

Richard Millington



# build your comm unity

A network diagram is overlaid on the title. It consists of several blue circular nodes of varying sizes connected by blue lines. The nodes are positioned at various points across the letters of the title, creating a web-like structure that suggests interconnectedness and community.

Turn your connections into a  
powerful online community

## **Praise for *Build Your Community***

‘Thoughtful, strategic and tactical, Millington’s book will help you see that the real work lies in leading a community that cares.’

**Seth Godin, author of *This is Marketing***

‘Building a successful, thriving community is one of the keys to success for modern brands. However, very few people understand how to start and nurture a community. Luckily, Richard Millington shares his insights from years of experience and provides a chapter by chapter guide of proven steps that will help anyone successfully launch their own vibrant community. This is the playbook to community success!’

**Sarah Leary, Co-Founder, Nextdoor, Inc.**

‘Richard’s book will help any community leader – aspiring or current; in or outside an organisation – gain the tools to not only build their community but also ensure it is valued. Too often, community leaders are stretched too thin and unable to do their work sustainably – Richard breaks down the art and science sustainable community building with a roadmap that provides practical tools and advice.’

**Deepti Doshi, Head of Strategic Initiatives, New  
Product Experimentation, Facebook**

lipstick is best. But everyone has a favourite. Over time, an aggregate of opinions might form a consensus. Thus the more opinions the community solicits, the better the community can form a consensus (and the more valuable it becomes to members).

Members are encouraged to talk about what's on their mind and share their likes and dislikes each week. It might not look like it, but the culture of the Sephora community is as carefully cultivated as the culture of Stack Overflow. Members get a place to feel like they belong, to be inspired, and understand what people like themselves do.

This process of setting and enforcing rules to create a unique culture has a name we're far more familiar with, *moderation*.

## Moderation

We often think of moderation as just removing the bad stuff. And, sure, removing the bad content is important. It's hard to create any sort of meaningful culture in a community filled with spam, fights, and personal insults. But moderation isn't *just* a battle to keep the hounds of hell at bay. It's also the work that shapes the culture you want for your members.

There are two elements to moderation: (1) establishing rules and (2) enforcing rules.

### Establishing rules

Let's tackle establishing rules first. This is where your corporate communication policies, ethical concerns, philosophy towards free speech, your duty of care towards members, and your urge to create something special are going to collide.

A quick warning before we begin, in some areas we're going to tiptoe into legal matters. Always get a lawyer to review your moderation policies and processes to ensure you're abiding by all necessary laws.

### Enforcing rules

At first glance, setting rules might seem to be a relatively simple case of telling people what they can and can't do in the community. If they break the rules, you remove them. That sounds simple enough.

Alas moderation is far less black and white than you might imagine. Instead it's deciding which shade of grey you want for your community and trying to keep it that shade as your community grows and matures.

We can break categories of rules into three specific areas we see below. There are rules you create which nurture unique social norms, those which are universal amongst all communities, and those which fall into the category of 'tricky judgement calls'.

Types of rules	Explanation
Unique social norms	Rules that help you create and shape a unique community experience. These are primarily formed and created by you and the community team (i.e. no opinions allowed!).
Universal rules	Rules that provide a safe experience for community members. These are informed by ethical guidelines and the law (i.e. no racism!).
Judgement calls	These are 'grey area' issues which reflect both of the above. These are informed by your brand, communication policies, and your available resources to enforce them (i.e. should swearing be allowed?).

## Step 1: Create unique social norms

The first thing you should do is decide what remarkable rules (or social norms) might define your community. Consider Priya's example above. She knew mums spent a huge amount of time at social gatherings talking about their kids. If she forbade that as a topic, it forces the conversation to evolve beyond their comfort zone. What kind of rules might shake your members out of their typical mode of communication and help force the kind of community and culture you want?

Think back to your personas from Chapter 2 here. What kind of personalities are you dealing with? What kind of information do they need? Are they likely to want to participate in a community at the more serious end of the continuum or at the most fun end of the continuum? Do they want to talk about themselves or just about the topic? Creating a unique social norm can completely change the type of interactions you have.

Change My View, for example, is a subreddit<sup>3</sup> encouraging people to post a belief and then call for the opposing view. At the time of writing it has nearly 1m members. It's a completely different type of community experience and the opposite of the flame wars which take place on Twitter every day.

Another great example is ProjectManagement.com – a community filled with project managers sharing templates with one another. Each template has to be original and of high quality to be accepted within the community. Today the community is filled with thousands of templates for project managers to use. That’s an indispensable asset to community members.

Almost every kind of online and offline group has unique social norms. Academia has strict norms about accepting and publishing peer-reviewed submissions. 4chan has unique social norms enabling members to post almost anything and everything they want (for better or for worse). Sometimes you want a social norm to compliment an existing audience’s personality, other times you might want to become a breath of fresh air by violating typical expectations.

These unique rules might be the single biggest decision you make about your community. For example, if members need ideas and inspiration, then you might ban opinions and instead force members to share their personal stories with one another. Likewise, if members need facts, then you might only allow members to share data, solutions, or facts verified independently.

Decide which social norms might really matter to you. You probably want to set at least one (and no more than three) remarkable rule for your community.

Most decisions here exist in some sort of continuum. It’s best to push towards one side or another of a continuum. I’ve included some examples below:



## Mundane or noisy?

The advantage of moving towards the serious end of the scale is it delivers high-value information to members. The downside is it can be a mundane experience. High signal communities usually become a place that members visit only when they need information. Worse yet, you start competing with search engines for that information.

The advantage of a fun community is it's a more enjoyable place to visit. Members can feel a strong sense of community with each other and talk about what's on their mind. The downside is it can be noisy and difficult for people to find what they want. It can feel like wading through a lot of low-quality posts to get to useful information.

Don't be afraid to be different from any other community out there, it's usually the best strategy to get a community started from scratch.

When you start considering 'crazy' options like banning opinions in favour of facts, banning questions in favour of stories, or banning solutions which don't include evidence etc. you might create the framework for a truly powerful community experience. And we have barely scratched the surface of the unique rules or processes you can set up to create a truly unique and different community culture.

Aim to come up with between one and three unique rules which set the tone for your community. You might even want to run these by some prospective community members to get their take on what they want to see.

## Step 2: Establish your universal rules

Once you've established your unique rules, you can now set clear standards you expect members to abide by. These are the typical rules which prevent your community becoming filled with irreverent internet memes, flame wars between members, and constant trolling. Not only would it undermine the entire value of the community, it would also be an obvious target for detractors looking to cause problems (and it just looks bad).

## **WARNING – The danger of fighting for free speech!**

A quick aside for those free speech advocates out there.

Sure, you might want your community to be the final bastion of free speech on the web. That's a noble goal that many communities have pursued in the past. But be aware that being the final bastion of free speech on the web means you're likely to attract the speech of people who have been booted from every other site.

This is a PR disaster waiting to happen. Anyone with any sort of audience can highlight the kind of speech you're allowing and claim your organisation's failure to remove it is an endorsement of it (which is true). This can easily tarnish both your reputation and your organisation's mission.

It also opens the door for mischief. One client had competitors posting offensive comments in the community and slipping tips to trade journalists that the company tolerated this kind of abuse. These proved devastating in the trade press and led to the community's swift demise.

There are several rules which we consider universal and they should be enforced in every kind of community. These include:

- 1 No hate speech.** Any post which is intentionally racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or discriminatory should be removed and the user suspended (if not outright banned). As we'll soon see, while the enforcement of this rule can be open to interpretation, it should still be an indisputable rule.
- 2 No illegal activity (or sharing of illegal activity).** Posts which discuss illegal activities, link to illegal activities, share the fruits of illegal activities, or use copyright content should be removed. You should also not allow links to illegal streams or let members share methods to circumvent laws etc. It's just not worth the bother and attracts the people looking to undertake illegal activity.
- 3 No self-promotion.** Members should not be allowed to explicitly self-promote their own work except by special permission. As any visitor to LinkedIn can tell you, self-promotion is one of the easiest ways to kill a community. This is usually the most common violation and also covers almost every type of spam.

- 4 **No personal attacks.** Members should be encouraged to debate issues as much as they like, but personal attacks against the person are forbidden. This keeps discussions on the right side of the line. You're allowed to say 'you're wrong!' (with an explanation) but not 'you're stupid!'. Once a member attacks the individual instead of the individual's argument, the argument is over.
- 5 **No ongoing conflicts.** Online debates often continue forever as two sides become increasingly entrenched in their own views. After members have made a few posts on the same topic (e.g. up to five), it's time to call it quits and lock the discussion.

Below your social norms, list these rules. These rules ensure members can participate without fear of being personally attacked. These are very much black and white decisions.

Now we start to wade into the 'shades of grey' area, your tricky judgement calls.

## Step 3: Make your judgement calls

You're going to need to make some tricky judgement calls in some areas of your community. Sometimes your platform vendor will do some of these for you.

Other times, your company and communication policies can help.

Some of the most common judgement calls include:

- 1 **Should members be allowed to swear in the community?** If your answer is yes, consider if you want to be removing posts of members saying 'That's a fucking amazing idea, thank you so much!'.
- 2 **Do members have to use real names or can they use a pseudonym?** If pseudonyms are allowed, are there any restrictions on what characters they can use or potentially inappropriate terms? That is, would you be happy with a community with a member called Jackhammer69 or TrumpMEGAFan2024? If not, what usernames are forbidden? Also consider what characters you allow. Remember some languages have characters which don't exist in the English language. You can inadvertently cause offence by banning characters which don't appear in the standard English alphabet.
- 3 **What profile photos are ok?** This is the same challenge as above. Can members use almost anything as a profile photo or should it be of themselves?