend working with a professional firm, if your budget allows. However, don't let a tight budget stop you from doing research yourself. A little testing is better than none, and going through the process of conducting surveys, interviews and focus groups can really help you hone your efforts.

### *Take a Survey*

A survey that's professionally created and run can give you reliable information about the opinions and makeup of your target audience. Depending on the type of product or services you intend to offer, you might ask potential members about some or all of the following:

- **DEMOGRAPHICS**, such as their age, race, income, and education
- **PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS**, such as their livelihood, the professional groups they belong to, and the conferences they attend
- **PERSONAL INTERESTS**, such as the books, magazines, and TV shows they enjoy and the hobbies they pursue
- **COMPUTER USAGE**, such as the type of computer equipment and software applications they use and the Web sites they frequent

The key issues when conducting surveys are sampling (who is invited to take the survey), self-selection bias (of those invited, who actually responds), question construction (what form the questions take and what order they are presented in), and length (how much time the survey takes to complete).

The results you get from running your own survey might not be as statistically valid as those from a professional one, but you'll certainly get some useful information and ideas. Here are a few survey guidelines to get you started (see the companion Web site for further resources):

- **KEEP IT SHORT.** Respondents will be more likely to complete your survey and give you accurate answers if they're not exhausted by the process. This is especially true for online surveys, given Web surfers' notoriously short attention spans.
- **PROVIDE INCENTIVES.** Your goal is to get a broad range of people to respond to your survey. Offer something like a discount coupon, a gift or payment, or even a chance to win a prize for participating (Figure 1.7). Otherwise, you're likely to get answers from avid devotees and people with a bone to pick, but you won't hear from the "silent majority."

FIGURE 1.7

**ENTICING MEMBERS TO FILL OUT A SURVEY**  
iVillage used two different opening screens to entice its members to fill out an online survey. One approach offered the chance to win a prize; the other simply offered the opportunity to contribute one's opinion. In this case, iVillage discovered that both approaches were equally effective in motivating people to participate. If you decide to run your own surveys, you may want to experiment with different approaches as well.



- **ASK SIMPLE QUESTIONS FIRST.** Surveys usually start with simple, multiple-choice questions to get the ball rolling. Save the longer, more open-ended questions for the end.

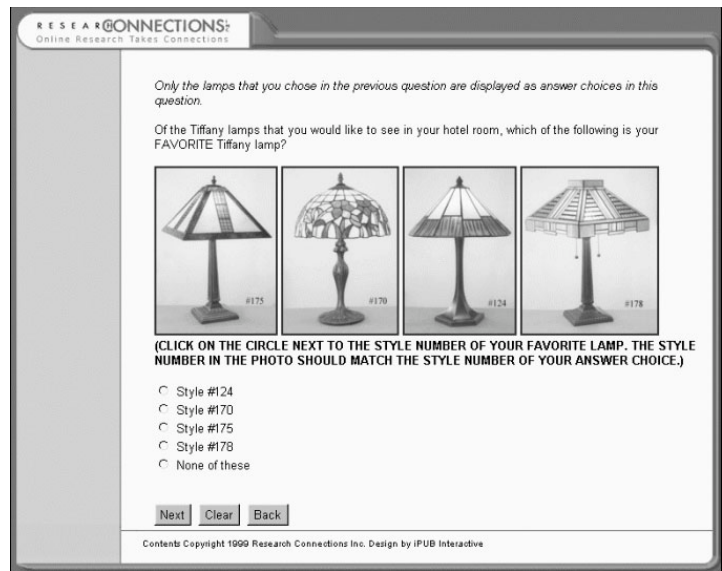
Surveys can take place on the telephone, in a mall, through email, or via interactive forms-based Web pages (Figure 1.8). In general, email and forms-based surveys are most appropriate for Web communities, because you know you're reaching people who are

already online. If you were trying to bring new people online and into your community, however, phone and mall surveys would work better.

FIGURE 1.8

AN AUTOMATED FORMS-BASED SURVEY  
[www.researchconnections.com/  
livedemos/questconnect.html](http://www.researchconnections.com/livedemos/questconnect.html)





This is a sample question from an automated survey put together by Research Connections (a division of Talk City, Inc.), a professional market research firm that has developed their own proprietary survey tool. Firms such as this use their tools and expertise to run surveys that yield robust (and statistically valid) results. If you can't afford such a service, you can still learn a lot about your audience by checking out how the pros do it and then creating and running your own survey.



RESEARCH CONNECTIONS:  
Online Research Takes Connections

Only the lamps that you chose in the previous question are displayed as answer choices in this question.

Of the Tiffany lamps that you would like to see in your hotel room, which of the following is your FAVORITE Tiffany lamp?

			
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(CLICK ON THE CIRCLE NEXT TO THE STYLE NUMBER OF YOUR FAVORITE LAMP. THE STYLE NUMBER IN THE PHOTO SHOULD MATCH THE STYLE NUMBER OF YOUR ANSWER CHOICE.)

- Style #124
- Style #170
- Style #175
- Style #178
- None of these

Next Clear Back

Contents Copyright 1999 Research Connections Inc. Design by IPUB Interactive

So how do you choose the target audience for your survey? It depends on your goals and the state of your community. If you're looking for a better understanding of an existing community, you'll want to survey your current members. You can do this either by sending out an email survey or by enticing visitors to your site to fill out a form.

If you're trying to expand your membership or haven't yet launched your community, then you'll have to find nonmembers, which can require some ingenuity. First, you'll need to specify a profile for the survey participants—their age, gender, interests, experience, and so on. Next, you'll need to locate people who fit this profile. Professional market research firms often have access to special resources, such as targeted mailing lists. However, there are many ways to locate survey participants, both on and off the Web. For instance, if your profile specifies teenagers, you might look for survey participants at local schools, in hobby shops, at the mall, or in AOL chat rooms. You could also place an ad in the school

newspaper, on the library bulletin board, on the message boards of an existing teen community, or anywhere else that teenagers hang out.

### ***Focus Groups***

A focus group is a sort of group interview that generally involves some combination of specific questions, free-form discussion, and reactions to visual material. These group interviews usually involve six to ten people who are led through a discussion by one or two moderators that are trained to keep things moving and stay neutral about the issues being discussed. Often, the client—in this case, you or others responsible for your community—can observe the session and communicate with the moderators without being seen by the participants.

Focus groups are often used at key stages of a project as a “reality check” for visual and conceptual decisions. For example, if you’re planning to run a subscription-based Web community, you might run a focus group to see how much people are willing to pay for your service. Or if you’re considering several different visual designs for your site, you might show sketches to a focus group and get their reactions before finalizing your approach.

Online chat rooms are an increasingly popular way to run a focus group. Some research firms have created customized tools that allow them to control the proceedings (Figure 1.9). However, you can use any chat software to conduct an online focus group, as long as the software offers private spaces, moderator capabilities, and a private messaging backchannel (see Chapter 2 for more about chat software). The issues with selecting participants for an online focus group are similar to those of surveys—you’ll either want to use your current members, find nonmembers who fit a particular profile, or both.

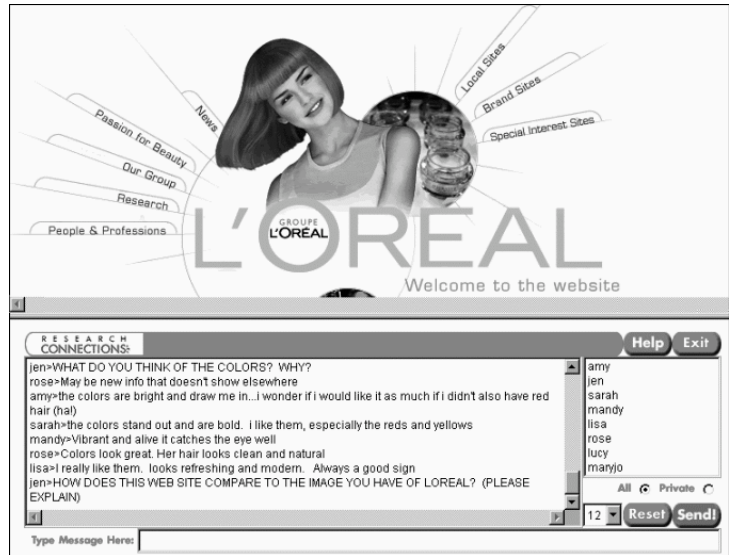
Online focus groups have many advantages for a Web community. The cost tends to be lower than for an offline group, especially if a professional firm is running it. It’s easier to get a wide geographic reach. You can show a variety of Web images and change your visual materials with ease. And the anonymity of being online tends to bring out more revealing answers.

FIGURE 1.9

**AN ONLINE FOCUS GROUP**

[www.researchconnections.com/livedemos/focusconnect.html](http://www.researchconnections.com/livedemos/focusconnect.html)

This is the instruction screen from Focus Connect, a customized version of the software that Research Connections uses to conduct online focus groups. This tool allows the research firm to customize the introductory screens and lets the moderator control the proceedings



If you decide to run your own online focus groups, try to choose a moderator who's not emotionally invested in your community, to help keep the results unbiased. Also, make sure to prepare all your questions and materials ahead of time. But if the conversation becomes lively, don't feel that you have to stick too closely to your script; you can get a lot of valuable information out of a freeform conversation.

## Articulate Your Vision

You know your purpose, you're clear on your goals, and you understand your audience. Now you need to articulate a vision that brings your purpose to life. This vision will be realized through words, images, features, policies, and even the social dynamics that take place within your community.

It's especially important to be clear about your vision if you're trying to attract a particular audience. The makers of L'EGGS pantyhose discovered the importance of this principle in 1995,

when they launched an ambitious, expensive Web site for the purpose of fostering brand loyalty and learning more about their market. To develop closer relationships with their customers, they included a discussion area called “The L’Eggs Community.” Much to their surprise, the discussions quickly became dominated by men who enjoyed wearing pantyhose and were thrilled to discover an anonymous setting where they could trade tips and not feel so alone in their somewhat unusual habit. The company that financed the Web site, however, was less than enchanted with this turn of events. The women they were trying to attract were put off, and shied away from participating in the discussions.

Since then, the L’Eggs company has learned to market more explicitly to its target demographic. But the point remains: unless you communicate your purpose clearly, people will use your Web community in ways that you never intended.

### **Craft Your Mission Statement**

Your mission statement is the most direct expression of your community vision. It spells out *what* type of community you’re building, *why* you’re building it, and *who* you’re building it for. Not only will developing a mission statement help you crystallize your thinking and focus your efforts, it will also make it easier for you to include other people in the project as your community grows.

The length and formality of your mission statement depends on the requirements of your project and the standards of your organization. If you’re starting a mailing list for a few friends, it will probably be short and informal. If, on the other hand, you’re launching a multimillion-dollar initiative for a large corporation, you’ll almost certainly need to develop a more in-depth document that will undergo an extensive review process.