

Online Facilitators Playbook



Creating an active and thriving online group



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As an online facilitator we all wish that we can go full steam ahead at all times.

But sometimes you will be on the offensive and looking to encourage higher numbers and more participation.

At other times you will be slightly defensive, holding on to what you have and just keeping the group ticking over.

And on occasions you will bring in a special play to stimulate activity in the group

This playbook is designed to give you the tactics to run a successful online group, and help you to plan activities for being on the offense and defence, and how to use a few special plays.

Offensive plays	Defensive plays	Special plays
Member acceptance Creating discussion Polls Invitations	Announcements Newsletters Content 24 hour rule	Hotseats Webinars





Offensive plays are all about breaking down the boundaries of the community and moving it forward.

You will be looking to increase the number of discussions and participating members.

Improve the quality of the conversations and content, and encourage better relationships between the members, using the following offensive plays tactics.



Most online groups are happy as they are.

You can help them hold onto that position of contentment, but they will still need a consistent flow of activities to keep them happy.

The following defensive plays will help to encourage return visits and participation.



As an online facilitator you have at your disposal a range of activities that are game changers in your community.

These activities have the ability to cause momentum shifts, increasing participation as well as building a stronger sense of community.

Use the following 'special plays' tactics to spark new conversations and debates, and create high levels of activity which help work towards the community's spirit of learning and sharing.



Member Acceptance



Many acceptance messages focus on the point when visitors are converted into members, but why go to all the effort of attracting new members if they don't contribute to the group?

When a member requests to join, they receive some kind of welcome email. These are pretty standard across the board – they thank the member for registering. In many online groups, that's all the emails say. What a waste!

Some groups customise these messages to some extent. Some urge members to introduce themselves. You want to make contributing to your group irresistible.

Try to include in your message:

- A thank you for joining
- A call to action
- Links to key discussions and content
- Details on how to get in touch with you
- Details of others who can help
- Reminder to set up alerts for the group

Don't expect to write a template acceptance message and leave it at that for years to come. See the acceptance message as something that is constantly evolving – just like your group.



Starting discussions



No one likes to join an empty group. In the same way that no one would stay at a party if no one was talking to each other. But getting the conversation started can sometimes be hard.

So why not fill in the blanks. Below are 10 questions that you can ask key members of your facilitation team and potential key members to help you create conversations.

- 1.What is your favourite
- 2.What advice would you give to someone who..?
- 3.Can anyone recommend
- 4.What is the best/worst
- 5.What are your top five
- 6.How would you handle (topical issue)?
- 7.Does anyone know how to.....?
- 8.Has anyone tried
- 9.What are the advantages of
- 10.I can't live without my



Polls



Polls are fun, enlightening and great conversation starters.

Best of all, they're an easy way for lurkers and new members to start participating. The first contribution is everything. That first contribution gets members into the notification cycle and can turn them into an active participant.

The basic rules for any poll are:

- If you don't plan on coming back and looking at the poll – don't create it.
- If you already know the answer to the question – don't create it.
- Keep your own opinions out of the poll.
- You get to ask one question. So ask one question.
- Make it easy for people to answer and more people will participate.

When creating the options make them logical

Put some thought into the ordering of options. Generally, put YES first, NO second. Order numerical choices from lowest to highest. Alphabetical order is a good choice for some things, such as names.



Inviting members



When writing a message to invite people to join your group, make sure you include three things.

1. The name of the group (hopefully an obvious one).

2. Why you are inviting them

You have identified your audience, and explaining to them why they have been invited is critical. Include how they can help to raise the profile of the work area and have a voice in the direction of the group.

3. What's in it for me?

Ensure you include the benefits for taking part in a group. For example:

- new opportunities
- professional development
- collaboration with others
- sharing knowledge
- developing best practice



Announcements



Where you can, direct members to the discussions, events and content that you wish to promote or encourage participation in.

Highlight the members that are participating or uploading content and use calls to action such as:

- Download now!
- Share your thoughts
- I urge you to
- Top rated
- Easy to Use

Your signposts should direct members to:

- Top discussions
- Newest documents
- Latest events
- Member blogs
- Discussions that need an answer



Group messages



Group messaging your members on a regular basis creates a ritual.

They will expect to see the message and become disappointed if they are not receiving the latest updates from the group.

When you are writing your message this is your chance to grab your members' attention to spark debate and increase engagement within your group. You can also use some calls to action tactics from signposting.

There are two types of messages that you may wish to use:

1.Nudges (weekly messages) are a great opportunity for you to showcase your group's best content, put members in the spotlight and encourage them to get involved.

2.Newsletters (monthly messages) provide a round-up or summary of the latest activity from the group and upcoming activities that are of interest to its member.

Use positive language and members names to draw members into the group and encourage participation.



Content



Members come for the content but they stay for the community. So you need to know what types of content encourage participation rather just visitors.

A key point is keeping a constant stream of content. Uploading everything on day one will normally cause the group to die within weeks.

There are three types of content to look out for:

- Institutional Content (IC) - content that is created by the lead organisation or governing body.
- User Generated Content (UGC) - content that is contributed by members on their own accord or upon request.
- Community Narrative Content (CNC) - content about the members that increase the sense of togetherness felt.

The sign of a truly thriving online community is when more than 40% of the content is driven by or created by the members.



24 hour role



One of the most widespread challenges revolves around getting members to use your online group as a resource on a consistent basis.

This makes the 24 hour rule one of the most important parts of building successful group..

The 24 hour rule says:

For the first 6-12 months of an online groups existence, you must ensure that all discussions are responded to within 24 hours of the initial posting.

When a member asks a question or starts a discussion they would ideally receive a response from other members of the group. However, people are busy, priorities shift, and members aren't hanging around your group all day waiting for discussions to crop up. That "legendary, instant conversation" rarely occurs.

If a member does not respond to the initial forum post, the 24 hour rule kicks in. Sometimes, it is the facilitators who respond. Other times, the facilitators will research others in the group who might be able to help and ask them to respond.



Hotseats



A hotseat allows members to ask questions to someone who has volunteered (experts in their field, practitioners guests) to answer questions and share their experiences on a particular topic.

Engaging members

Hotseats are perfect for attracting people to the group, creating dialogue, and sharing knowledge and experiences. They can help build relationships between members and are an excellent way of engaging members to debate issues of common concern.

Checklist

- Alert the members of the hotseat session in advance, through the events calendar, announcements and group messaging.
- Aim to answer questions within the time period.
- Acknowledge when a member has introduced an idea or information which could influence the future ideas - it is a powerful motivator.
- Establishing the right tone is essential for success. Valuing members who participate will build long term goodwill and encourage them to take part in other community activities.
- As the dialogue builds check back for any responses to the responses. These may be higher up the page and will be flagged.
- At the end of the hotseat, thank everyone for their contributions, highlight a key points raised, and provide a concluding statement.



Webinar



Short for web-based seminar, a webinar is a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar that is transmitted over the web. A webinar can be combined with a telephone conference if audio is not possible through the technology used for the webinar, and is great for getting people together where travel may not be possible or affordable.

Preparation of webinar presentation material

- Use different visuals to keep people's attention
- As a rule of thumb use one slide for every 2-4 minutes
- Always include a photo of the presenter
- Show a slide while you're taking questions.

During the Webinar

- Keep a hard copy of the presentation in front of you
- Provide a PDF copy of the presentation to attendees
- Let your participants know how to mute their phones
- Set the rules on how and when to ask questions

After the Webinar

- Send a follow up email to participants thanking them
- Provide instructions on how to access any materials
- Respond to any questions that were not answered
- Review and respond to feedback



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