

The Culture of Community Engagement: An Anthropological Discussion on How to Encourage More Member Interaction



HIGHLIGHTS

- The most important message from this report is to understand the member’s motivation for joining and remaining a part of the community. Only if the community manager understands the motivation can he/she take steps to encourage participation based on that motivation. Chris stated that in his research, the four main motivational characteristics are altruism, enjoyment, status seeking and reputation seeking.
- At any time, a member’s motivation could consist of all four of the above characteristics and/or could switch from one characteristic to another based on time and circumstance. This is the challenge for community managers as they need to uncover the community’s overall *prime* motivator, particularly as a means to engage lurkers.
- Reward systems are a tool that can be used to encourage member participation in the community. However, beware of the inevitable gaming that will result if the system is easily discerned.

SPEAKERS

Chris Bailey,
[BaileyHill Media](#)

COMPETENCIES

Community
Management, Culture

MATURITY PHASES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3

OVERVIEW

Chris is the Principal of Bailey Hill Media, which is an online development company working with small and medium-sized businesses.

- Much of Chris' background is with offline community building. However, many of these offline community building concepts can be used with online community building.
- Chris' interest in this topic began by wondering why individuals choose to give freely in online communities, i.e. content. What does the individual receive in return?
- The main concept to understand in any type of community building is why people join the community and why they choose to remain a member. Chris is currently working towards a Masters Degree in Business Anthropology, which is really taking the idea of anthropology and understanding the thoughts and behaviors that arise from within an organizational culture to uncover norms and rituals. These theories give insight into how people come together, how they work, how they relate through theory while also incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods. Chris believes that corporations and businesses are really just communities within themselves, which opens the door to relating these concepts to improved online community engagement.



Chris Bailey



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OVERVIEW

Relating Anthropology to the Online Social Community:

- **Potlatch:** Chris began the discussion from the anthropological perspective of gift giving. This dates back to the time-honored concept of “potlatch,” which is a tradition from the Pacific Northwest indigenous tribes. The main purpose of this ritual was to spread the reciprocity of wealth.
- This tradition was practiced by many tribal cultures throughout the world. What is interesting is that this idea of giving freely is universally within us as a species. However, the potlatch idea brings forth the concept of “status.” Status comes into play based on how much is given away and the sense of power that results, i.e. the redistribution of wealth is a demonstration of power within the community.
- Chris explained that it would often become a competitive tug of war in that if someone gave away silver, the person who gave the potlatch next would try to give gold. Even in the earliest tribes, there could be seen this practice of “one-upmanship” as a way of gaining status. Applying this traditional idea to online communities, that action of giving away really defines the community experience. It is a necessary action or the community’s health is at risk of over consumption. Community members give freely in their production of content and freely moderate discussions.
- They are giving as a way of getting something in return. There isn’t an immediate financial reward, but it does build that social capital of a whole. From a cultural perspective, giving and receiving are the glue that binds our communities together. It is what deepens the relationship that sustains the whole, particularly in the absence of physical presence.

OVERVIEW

The Motivations behind Giving and Sharing

Chris explained that when it comes to encouraging members to become more engaged within the community, it is important to understand what motivates them in order to recognize these characteristics and use them accordingly. In his research, Chris shared what he has seen to be the top four characteristics behind the motivation to give:

- **Altruism:** Altruism is the easiest to recognize. The theory behind this is that the individual feels a sense of reciprocity and good karma by giving and sharing. In other words, if we get something interesting, we want to be able to give it back. Relating it to the community, the member wants the community to succeed. Chris did not at first think that altruism was a strong component. However, the more he researches this area, the more he sees that with altruism there is something deeper that motivates us on a more selfish level (which is not necessarily a bad thing).
- **Enjoyment:** This is the feeling of reward and the experience of belonging. A great example of this is the open source communities, which offers its members a deep sense of satisfaction by belonging to the community.
- **Status Seeking:** Status seeking is a more formal process. It consists of those elements that improve an individual's standing within the group.

OVERVIEW

- **Reputation Seeking:** This is a process that is based on interpretation and the attributions of other individuals. So, if you think about it from a status seeking perspective, that's an internal process (the individual is giving/sharing as a way to seek status). With the process of reputation seeking, the individual is taking an action for which that reputation is then bestowed upon him/her from outside.
 - Status seeking and reputation seeking seem similar. Chris explained that the best way to differentiate between the two is to think of philanthropy. A wealthy individual gives as a way to increase his/her reputation. They give away large sums of money to, for example, Haiti. There were a lot of wealthy, well-known people giving money to Haiti as a way to increase their reputation. However, they'll seek status through the size of the gift. One person gives \$1 million and someone else is quick to give \$2 million. Alumni gifts are another example. The individual is giving to improve his/her reputation, but their status is elevated based on the size of the gift.
 - Chris would also argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between enjoyment and altruism. If you are giving to build your reputation and to build your status, typically the person will feel enjoyment. There may be those that do it begrudgingly because they feel they have to, but for the most part within our communities, enjoyment is derived from giving and sharing.
 - There is an interesting mix of these motivations within each member. It is possible for all four of these characteristics to coexist in some ratio that can fluctuate depending on time and circumstance. It could be mostly altruism one day, but the next day the individual may realize that they need to elevate their status as a professional and take steps accordingly.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand the prime lever or motivator within the community.**

If somebody's prime lever truly is altruism as reciprocity (giving back because the giver feels that he/she has been blessed), that prime lever is a sense of altruism and reciprocity vs. something else. It all comes back to understanding that individual and building a process to recognize what that prime lever is within the cycle. Chris acknowledged that this is tricky and he is not yet aware of anyone who has a clear cut way of doing this, especially since that prime lever can change in time and circumstance. As mentioned, an individual could be more altruistic today and more status seeking tomorrow. It is an ongoing challenge to figure out where that individual is in that spectrum in order to motivate them to produce content and keep the community going. With research, we can begin to build theories and models to understand what motivates each online community.

- **Understand lurkers by understanding why members choose to belong to the community.**

Chris explained that the danger of a supply and demand imbalance within the community always exists as it relates to content (more people demanding content than supplying content). If the community gets to that stage, it is an issue of over-consumption. In this case, it is necessary to turn lurkers into contributors. The first step is to understand the motivations within the community itself. Ask members, either overtly or covertly, why they choose to belong to the community. Is it to increase status? Is it to build their reputation? Are they there because they believe in the community and there is an altruistic motive that overrides all else? The answers to these questions will help the community manager understand why the lurker is there. Lurkers are still participants, just on the side. Motivate them to participate.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Be aware of the social norms within your community to ensure that it is not inadvertently fostering disengagement.**

Chris cited a real-life example from the Education Network of Ontario. This is a community of practice for teachers in Canada. They did a fantastic job of building an early community of individuals that were so tightly knit that they almost became cliquish. For the groups that waved in after, it became a very intimidating experience. The rules and the norms of etiquette appeared very rigid to the new members. Furthermore, the elder members did not encourage participation from the newer members. They enjoyed a community-founder status, but their reputation was having a negative impact. This cliquish perception from the newer members undermined the whole value of the community. Therefore, understanding how your members are using their status and reputation is a way to help lurkers and/or others who do not contribute to the fullest extent.

BEST PRACTICES

- Chris offered the following action steps for encouraging community engagement:
 - **Create a Guide for Increasing Status and Reputation:** When it comes to attracting new members, Chris recommends demonstrating how the community can elevate status and reputation. An example offered by Chris was the systems used by Four Square and Gowalla. Four Square used badges and Gowalla used items. These are tangible status symbols, if you will. As the individual progresses through the cycle, it becomes easy to identify the stronger users and those who are not. However, what Chris likes about this system is that it encourages people to take action. It is a dynamic way of using status as a means to build that community. Again, this always comes back to the member's motivation, which could be as simple as the ability to receive a discount at a local coffee shop.
 - **Social Comparison:** An example of where social comparison is used to entice members to action is a site called: "MovieLens." It is basically a movie rating site in which members rate movies and offer recommendations. In trying to boost rating contributions by members, they conducted an experiment with a control group and an experimental group. Each group was emailed a newsletter. In the experimental group, they demonstrated how these members compared with other community members, i.e. below average in terms of the amount of movies rated, above average or in the middle. The control group simply received an email with the member's individual results (no comparison with other members). The group that received the social comparison email began to rate significantly more movies. In the end, they rated more movies and contributed far more content than the control group. That being said, this type of tool does require caution because some members did take offence to being compared to others in the community. However, the social comparison spurred greater engagement from those members who wished to improve their status and reputation.
- Consider the use of a point system to assist members with building their reputation and status if these elements are present in the motivation of the community. However, be aware that gaming can be tempting in this kind of environment. (*See the "Lessons Learned" section below for various insights regarding gaming.*)

LESSONS LEARNED

- Chris was asked to clarify the idea of gift giving, a practice that is becoming increasingly more prevalent (particularly as a monetization strategy). The participant who asked this question felt that gift giving muddies the water when placed in the context of community motivation, i.e. is there a difference between gift giving as a one-to-one activity vs. contributions in content creation as a one-to-many motivation? Chris responded that it again comes back to the individual's motivation behind sharing and giving. The individual could be motivated by money, even though he/she is not getting paid immediately for the content contribution. He/she could be sharing content that they plan to eventually use elsewhere, like an e-book, etc. and they are testing the content in a smaller community.
- Rachel raised the topic of incentives and rewards and how these can sometimes backfire in a community if not used properly (i.e. members come to expect certain rewards for certain behaviors and sometimes the wrong behaviors end up being rewarded). Chris replied using an example of a community that he belongs to in Austin, Texas. It is an offline networking community with an excellent online component built into it. Offline, the objective is to get to know more people in the area. The online component assists with that objective through a points program. The point system is kept very simple, i.e. post a picture to receive five points, refer a member to receive 15 points, etc. The member is constantly trying to gain more points within the community because a certain status will be received. For Chris, he is motivated to increase his number of points (and thus his status) so that when somebody searches through the database, he will be easier to find. From that particular aspect, he is encouraged to generate more content because it will help him with his goal of gaining visibility and thus getting to know more people in the area (the motivation for belonging to the community).

LESSONS LEARNED

- Chris does not believe that a motivation can always be 100% altruistic, i.e. there has to be that intrinsic reward of contributing content for the greater good. In Chris' experience, sometimes it comes down to finding those levers within the community. In the above example, it was about status. However, reputation also comes into play because when he uploads his blog, the content has to be good in order to elevate his reputation. Therefore, the reputation that comes into play is equally as strong.
- Chris was asked to distinguish rewards from feedback. Chris replied that a good example is opinions, which involve building a reputation based on the quality of the reviews rather than the quantity. This carries more weight, as well, because the reviews are peer generated. In this case, the feedback received ties into the reward of what is being given. Chris believes that often all four of the characteristics are within the motive. Therefore, the community manager may choose to not stick with just one characteristic, especially if there are sub-groups in the community. What works for one group may not work for the other group. Discovering the motivation behind each community involves experimentation.
- Adding to the above, Jim offered Yelp as another example. Yelp does a good job of providing status and reputation. As members write their reviews, various buttons provide feedback and offer members the opportunity to seek attention by writing controversial reviews.
- For some people, contributing to online communities is a way to build their reputation via altruism. Chris explained that in this instance, altruism is really the “giving and reciprocity” factors. These individuals are often very strong and vibrant members of the community. They are keyed into the reciprocity factor and doing what they can to encourage newer members to become involved, i.e. the on-boarding process. The driving force behind this behavior is that if the community was to disband, the building of their status and reputation is lost. When thought of this way, it almost has to be tied into altruism.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Gaming:** Jim cautioned participants to be careful with reward systems. In his experience, people will try to game reputation systems. The challenge with putting these types of programs in place is to create a point system that will not be easy for members to figure out the reward levers because if they can, they will try to game the system. Another member added that a book authored by two former Yahoo! employees will be published soon entitled: ""Building Web Reputation Systems." One of the chapters specifically talks about Yahoo! Answers and how one part-time person handles 100,000 questions every day. It candidly shares the lessons learned behind trying to manage this medium with a point system. Given the sheer volume of information, there were many members attempting to game the system resulting in a lot of bad content being posted. In answer to this dilemma, they developed a series of algorithms. The book shares many examples of how reputation systems can change how people behave within the community, depending on how the rewards are set up. The overall lesson learned here is that you will get the behavior that you reward, so make sure that it is the behavior that you want to see.
- As the community manager becomes familiar with the members of his/her community, members will begin to fit into certain personas. One example shared by Chris is the "networker" persona. For this individual, reputation is about being able to recommend more people that are quality people to others. They will get enjoyment from helping others network with each other. They see an altruistic benefit because they are giving something back to others in the community. Chris again pointed out that the four characteristics all wrap together, making it the community manager's job to uncover the prime motivator within the community.