
How to Measure the Health of Your Community



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Ten simple ways community managers can assess the ROI of their community.

Community is like the air around us, invisible and seemingly intangible. Yet it's a fundamental part of any organisation that brings together people in the pursuit of a common goal. Often a community's "soft" characteristics, such as values and purpose, exert a stronger force on its members than formal governance.

Whether a community includes employees, alumni or people sharing the same passion, community managers need tangible metrics to tell meaningful, accurate and compelling stories about the health of their community. However, coming up with such ROI-style data is easier said than done.

The field of community management struggles with quantitative information. Some metrics are too simplistic. An example is gauging engagement by the open rate of an email newsletter. Other metrics are expensive and time-consuming to obtain. For instance, firms may use highly sophisticated tools

to monitor a community, but these require considerable investment, from IT to user training, for successful implementation.

There is no definite right or wrong metric, as the best one always depends on the context. As a general guide, here are 10 simple ways leaders and managers can better understand the health of their communities:

Values alignment

1. Awareness test A community manager may ask members to identify the organisation's official values from a list of plausible options. This measures the understanding of values and helps keep them at the forefront. However, it cannot assess whether people embody the values. As a first step, it does help monitor the proper communication of values. When members are able to articulate their organisation's values, it is often a strong sign that they have internalised them.

2. Peer assessment Ask community members to rate each other in terms of values alignment. Averaging out the responses gives managers more reliable information and insight into how individuals embody the community's values. Over time it can reveal trends and mould the way people interact within the organisation. This exercise is worth the time investment, particularly in the critical first year of community membership.

Purpose

3. Motivation "pie chart" Strong communities share a purpose, and people will join and stay when properly motivated to do so. To assess this, a community manager can devise a list of plausible reasons to belong to the community and then ask members to allocate 100 points across these reasons. This is a simple way to map out motivations and check whether they are aligned with the community's intended purpose.

Engagement

4. Retention rates How many members stay in the community over a period of time? Low retention rates may be a sign of disengagement. People may not find enough value in the community, or the culture may not be a good fit. Of course, a high turnover can sometimes be an expected and healthy part of a community's model: Using retention rates requires an understanding of the organisation's context and aspirations for its members.

5. “Alumni” engagement levels Many communities include people who share a certain experience or affiliation with each other but then move on to join a new primary engagement community. A classic case would be students who join a firm after graduation. They may or may not keep a strong connection to their alma mater. Another example could be any country’s diaspora and how its members give back or stay loyal to their former community.

Having metrics to understand what the ideal engagement of the community’s “alumni” looks like and what percentage of them exhibit it can tell an important story about loyalty to the community, even from members that have “graduated”.

Social ties and relationships

6. Social network analysis (SNA) This isn’t about counting likes on Facebook. A proper social network analysis examines the ties between people, as well as the direction and depth of those relationships. These three variables, combined with certain [SNA software tools](#), can help map out how community members are connected to each other and illuminate the dynamics of the community.

7. Trust and interaction levels A less sophisticated but easier method than SNA would be to ask community members how much they trust each other and how often they interact on relevant platforms. This can help a community manager understand both the quality and quantity of interactions, high levels of which are indicators of a strong community.

Impact

8. Number of collaborations Many communities aim to drive collaboration between members. Capturing the number of such collaborations can be useful, even though the actual collaboration results (and attending issues) may vary. Augmenting this with stories and qualitative information can be a useful approach.

9. Project-based metrics If an organisation’s impact is standard across the community, it is possible to use a common KPI, such as the number of trees planted, attendance at an event or funds disbursed to beneficiaries, to get a sense of the outcomes.

10. Quality perception A community may have many sub-units whose impact cannot be fairly compared. Consider a school with multiple programmes or an organisation with chapters in cities of all sizes. One option would be to ask community members to rate their perception of impact. The average or median rating of a relevant sub-unit can provide a credible metric on the quality of a community's impact. This, of course, relies on the members' honesty, supported by incentive alignment or cultural norms.

All organisations need to obtain accurate and useful data in keeping with their resources and needs. Every community is unique in its objectives, and certain communities may require additional metrics and indicators.

Qualitative information and anecdotes also have a role to play in inspiring community members and conveying the community's health in an emotionally appealing way. However, quantitative information remains the most empowering tool for community managers and leaders as they craft data-driven strategies and interventions to help their communities reach their full potential.

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