

Tools for Building an On-line Community

Research and Recommendations

For the TA Provider Community

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A. Purpose

CARAT is planning to use on-line community tools for sharing problems, ideas, suggestions, and success stories across the small business TA community in California and the rest of the U.S. Through these tools, CARAT can further enhance its role as the central organization for best practices and professional development of the TA community. These tools fill a void in the business development/TA industry, providing a centralized location where TA providers can share ideas and feel that their work and their organizations are part of a larger community.

B. Research Methods

1. Search existing on-line community groups, methods, tools.
2. Gather information on existing discussion groups, community resources.
3. Test all tools

C. Findings - Communication options

Through this research, we have identified 7 common tools used in online communities.

1. Message board

a) What is a Message Board?

An Internet-based forum for an interest group; also called bulletin board, discussion board, interactive message board.

Message board software online is much like a message board in an office or school: you post a message on the board and come back an hour, a day, or a week later to see if anyone has responded to it.

b) Advantages of Message boards¹

- Asynchronous: maximum flexibility, participation doesn't require real-time coordination. Message boards can be a particularly effective way to sustain a large, thriving community as it provides a "location" where your members can gather.
- Encourages communication with each other since participants post opinions and react to others' comments.
- Linear format encourages continuity of comments on topic. It can be moderated by experts or volunteers, or both.

c) Two ways to organize messages in a system²

There are two ways to organize messages in a message board system: threaded and linear. Some software allows you to choose which way you want to present the material.

1) Threaded: With a threaded system, messages are arranged into "threads," or topics. A message will be attached to the message to which it's replying, whether or not it appears in chronological order. Often you'll see only one message per HTML page.

¹ Janet Salmons: Virtual Community-Building for NonProfit Organizations
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=301&topicid=5>

² By Sue Boettcher "What types of virtual communities can I build and what tools are available?" / <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitytypes.htm>

- Advantages of threaded boards:
 - Good for technical information where people need to be able to find answers to a particular question easily
 - Keeps topics neatly organized

- Disadvantages of threaded boards:
 - Sometimes a threaded board is more organized than people are - i.e. difficult to hold a conversation because real conversations drift... if the drift creates a new topic, you'll lose track of where it went because it's categorized under the thread from which it originated.
 - Less conducive to social communities
 - Often have to load a new HTML page to see the next message

2) Linear: With a linear system, each post in a given topic arrives in chronological order. The result is more like a real conversation. Often with a linear system you can read more than one post per HTML page, which speeds things up when you're reading. Linear message boards are sometimes called "Conferencing,"

- Advantages of linear boards:
 - Great for social conversation and in-depth discussion of important issues
 - More conducive to displaying conversation the way people really talk
 - Often can see a number of messages on one HTML page

- Disadvantages of linear boards:
 - Difficult to come to some kind of resolution or conclusion
 - Hard to find specific information again if you want or need to later

For a listing of current conferencing software, check out David Wooley's [Think of It \(http://www.thinkofit.com\)](http://www.thinkofit.com) site.

d) Three options to create a message board

1) Build a message board on your web site.

In this option, the message board is an integral part of your website. You are able to create or modify items, and exclude or censor your visitors. You can make it customizable to show your organization's characteristics. People can use the board and share their opinions and experiences without leaving your website. But you need a technical staff member to download the software and build the message board. You can find websites that provide free software for building your own board.

Free Message Board Software:

BraveNet offers free community building tools such as message board hosting, email list distribution, and site polls/ surveys. - <http://www.bravenet.com/index.php?sourceid=00380277013726990723/>

2) Using an existing free hosting board.

With free hosting, you can link your site to this external board, and be the host and moderator. You can find websites to register for free and can create your board easily. The message board can be up and running in a day because you set up the website online; no software download is needed. Free-hosting web sites let you customize to use your logos, colors and frames. It is almost the same function as above the board except it is outside of your website.

Free Hosting Board Website

Forumer 100% free hosting and connects your own domain to your forum.

<http://www.Forumer.com>

3) Using an existing free message board

With the free message board you can find many existing boards with topics you're interested in. For example Yahoo message board has categories like Business, Cultures, and Arts, and each of those categories has a variety of topics. People participate either by logging in as a member or without log-in as a guest. Participants cannot edit or remove topics or opinions easily, and some boards don't allow you to post new topics; you can only post messages within existing topics.

Free Message Board

<http://messages.yahoo.com/index.html> : Yahoo Message Boards

2. E-mail and Listservs³ -

a) Listservs, named after the original software for e-mail list applications, are electronic mailing lists that distribute written discussions to those who subscribe; each posted unit of a discussion shows up in the subscribers' e-mail boxes.

- Advantages:

- It's a "push" technology: you don't have to remember to go check it - it comes to your email box
- It's inexpensive for people with high access costs - messages can be composed and read offline
- You can reach virtually anyone who's online

- Disadvantages:

- Messages sometimes come out of order
- Archiving is not always used. If a list's messages are archived they are sometimes difficult to retrieve

³ By Sue Boettcher: What types of virtual communities can I build and what tools are available?
/ <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitytypes.htm>

- "Spammers" can send messages to the list and gather email addresses for advertising purposes

b) Listservs function in two basic ways⁴:

- The **Announcement** type of listserv where the owner of the list is the only one who writes, and members receive postings from the owner frequently. These types of listservs are also known as receive-only lists.
- The **Discussion** type of e-mail list, where anyone can send a message that will be sent to everyone's inbox on the subscription list.

c) Lists can serve different functions⁵

- Information Lists: people merely seek and offer specific information
- Dialogue lists: subscribers exchange views on issues and ideas. These tend to have more of a political dimension about them.
- Project Lists: subscribers use e-mail to collaborate on a specific project on which all list members are working.

Some web-based community-building systems include email tools to mail everyone in your group, as well as the ability to create sub-group mailing lists and send newsletters.

⁴ By: Susan Tenby : An Introduction to Email Listservs and Internet Mailing Lists
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=147&topicid=5>

⁵ By: Susan Tenby : An Introduction to Email Listservs and Internet Mailing Lists
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=147&topicid=5>

3. Newsgroups⁶

Newsgroups are like a cross between public message boards and an email list. You have to subscribe to a newsgroup, and sometimes only subscribers can post a message. They are usually not moderated, and it's not unusual for newsgroups to get quite contentious.

⁷Newsgroups can be public or private. Newsgroups can also be linked to mailing lists, so people can either participate by email or by visiting the newsgroup. The advantage of the newsgroup over a mailing list is that the visitor may view all the active topics on their computer screen at the same time, and choose which to respond to. This makes the discussion more organized, and the thread easier to follow. To read newsgroup messages, you need a newsgroup reader. Often these come with your browser (like Netscape Messenger) or your email software (Microsoft Outlook). You subscribe to the newsgroup, download the "headers," or title lines, and then you can read as many or as few of the actual messages as you choose. DejaNews is a searchable archive of thousands of different newsgroups. If you want a flavor of newsgroup life, take a look there.

<http://www.dejanews.com>

The advantages and disadvantages are similar to email, with two differences: Newsgroups are not "push" technology - you still have to remember to go check them. And with news readers, you can download just the titles ("headers") of messages and avoid downloading the entire message if, based on the title, you don't want to read it.

⁶ By Sue Boettcher: What types of virtual communities can I build and what tools are available?
/ <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitytypes.htm>

⁷ By Hilary Naylor : TechSoup Article - Options for Online Discussions
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?articleid=149&topicid=13>

4. Chat room⁸

A site on the Internet where a number of users can communicate in real time (typically one dedicated to a particular topic)

- Advantages:
 - Good for meetings where you want to come to a conclusion with everyone there
 - Can have a real-time discussion
 - Can have a guest speaker to answer questions
 - Can log the transcript to be posted later

- Disadvantages:
 - Difficult to schedule a time if you have users around the globe
 - Sometimes inexperienced chatters have difficulty keeping up with the pace
 - On the web, sometimes access issues make it difficult to build a room which will accommodate everyone (Java is often used to power chat rooms, and some operating systems and browsers have difficulty with Java.)

5. Polling ⁹

- Quick, informal read on opinions.

- Way to gather input on decisions.

⁸ By Sue Boettcher: What types of virtual communities can I build and what tools are available?
/ <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitytypes.htm>

⁹ Janet Salmons: Virtual Community-Building for NonProfit Organizations
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=301&topicid=5>

6. Active Calendar¹⁰

- Organize internal projects or teams.
- Publicize events or meetings.
- Build awareness of organization's activities.
- Increase participation.

7. Weblog

a) What is a Weblog?

Weblogs¹¹: An online diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page; also called Blog, Web log. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author.

Weblogs¹², commonly referred to as blogs, are Web sites that are very easy to update and provide instant access to information. Typically, links are the primary content of a weblog. Read chronologically, the most recent postings are on top of the Web page while the older information gets pushed to the bottom. A blog post frequently consists of a title, link, comment, date and time of the post, and archival information.

b) What does a Blog Do?¹³

Blogs serve many purposes, addressing a wide range of audiences. Some are serious. Some are satirical. Weblog topics range from celebrity journals to news and events. Some blogs are information resources or communication tools used

¹⁰ Janet Salmons: Virtual Community-Building for Non-Profit Organizations
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=301&topicid=5>

¹¹ Weblog: <http://dictionary.reference.com/>

¹² By Sarah Hawkins: An introduction to Weblogs
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=439&cg=searchterms&sg=weblogs/>

¹³ By Sarah Hawkins: An introduction to Weblogs
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=439&cg=searchterms&sg=weblogs>

within a business or organization. ¹⁴Blogger-style tools allow links and commentary to quickly grow into longer essays and diaries on the Web. Online journals had existed before this, but weblog applications made journals easier to manage for those who didn't know HTML

c) What are the benefits of a Weblog?¹⁵

In general, blogs are simple to use and easy to update. Therefore they keep content fresh and relevant. Blogs can provide both well-organized information and good narrative (stories that engage readers). Users will share their own information and stories using the comment section. Blogs can be syndicated and can distribute content so that information can come directly to "consumers" rather than requiring folks to come back to the site to find information. Right now this "push" feature is used by a few sophisticated blogs. In the near future, syndication or pushing may become more popular. For now, the Weblog is still primarily a pull technology, meaning that people must choose to come back to your blog to read and respond to the postings.

d) What are the main challenges in the production of a weblog?¹⁶

You need consistent and timely postings with relevant content driving people to the site. You also need to strike the right balance between engaging people with narrative and to keep information concise and "browsable."

¹⁴ What are blogs, and how did they become so popular? Ask Yahoo <http://ask.yahoo.com/ask/20021115.html>

¹⁵ Profiles of Nonprofit Weblogs

http://www.techsoup.org/howto/npostory_article.cfm?articleid=80&topicid=13&cg=searchterms&sg=weblog

¹⁶ Profiles of Nonprofit Weblogs

http://www.techsoup.org/howto/npostory_article.cfm?articleid=80&topicid=13&cg=searchterms&sg=weblog

8. Online Tool Feature comparison

Functions/	Message Board	E-mail listserv	News groups	Weblog
Search	Y	N	Y	Y
Post topic via website	Y	N	Y	Y
<u>Allows guests to post topics via website without a login/account</u>	Sometimes	N	Sometimes	N
Post images via website	Sometimes	N	Y	Y
Send topics via email	N	Y	Y	N
<u>Allows guests to post topics via email without a login/account</u>	Sometimes	N	Sometimes	N
Send images via email	N	Y	Y	N
Get topics and reply via email	N	Y	Y	N
Reply or give comment via website	Y	N	Y	Y
Group mailing	N	Y	Y	N
Polling	Y	N	Sometimes	N
Calendar	Sometimes	N	Sometimes	Sometimes
Can sort and group messages by topic for easy viewing	Y	N	N	N
Can customize interface with logos, etc.	Y	N	Y	Y
Private Message	Y	Y	Sometimes	Sometimes

Note: All of these technologies are constantly changing and updating features. Strengths and weaknesses that we've identified today may no longer be true tomorrow!

D. Recommendation For CARAT: Message board

1. Why Message Boards?

¹⁷ “Certainly, there's more than one way to build an online community. But a message board can be a particularly effective way to sustain a large, thriving community as it provides a "location" where your members can gather (without the inconveniences of travel, of course). Users can chat with each other nearly in real-time and navigate through conversation threads with ease. Discussions are archived, and you can access them and search them via a Web-based interface.”

Each message board technology or vendor has a different set of features and functions beyond the ability to post and read messages. Some of these additional functions include search, polling, private messaging, and e-mailing. You should consider which features you would like when choosing which message board technology or vendor to implement for your organization. The technologies that are most similar to message boards are newsgroups and blogs. We have described the major differences between these technologies below.

2. Message boards vs. Newsgroups

While some newsgroups also have some of those above functions, message boards can be organized by topic, and sorted in different ways. As a result, message boards are often much easier to read than newsgroups when you have many participants and different topics. Another advantage of message boards is that they won't expose participants' e-mail addresses and make them vulnerable to spam, which is a risk with newsgroups. You can categorize specific topics and informal posts and replies on the message board. When you are the organizer of

¹⁷ Susan Tenby “Using Message Boards to Build Community-”/
<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=529&topicid=13>

the message board, you can set up the message board so that it is easy for people to participate in certain topics without logging in. It is easy to get people involved with your organization and to provide or share many resources. It can be a very informal resource tool for your organization.

3. Message boards vs. Blogs

A Blog is more like private diary where you read the most recent entry on the top of the page and the oldest going to the bottom. It is not easy to organize by specific topics or sort in different ways, like it is with a message board. Also Blogs need to provide constant and timely postings. Blogs are appropriate for companies like magazines, newspapers and other organizations that need to keep their site very up-to-date and reference current events. A message board can be a more interactive and open discussion tool for general organizations, allowing people to share new ideas and /or best practices.

► More resources for building message board

http://www.techsoup.org/resources/index.cfm?action=resource.view_summary&resourcelist_id=20 : You can find here many URLs that provide free online community building tools/

<http://www.network54.com/> Create your own forums, chatrooms, votelets and other community resources for your web site.

www.Forumer.com/ 100% free hosting and connects your own domain to your forum.

<http://www.ezboard.com/> EZBoard offers Web based discussion forums. Some features include: HTML compatible, customer Support, profanity filter, searchable communities, and option to link EZBoard community to home page.

<http://www.bravenet.com/index.php?sourceid=00380277013726990723/> BraveNet offers free community building tools such as message board hosting, email list distribution, and site polls/surveys.

E. Online Community Best Practices

15 Tips for Getting People Involved and Active in your Message Board

1. Use Email & Email lists to reach your existing audience
 - Gather email addresses from lists already you have.
 - Gather email addresses from members and activists who are most likely to respond. This group can form your core group of dependable online activists.
2. Provide your users with member lists and access to user profiles. It's hard to be engaged in a community if you don't know who's in it.
3. Collect minimal information during registration -- username, password, and e-mail address. Gather additional information through polls and surveys.
4. Send/give information about your discussion board including address, the purpose and how to access. Clearly identify your community purpose and target audience.
5. Advertise your discussion board to stakeholders. Make sure that registration requires no more than two clicks -- one to start the process and one to verify the information entered.
6. Establish discussion lists.
 - Gather common topics from the people, organizations, events, and existing workshops.
 - Identify the current issues in industry.
7. Seed new message board with posts written by moderators.
8. Provide help for newbies.
9. Scatter interesting quotes, hot discussions, and poll results throughout the site and link them back to the message boards. Also provide links in your message boards to other places on your site.
10. When you need to get specific results, send the topic with address of your discussion board via e-mail to your participants to ask for more active responses

and remind them the board is good source for sharing their opinions, best practices and innovative ideas.

11. Highlight your most active discussions on the main page of your site and on the main page of your community, and list your topics in order of most recent posts (except for the few general-purpose topics -- such as how to use the site -- at the top of the list).
12. Feature experts from the field in special online events to expand interest and generate new members.
13. Participate in related e-mail lists and online communities to build and maintain connections with other communities. With a presence in other communities, you can credibly promote special events in yours.
14. Respond to incoming feedback within 3 days.
15. In order to keep your organization as a whole committed to the community, ask your co-workers to foster relationships with the hosts of the forums and regularly participate in discussions.

Resources from:

http://www.techsoup.org/resources/index.cfm?action=resource.view_summary&resourcelist_id=20&set=products

[TechSoup's list of nonprofit technology online communities](#)

[TechSoup's article on options for online discussions](#)

TechSoup's article, "[Virtual Community Building for Nonprofit Organizations](#)"

<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=147&topicid=5>

<http://www.fullcirc.com>

<http://www.fullcirc.com/commresources.htm>

TechSoup's article, An introduction to Weblogs

<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=439&cg=searchterms&sg=weblogs>

<http://www.techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=529&cg=searchterms&sg=message%20AND%20board>

http://www.blogger.com/tour_start.g

TechSoup's article, Profiles of non-profit Weblogs

http://www.techsoup.org/howto/npostory_article.cfm?articleid=80&topicid=13&cg=searchterms&sg=weblogs