emoderation

Interaction and brand management

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Six techniques for creating culture through online moderation

By Jake McKee and Tamara Littleton

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"I spend so much time looking at content submissions for my community; I feel like I know the community members. If I could just tell them directly why their content was out of line, I'd probably avoid seeing even more of their unacceptable submissions in the future."
- Anonymous Community Moderator

More and more companies are developing online social tools and activities as a way to better connect with their customers, find new customers, and even provide a platform for connection between customers. These tools allow users to share technical explanations that help other customers, for example, solve computer problems, submit travel photos as part of a contest, or learn more about the brand and the other brand customers.

Nearly every company launching these tools today is doing so with some sort of content moderation process that ensures that only content that meets certain standards is posted. Typically these processes involve a staff of moderators who assess submissions and mark them as acceptable (and let them be posted) or unacceptable (and remove them from the site).

But beyond this basic task of accepting and declining submission, are moderation teams being used as effectively as possible? Are moderators just silent authority figures or are they active leaders in the development of an engaging social culture? Are they bouncers, standing in a corner with arms crossed or are they party hosts, helping guests feel comfortable enough to join the fun?

Community moderators have more day-to-day understanding of the social dynamics of the community, the key leaders within the community, and the potential triggers for negativity than anyone else. Yet, today's typical community moderator is essentially utilized in an assembly line fashion; working far removed from the actual activity happening within a social community, limited to only accepting and declining content. Every opportunity and benefit that can be gained from that day-to-day knowledge is being set aside.

Many of the managers overseeing these social community projects worry that moderators - outsourced consultants or internal employees alike - wouldn't be able to properly represent the brand if they were allowed to join, rather than oversee the community. While some amount of this concern may be justified, there is far greater benefit from empowering the moderation staff; namely, the creation of a sustainable community culture.

Every online community develops its own unique culture over time, based on the community goals, the participants themselves, the leadership, external issues, and a range of other factors. A community's culture will influence:

- The way new members are integrated into the community
- How trolls are perceived and dealt with
- The level of quality of the participation by community members
- How new leaders are cultivated
- How the host company is perceived

Moderators who are actively participating in the community have a direct influence over these issues. They are able to lead by example, to push community members towards more positive solutions for problems, and encourage more brand-acceptable activity.

An empowered moderation staff can do incredible things to help build your community's culture, and thus its success. Outlined here are six tips for creating empowered moderators who can drive fantastic community culture.

Allow moderators to join the party

Imagine this: You've been invited to a party at a house of someone you don't know. You knock on the door, and a burly man with sunglasses and folded arms answers the door. He doesn't say anything and just stares at you accusingly. As soon as you say anything, he shouts "wrong!"

Not very inviting (or comfortable), is it?

Now imagine that you knock on the door and the host invites you in, offers you a drink, and introduces you around. When your party host breaks out the karaoke machine and steps up to the microphone, it starts a trend. If the host dives into the food, everyone else will follow along. A good host knows that where he or she leads, others will follow.

It's crucial for the moderators to do the things we hope to see users do. That means showing a positive, helpful attitude. The more the moderation staff does the things we consider "perfect usage" of the site, the more users will follow along as well.

Culture isn't created at arm's length, it's created through direct participation.

- Allow your moderation staff to participate in the community as "official users". Give them specific, official identification badges and message footers that showcase their official status.
- Evaluate their performance based, in part, on the amount and quality of direct participation they undertake.

Trust your moderators, you've hired smart people

One of the most important decisions made when designing a brand community is how to staff the moderation team. Should you outsource or staff internally? Should your schedule include 24 hour moderation? Should you pre-moderate or post-moderate?

But regardless of the outcome of those decisions, the one decision that every team makes is to hire the smartest, most talented community moderators they can find. They want moderators with experience, with an understanding of community dynamics, and an evenhanded nature. All the automated moderation technology in the world can't have the same impact as a great team of humans.

While most brand managers hire moderators based on trust, they don't actually task those moderators with that same trust. There is a fear that the moderation staff won't be able to properly understand the brand needs or react to the community needs. The truth, however, is that in most cases an ongoing dialogue that reaches resolution is better than a position that dictates resolution.

The more trust you have in the moderation team, the more empowered they will feel. This empowerment leads to a deeper more personal connection with your project. If you're looking for your moderators to help develop the culture as well as to ensure safety, this empowerment is crucial. After all, what moderator will be concerned with ensuring that a lasting, positive culture is created when they believe their only worth is in accepting or declining content submissions?

Trust is certainly earned, so give your moderation staff a chance to earn it.

- Ask for their feedback in the early development, allowing them to help develop the public and private tools they're going to be using daily. This may mean that you need to hire some of your moderation staff earlier than originally intended, but this will lead to hours of efficiency down the road.
- Create a suggestion box for them to submit ideas for improvement. After all, the people who use the tools day in and day out will quickly come up with wish lists of things that will make their job easier, things that would only come up in real-time live use of the tools.

Clearly define Rules of Engagement

You're nervous about letting your moderation staff loose inside your community; it's understandable. After all, you've worked hard to convince colleagues, find budget, and build just the right technology solution. And with the more official company representatives (employees and moderation staff alike) joining the community, there's that much more risk that something could go wrong. There is a risk that someone might say something wrong, or upset a community member. At the same time, the possible rewards are considerable - more successful community, more engaged members, and better company/customer connection, just to name a few.

Reducing the risk associated with moderation participation is fairly easy to address: create a set of rules that dictate how, where, and when moderators are allowed to engage and participate within the community. Train these Rules of Engagement (ROE) in the same way you train any other moderation task.

- Rules of Engagement are primarily focused around the principle of "doing no harm", in that moderation participation is primarily focused on being positive and helpful. Engagement should generally be more about rewarding and encouraging positive behavior than punishing negative behavior.
- Any engagement requires resolution. When moderators engage in the community, they need to ensure that they see that engagement through to a conclusion, posted publicly for all to see.
- Embrace the personality variance of the moderators, allowing each to have their own personal voice and persona. Community members want to connect with individuals, not generic company positions. Again, you've hired smart people, let them interact as the smart people they are!

Let them be your eyes and ears

It's surprising how connected moderators become to the community projects they work on. It's hard not to, consider the level of involvement they have with the community. In fact, moderators quickly become the most knowledgeable people about the community itself. As such, the moderation staff can provide smarter, faster assessment of the health of the community, pending troubles, and general issues than any technical dashboard solution.

Establishing a successful culture that bonds your community members with your company requires a firm understanding of these kinds of issues. Additionally, you will need to react to these issues as fast as they arise. Nothing screams "out of touch" more than taking a few days or a week to respond to an issue that's already over and deserved immediate attention.

An empowered moderation staff can be your "human dashboard", helping to ensure you don't miss any crucial issue. And just like a dashboard that comes in the form of an automated Web tool, you'll need to design the criteria for your human dashboard as well.

- Consider what specific issues you'd like moderators to watch for. Just like a tech dashboard, you have to initially set the criteria that you want to report against. The more clear your moderators are about what kinds of activities, problems, and opportunities you're interested in monitoring, the more successful they will be at delivering that information to you.
- Ensure that moderators clearly understand that those are simply starting points and that you're not dictating a singular structure. Moderators need to clearly understand that you trust (and expect) them to deliver a "real and accurate" community update, which will absolutely need to evolve and expand beyond the original dashboard requirements.
- While you want moderators to work constantly to reassess what's important to report, you don't want them guessing at what format you'll most appreciate their reports be delivered in. Provide moderators with a template for notification that is quick for them to create, quick for you to put to use, and easy for you to share with colleagues.

Document the social activity

Documentation is a crucial part of a moderator's daily activity, but sadly most of the documentation focuses solely on a historical record of what content was removed. This provides an important record for legal and internal management purposes, which is certainly important.

But the documentation that can help moderators, brand managers, and community leaders build a stronger, better culture is often overlooked: social history. What types of issues typically spark flame wars between site users? What have been the most active topics in the past? Who are the site trolls, and what usernames have they masked themselves with?

Understanding the way that social trends have unfolded in the past gives an idea of how things will happen in the future. Being able to quickly access information about the community's social norms, the personalities of the members, and having a documented oral history gives moderators and company staff an invaluable tool to properly respond to many issues. The better the response, the more positive the culture overall becomes.

- Set up an oral history wiki that allows moderators to document the social activity. In addition to capturing a historical record about the community activities and members, ensure that the outcome of escalated issues are captured as well.
- Grant moderators time in their daily shifts to spend on this documentation.
- Consider sharing appropriate parts with the community itself, allowing the members to help create and maintain the database of information. Certainly there will be parts of this wiki that you wouldn't want the community to see (such as internal decision making or member comments), so consider what parts of the tool would be appropriate for public access.

Train your company's objectives

Typically when a new moderator joins the team, training is conducted to get them up to speed. Most of these training programs tend to focus solely on how to use the moderation tools or the specific set of criteria by which content is acceptable. These are certainly crucial elements to the task of moderation, and without them a moderator would quite simply be unable to do their job.

But what's often missing from the typical moderator training is an understanding of the larger objectives of the company. Rarely does a moderator receive any level of depth about the reasons that the company has built this particular community, or how success will be judged by the company. Most companies have fully developed brand guidelines that are regularly shared with agencies, partners, and new employees. Why not share those with same guidelines with your moderators? Even short term, advertising focused programs can benefit from having a team of moderators who truly understand the nature of the program in relation to the brand goals and background.

When the moderation team understands not just the guidelines they're moderating to, but also the larger objective the company is trying to achieve, they're more capable (and likely) to review content and engage users in a way that drives that objective.

- Take time to introduce moderation staff to the objectives of the social community you've built as part of their initial training.
- Regularly share results of how the community is delivering on the established objectives. Help moderators understand that they're an important part of something bigger than themselves. Show specific instances where moderators have influenced and impacted the objectives.
- Don't forget to train the company culture as a way to help contextualize the objectives.
- Moderators are employees too! Consider what kind of training traditional new employees receive when they join the company and create a version of that company introduction appropriate to the moderation staff.

Creating culture is an activity that takes time. Following the tips outlined above will put you on the fast track to creating a fantastic culture for your corporate community, but don't be surprised if the effects of putting these tips to work don't become obvious for months. A positive culture, however, is a significant reason that a community thrives and survives. And your moderators are the foundation of that culture.

About eModeration

Founded in 2002, eModeration Limited is an international, specialist user-generated content moderation company. It provides 24-hour community and content moderation to clients in the entertainment and digital publishing industry and major corporate clients hosting online communities and consumer-driven projects.

eModeration's CEO and founder, Tamara Littleton, has an established background in editorial quality control, fault escalation and process management gained from previous work as the Product Delivery Director for Chello Broadband and Online Operations Manager for BBC Online, where she managed the world's first ISO 9000 accredited team for digital publishing management and monitored over 400 BBC websites.

Tamara Littleton is a member of the Home Office Internet Taskforce for Child Protection on the Internet which brings together government, law enforcement, children's agencies and the internet industry, who are all working to ensure that children can use the internet in safety. She was also the Chair of e-mint, the online community for community professionals from 2006-2007.

eModeration's team of moderators and staff are the key to its success and excellent client list. eModeration draws on the expertise of carefully recruited and trained moderators mainly in the US and Europe with specialist editorial and community moderation skills, which are matched uniquely to the client. The company can moderate 24/7/365 in more than 21 languages. All moderators are managed online from eModeration's headquarters in London, United Kingdom.

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About Jake McKee & Ant's Eye View

Jake McKee is an evangelist for customer collaboration, online communities, and fan groups. He has a rich background in Web development, community management, business strategy, and product development.

Jake is the Principal and Chief Ant Wrangler at Ant's Eye View, a Dallas-based customer collaboration strategy practice. In a past life, Jake was the Global Community Relations Specialist for the LEGO Company, where he spent five years on the front lines of customer/company interaction.

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