

The Small Association's Guide to

Getting Started with an Online Community

Combine the benefits members value most with the technology they seek.



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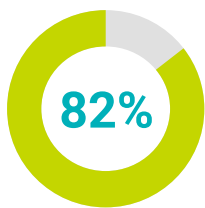
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Introduction

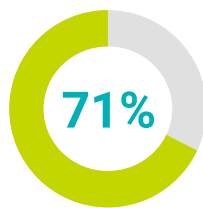
The 2019 Digital Evolution Study¹ points to the top reasons that members join a professional organization. They include networking and staying up to date on news, regulations, and trends.

The same study shows that technology plays a critically important role in the lives of today's members. Most members say technology helps them be more efficient, has transformed the way they live their lives for the better, and makes life more fun.

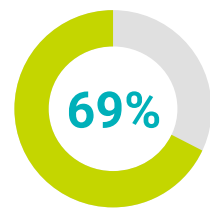
Member attitudes and values about technology (agree/strongly disagree)



Tech helps me be more efficient



Tech has transformed the way I live my life for the better



Tech makes life more fun

What better way to combine the benefits members value most with the technology they crave than providing an online member community?

The online community

An online community has the power to inspire and enable members to connect with each other and gain access to relevant content. Offering an online community is a great way to elevate social networking among your association's members. At the same time, it can make your association a part of your members' daily social networking habits.

Launching an online community when you have a small staff may seem like a big task, but it doesn't have to be.

This guide offers insights into four key areas to help you get started:



Ideas for what you can do with an online community



Best practices for building a thriving online community



Simple steps for launching an online community



Tips on what to look for in online community technology

¹ yourmembership.com/resource-library/whitepapers/digital-evolution-study/

What you can do with your online community

Your organization needs to connect members to events, volunteer opportunities, education, jobs, and industry information. An online community is the ideal vehicle to deliver these types of benefits to your members. It gives your members the tools

they need throughout their member journey to learn, share ideas, and become loyal advocates – ultimately driving retention, revenue, and member satisfaction.

Before launching an online community, it's important to understand how it can help you simplify and extend your member management activities. Here are some examples:

1 Engage members

Create discussion groups based on trending industry topics, areas of certification, member benefits, and educational opportunities. This allows members to see information and participate in discussions related to their specific interests, which in turn encourages them to participate more.

2 Offer volunteer opportunities

Get members more involved by creating various volunteer opportunities within the community. This can include micro-volunteering in which members can sign up for one-time opportunities. For example, volunteers could sign up to get a conversation started or write a content piece to be promoted in the community.

3 Generate non-dues revenue

Offer paid ads on your online community. These can be displayed through text links, posts, or within your online community mobile app.

4 Understand your members' needs

Pay attention to what your members are talking about in your online community to better understand their needs and interests. Also, set up online surveys and promote them via your online community to gather member feedback.



5 Recruit new members

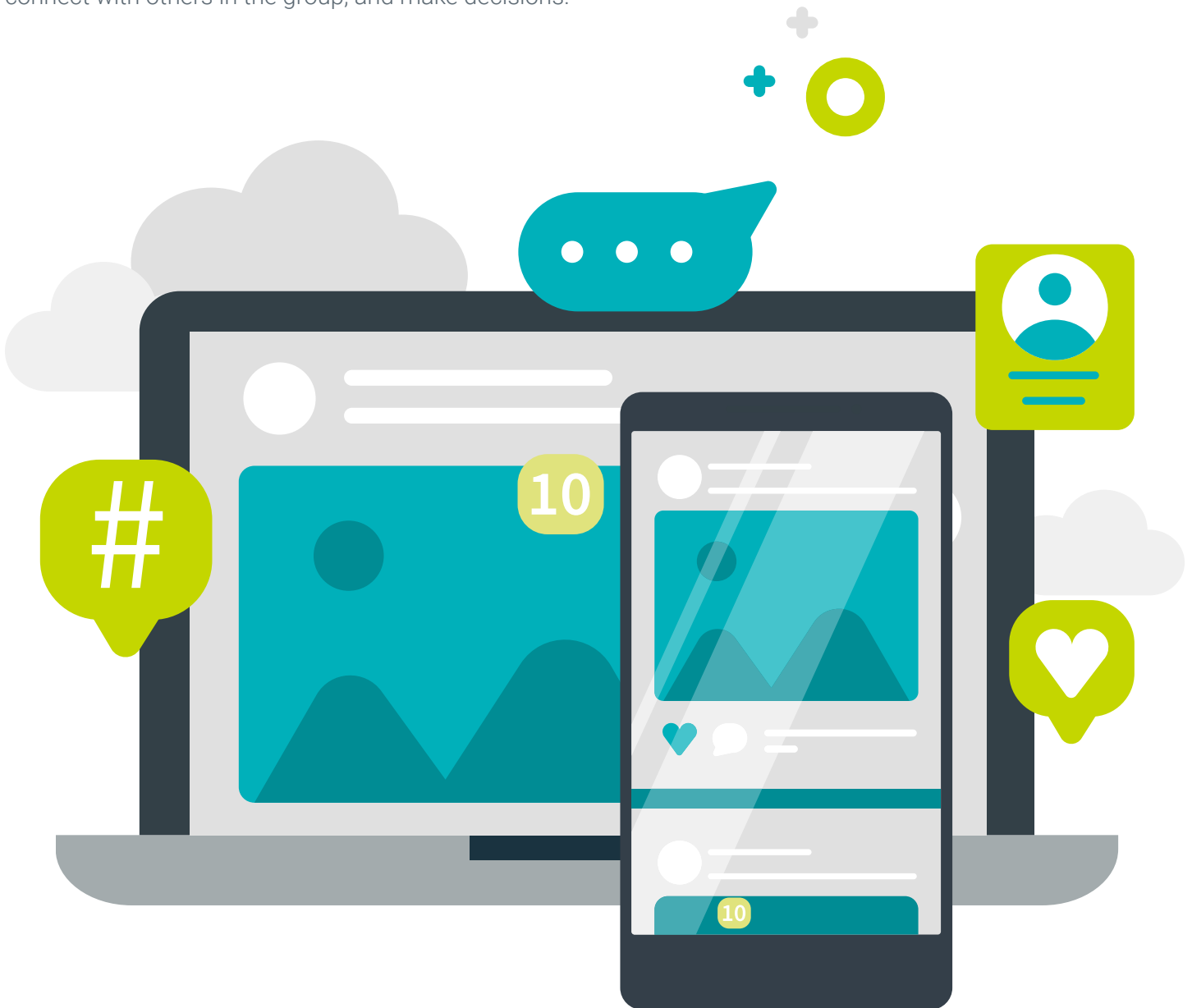
Give non-members limited access to the online community to demonstrate the value of being a member of your association.

6 Make collaborating more efficient

Set up exclusive groups for your committees, making it easy and efficient to provide real-time updates, connect with others in the group, and make decisions.

7 Simplify customer service

Create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page on your online community so members can find answers. Promote the FAQ page in your member communications to help drive traffic to your online community while reducing staff time spent answering common questions.



Getting started in six steps

So why haven't you launched an online community yet? Maybe you aren't sure how to get started. Or maybe your small staff feels too strapped for time to manage one more thing.

No matter what's been holding you back, there's good news. Launching an online community is easier than you think.

Here are six steps to help you get your online community off the ground.

1 Select your online community technology

You can't launch an online community without the platform to enable it. Look for technology that supports a modern experience, with key tools to help you keep members engaged. Some features to look for:

- **A social networking feed** – so members can view and comment on relevant content, discover learning and career opportunities, and access member benefits within a single feed
- **Suggested connections** – so you can promote connections and free networking opportunities based on common member attributes and interests
- **Quick announcement area** – to highlight important information, such as when your annual conference registration opens
- **Automated member renewal notices** – to reduce the number of lapsed memberships
- **Mobile app** – so your members can access content and benefits anytime from any device
- **Dashboards and analytics** – so you can keep an eye on member activities to better understand member interests and provide greater member value

TIP

YourMembership® offers an online community with a mobile app. It's built into YourMembership's association management software to help you increase social and community collaboration.

YourMembership's online community connects members to personalized dynamic content, career and learning opportunities, and member benefits.

2 Define a goal

Deciding on a clear goal is an important first step in your online community. A community can have multiple goals; however, one goal should be the priority. The primary goal should be something that directly achieves value for the organization. For example, “increasing engagement” or “getting more web traffic” are not directly connected to value.

Instead, uncover what happens if members are more engaged or you get more web traffic. This might mean better retention rates, more advocacy, or member growth. These are your goals. The goal of the community is the outcome of member behavior, it’s not the behavior itself.

3 Recruit community ambassadors

One of the great things about an online community is that your staff doesn’t need to do all the work themselves. In fact, one of the keys to a vibrant community is to get loyal members involved in posting and engaging. Other members are more likely to participate if your online community includes more than just posts from your staff.

Kick off your online community with members who have already demonstrated a high level of commitment to your organization. Invite them to become ambassadors for your online community. Ask them to get conversations started by posting in the community several times each week. These posts may include industry news, a call for suggestions about how to address a challenge, and questions to engage members. Your ambassador’s posts and activities will be seen by all members, providing a constant stream of new content members can access.

4 Offer valuable content

One reason people join an organization is to stay in-the-know about what’s going on in their industry. Make sure your online community offers members access to information, such as a code of ethics, details about professional development, the latest reports on industry best practices, and new insights from industry thought leaders.

Giving your members access to valuable content they can’t easily get anywhere else makes them feel part of a group and benefits them professionally for years to come. Plus, housing key content in your online community is an effective way to create dialog around your content, get feedback, and improve member engagement in an organic way.



By using the “Quick Announcement” area in YourMembership’s online community, you can improve visibility of your latest news or campaigns, ensuring your members are the first to be in-the-know.



5 Reward members for their participation

The existence of an online community is motivation enough for some individuals to become members. But in some cases, you need to offer additional incentives to participate.

Acknowledge and reward active and engaged members. For example, display member activity and participation levels, encouraging members to return, share, and connect. Like your members' posts. And go a step further by sending your top participants a handwritten note, providing them a discount code for an upcoming event, or partnering with them to produce a branded giveaway.

6 Promote the value of the online community

Members of your organization want to develop new relationships that further their career or improve their social standing. There is value in connecting them with a wide range of like-minded people and points of commonality, including professional training, expertise, experience, and a similar world view.

Access to your online community is a major selling point for joining your organization. Be sure to promote it in your member recruitment and onboarding activities. You'll attract new members to your organization and get more members more involved with your online community.

YourMembership's online community allows you to automatically connect new members with top volunteer ambassadors, or "buddies" to help the new members get to know the organization and feel more welcome.

TIP

Real-world story

Texas Statewide Network of Assessment Professionals (TSNAP) is a volunteer-driven professional organization that supports the needs of assessment professionals in Texas.

TSNAP's volunteer board was working from outdated spreadsheets, operating a website only one person could use, and was unable to send bulk emails. Accounting was lost in a sea of paper checks. In addition, there was no member portal, and the regional offices used multiple, disjointed solutions to connect and network with members. TSNAP needed an all-in-one solution to improve its member experience and streamline operations.

By moving to YourMembership, TSNAP combined membership management software, website, and online community into one easy-to-use platform. TSNAP discarded its manual processes and grew membership engagement, weaving the association into the daily social networking habits of its members.

"Prior to implementing YourMembership, our members had no reason to log in every day. Now, they have a reason to check their feed and what's happening in the community."

-- Shannon Kuhrt, Immediate Past President, Texas Statewide Network of Assessment Professionals

Best practices for increasing engagement

Once your online community is up and running, it's time to boost member engagement. Here are five best practices to get you started.

1 Keep your online community feed active

Your members are already accustomed to reading a large amount of information in their social platforms' feeds, and your online community is no exception. Frequent updates entice users to visit the platform more often as well as soak up details and share what they like with others. Boost engagement by feeding members a steady supply of useful and relevant content, such as industry news, commentary, job tips, and career opportunities.



2 Define your content types and frequency

While it's important to keep your community feed active, it's also important to define the mix of content you post within your online community. For example, entertain your members on a monthly basis. Inspire your members biweekly. Start a conversation with members each week. Teach your members something twice a week.

The Community Brands Member Loyalty Study² found that relevant industry information is one of the top reasons members renew their membership. So, providing relevant industry information several times a week is ideal.

This might seem like a lot of content, but you don't have create it alone. This is a great area to involve volunteers or your online community ambassadors.

3 Encourage connections

There are many ways to encourage connections among your members. Use your online community technology to promote one-on-one connections and opportunities to network, all based on details you collect through the platform.

² yourmembership.com/resource-library/whitepapers/community-brands-member-loyalty-study/

4 Make it fun

Use gamification to reward members for completing various tasks through your online community platform. This includes racking up time on the community, asking questions, or providing relevant answers. Members can see a score of their activity levels and how much they are participating compared to others. Such scoring promotes a competitive, playful spirit.

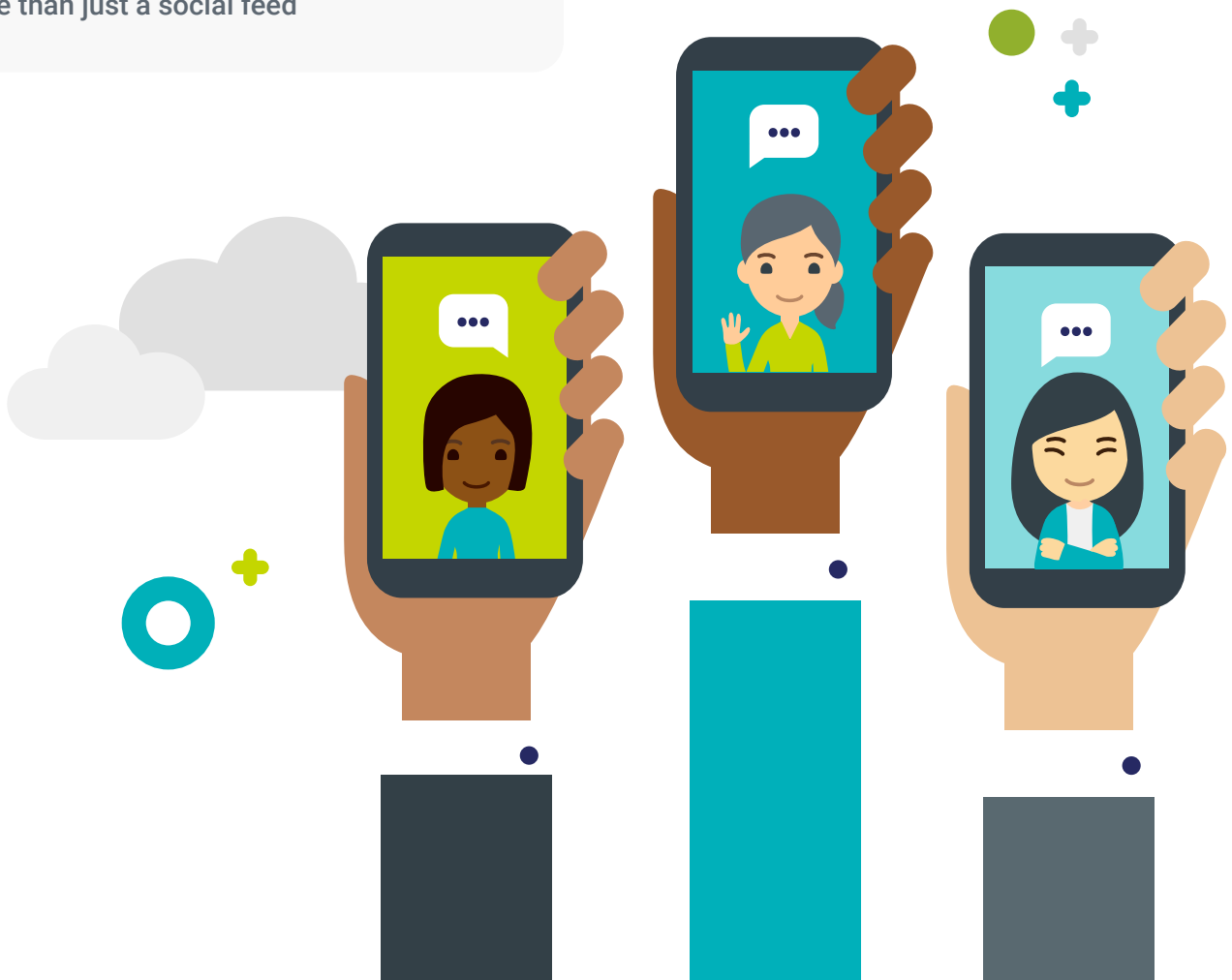


Leverage the power of YourMembership's mobile app as an extension of your communication and marketing efforts. Organizations can drive membership growth, event registrations and non-dues revenue. Read the whitepaper **Your mobile app: More than just a social feed**

5 Use your mobile app

Use your online community's mobile app to integrate with and influence your members' daily networking habits. For example, instead of relying only on email notifications or members logging in to the online community for updates, put your campaigns directly in front of your members through push notifications. Push notifications allow for instant updates and make it easier for members to have direct access to information without sifting through an inbox.

For example, mobile push notifications can automatically notify members when they are up for renewal or when registration is open for your annual conference. Members can easily renew or register for the event directly from the mobile app.



Take the next step



It's time to offer your members the benefits they want with the technology they seek. Even with a small staff, you can make your association part of your members' daily habits with an online community.

Using YourMembership, you can implement all of the techniques in this guide. YourMembership offers affordable, easy-to-use, all-in-one membership software for small to mid-sized organizations. It includes association management software (AMS) combined with an online community platform and mobile app to help you manage member activities while providing members with an easy, everyday way to connect, share, and learn.

YourMembership is part of the integrated software suite for associations by Community Brands. Solutions include membership management, learning management, event management, and career center. The solutions work better together to simplify work, maximize revenue, and strengthen member engagement, so you can continue to lead your industry while propelling your mission.

[Learn more](#)



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