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Something for everyone: communities on the Web

Pierre van Dyk
pvandyk@global.co.za

In 1996, Armstrong and Hagel (Schultheis and Sumner 1998) described various types of on-line communities in an article 'The real value of on-Line communities'. They classified the uses of the Web in terms of the electronic communities that have been created. They discuss communities of transaction, which facilitate buying and selling products, communities of interest, which facilitate the trading of information, and communities of relationship, enabling individuals to join on-line discussion groups.

The Webmaster of South Africa's biggest gaming Web site (www.propecy.co.za) partly attributes its success to an on-line community created via the use of forums. A recently launched home entertainment site, Take2 (www.take2.co.za), runs a forum, giving users a chance to discuss movies and pose questions about DVDs, provide site suggestions and so on. Developing a community gives users a reason to keep coming back to the site, and it can develop a sense of loyalty. A Newsfactor report (NUA 2002) states that site visitors who make use of community features are nine times more likely to return, and twice as likely to make a purchase.

The On-line Community Report (http://www.on-linecommunityreport.com/) provides a twice-monthly newsletter and reports on on-line communities, group collaboration, knowledge management systems and so on. If you are interested in on-line communities, or starting your own, it is an interesting site to start with, providing news on the latest developments and links to various community sites.

Although not all on-line communities have done well, Cashel (2001) discusses niches within the on-line community space that are 'faring very well'. One of the most successful trading communities he notes is E-Bay (www.ebay.com). Besides offering a successful on-line auction service, it also offers chat rooms, discussion boards, a newsletter and various other E-Bay-related news and views.

Cashel (2001) also points to Education Communities, stating, 'on-line education is booming'. One that he points to is SmartForce (www.smartforce.com). It provides an 'integrated, individualized, collaborative learning community that can be personalized to your learning requirements'. Once registered, it provides access to articles and white papers, discussion groups, events information and, of course, extensive information on e-learning.

Ezboard (http://www.ezboard.com/) states that it is the leading on-line community with over one million communities and 10 million users. Besides being likely to find a community that interests you, it is easy to create your own community to start on-line information sharing. Another useful site is http://www.partnerships.org.uk/, which provides a list of on-line communities along with information on creating communities.

For on-line collaboration, I recently used Yahoo's on-line groups – a facility to 'create and manage on-line email communities' (http://groups.yahoo.com/). It provides a group to which you can invite (or directly subscribe) members, and when a mail is sent it goes to the group or, rather than receiving mail, you can logon and monitor recent posts. The groups can be set up to be publicly available, or members can join by invitation only.

References

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