

Seven Key Characteristics of a Good Purpose for Social Software

Anthony Bradley, Nikos Drakos

IT organizations that want to help their enterprises create productive communities should start by defining a business purpose with the proper scope. Many social software projects fail because IT managers wrongly believe that successful communities form spontaneously after social software tools are installed.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of social applications that start without a business purpose will fail to deliver business value.
- No decision contributes to a social application's success more than choosing the right business purpose for the social environment.
- Adoption is the No. 1 goal, and quickly growing the community to become a self-sustaining mass of users should be foremost in managers' minds.

Recommendations

- Choose a targeted purpose for community participation — what *business objective* do you wish to achieve? — and make subsequent decisions, including selecting tools and designing the environment to achieve that purpose.
- Start by restricting the scope of the purpose, and focus on growing participation and scale. Once the community has scaled up, users will guide you on how to expand the scope.
- Build a "purpose road map" to show how social collaboration will advance over time toward a highly collaborative enterprise.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

IT or business managers in charge of employing social software should choose a core purpose for the community — what *business objective* do you wish to achieve? — and arrange the implementation to achieve that purpose. Contrary to the common perception that vibrant communities arise spontaneously, starting with a carefully chosen purpose does not limit participants — it gives them the direction they need to form a productive community. As those initial communities gain momentum, other groups will use the social application to build their own communities. This is how social applications achieve widespread adoption across the enterprise. IT or business managers should even create a "purpose road map" that shows a step-by-step evolution to a highly collaborative organization. To take this "purpose first" approach, managers should be able to articulate the benefits of starting with an appropriate purpose and should know how to define, select and use the purpose. Seven key characteristics define a good purpose for social applications.

ANALYSIS

A Common Misconception About How Communities Form

Many IT organizations follow a "worst practice" — installing social software in the expectation that productive communities will emerge spontaneously. IT organizations fall into this trap for several reasons:

- Users clamor for social software, such as wikis, blogs and social networking, because of the hype surrounding the technology and the importance of better collaboration.
- Social software has a multitude of capabilities and a vast array of possibilities for improving collaboration. Organizations struggle with where to start when faced with the all of these possibilities.
- IT organizations mistakenly perceive the fast growth of public social sites like Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube as spontaneous.

The "install and they will come" practice rarely succeeds. Gartner's discussions with clients suggest that 70% of the time a community fails to coalesce. Of the 30% of communities that do emerge, many revolve around interactions that planners didn't envision, that don't provide business value or that may even be counterproductive.

Users need a well-defined purpose of appropriate scope around which to mobilize. Communities on the public Internet seem to contradict this principle because they appear to arise spontaneously and grow to encompass millions of participants overnight. This perception has led many IT organizations to assume that social software does not require the system-building rigor typical of application deployments. However, most successful social Web sites start with a defined purpose and limited scope:

- MySpace began in Austin, Texas, as a tool to enable local musicians to collaborate and support one another.
- Facebook started at Harvard University as a way for graduates to keep in touch.
- Craigslist was launched in San Francisco during the dot-com boom to address a housing shortage by enabling homeowners with available space to connect with people who needed lodging.

Other popular Web sites have not significantly expanded beyond their original purpose:

- YouTube still primarily enables users to upload and share personal videos.
- Wikipedia continues to focus on building an online encyclopedia.

A clear, appropriate purpose is critical to rallying people into a community. Once the community is established, the community can direct itself, moving in different, sometimes unexpected directions. (This evolution can be good or bad; guiding the community toward productivity while leaving room for innovation remains an ongoing challenge.)

The Seven Characteristics of a Good Social Application Purpose

Purpose is central to social application success, but choosing any purpose for the social application is not enough. To take this "purpose first" approach, managers must be able to discern a good purpose from a bad one. A good purpose for social applications has seven key characteristics.

1. *Magnetic*: The purpose should draw people directly to participate. This is the "what's in it for me?" characteristic. Users should easily grasp its importance and the value of participating. The purpose must have meaning for users and give them a compelling reason to participate. If you have to create interest among users, especially through costly incentives, you've chosen the wrong purpose.
2. *Aligned*: Purpose should align with business value. This is the "what's in it for the business?" characteristic. A purpose's business value can take two forms, direct and indirect. Direct value exists when the purpose delivers the same value to the community as it does to the business. For example, a social environment to assist salespeople in collaborating on effective sales techniques helps both the community (that is, the salespeople) and the enterprise by increasing sales. With indirect value, the purpose that delivers value to the business is not the same purpose that delivers value to the community — for example, Procter and Gamble's (P&G's) Capessa social site. The participants gain value from sharing approaches to life's challenges, whereas P&G gains marketing intelligence. If necessary, social application leaders must determine the path from the direct community value to the indirect business value.
3. *Low Risk*: Choose low risk over high reward. Do not try to change the culture of a community or an organization with social software. No matter how enticing the reward, always heed the risk of adoption first. The risk of failure goes up substantially when organizations or participants are less apt to embrace the community's purpose, technology, collaborative behaviors, or transparency and information sharing. For example, if your organization makes decisions hierarchically, don't attempt to replace that model with community-based decision making. Often, high-risk communities hold the greatest potential for business value, but you should resist the temptation. Rather, aim to build momentum quickly and show business value early. Early wins are better than efforts with higher risk and longer cycles, even if the potential payoff is not as great. You can return to the latter projects after social applications have gained momentum.
4. *Properly Scoped*: Start with a minimal scope and focus on growing your community's scale as fast as possible. Once the community has scaled up, users will guide you on how to expand the scope. Early on, a broad scope can confuse participants and hinder adoption. Fight the urge to overengineer. A large scope requires more IT functions to support it, which increases complexity and can overwhelm users. If you have to train users on the social application, you've chosen the wrong purpose. No one had to be trained on Facebook, Google and so on. If participants can't enter the social application

and almost immediately be productive, chances are the purpose is too broad. Minimize the risk of failure by restricting the scope. Don't minimize risk by testing, prototyping or piloting in the community. Test tools in the lab, but don't test them on the community. If the tests go badly, you may not get another chance to turn that audience into a community. Another means of minimizing risk is to restrict the community. This is very tricky because restricting the community decreases the law of numbers and makes it more difficult to garner a thriving, active community. Use this approach only if absolutely necessary, but only in addition to, not instead of, minimizing scope.

5. *Facilitates Evolution*: Select purposes that you and the community can build on. Start by brainstorming numerous possible purposes for a target audience. As you apply these characteristics, weigh which purpose to focus on first. You will see that some have a more natural tendency to lead to others and facilitate emergence. This effort generates a "purpose road map" for growing the scope of communities or establishing other social applications and communities, with the goal of progressing toward a highly collaborative enterprise. Changing culture, over time, can be a fundamental goal of a purpose road map. Be flexible with the road map because once a thriving community grows, participant feedback and emergence should heavily influence the road map. Also, whenever possible, involve the community in helping to determine how to start with the most magnetic and momentum-building purposes.
6. *Measurable*: You can measure the success of a good purpose. Especially early on when organizations are skeptical of social applications, choose purposes where business and community value can be clearly measured. For example, a global consulting firm started with a social network to connect clients who had particular needs with consultants who could help. The firm could measure the results of the social application by new consultant connections, which ones led to a proposal and which proposals led to new business.
7. *Community-Driven*: The value must come from the community. The best communities contribute far more to themselves than do the enterprises that support them. If the purpose requires the enterprise to contribute most of the content, and the community participants are mere readers, the enterprise has simply used the new technologies as another channel to push communications.

The Benefits of Starting With a Well-Defined Purpose of Restricted Scope

Explaining the benefits of defining purpose first will help win over skeptics who continue to believe that communities will simply form spontaneously:

- *Starting with a purpose helps identify the target community*. Having a purpose provides the context required to understand the demographics and other characteristics of the relevant audience from which the community's participants can be drawn. Understanding who they are, what motivates them to collaborate and how they interact is critical to determining how to gain business value from their interactions. Growing communities is very difficult; organizations should strive to "unearth" communities by exploiting existing online or physical-world communities. Identifying a purpose will help determine whether you can achieve it by joining an existing online community, moving an offline community online or trying to form a new community. You can start with a well-defined purpose to catalyze a community, or you can examine an existing community to determine relevant purpose. Purpose is critical either way.

- *A purpose is required to build an accurate, measurable business case for investments in social software.* Without a specific purpose, application leaders would only be able to discuss business value in general terms, such as collaboration will "make us more productive," "improve effective communications" or "increase knowledge sharing." Moreover, leaders will have difficulty measuring success because no clear goals are articulated. A well-defined purpose leads to specific goals that leaders can articulate in measurable terms such as "use network consultants to create more new business proposals" or "involve high net-worth clients in the development of new financial products and services to increase their uptake."
- *A purpose enables you to build a social application that can achieve your business objective.* Knowing the purpose allows application leaders to define the "requirements" necessary for building a social application versus a mere technology. Purpose underlies the application's design, including needed capabilities, structure, user experience and system integration. In addition, a purpose enables leaders to understand organizational impacts, such as legal concerns, HR implications, cultural affinities and impediments, and compatibility with corporate policy.
- *A purpose can help you understand which people to tap when starting the community and which content is best to "seed" the system.* When people join the community they should see activity already under way and should get immediate value from participating. Without knowing the community's purpose, there is no framework for determining which content is appropriate to seed the system or whom to court for early participation.
- *A purpose helps to establish good governance for the community.* Healthy communities guide members toward good behavior by setting up policies and enforcement mechanisms that reinforce the community's goals. In other words, governance shouldn't consist of a long list of prohibitions but should explain the social application's purpose. Explaining why participants are asked to engage and which behaviors will further that purpose will go a long way toward fostering productive behaviors and staving off those that are undesirable. Of course, a good purpose will not eliminate the need for additional rules, but focusing on the desired behaviors can alleviate the need for a long list of "what not to do" that can turn off participants and hurt adoption (see "Establishing Policies for Social Application Participation").

RECOMMENDED READING

"Roundup of Social Software Research, 1H08"

"Tutorial: Social Context, Not Technology, Defines Social Software"

"How to Apply the PLANT SEEDS Framework for Enhanced Enterprise Web 2.0 Adoption"

"Social Interaction Is Important to Many, but Few Realize How IT Can Help"

"Five Major Challenges Organizations Face Regarding Social Software"

"Seven Ways to Succeed With Wikis and Social Software"

"Mitigate Risk But Don't Smother Wiki and Social Software Deployments"

"Five Best Practices for Establishing an Online Community for Marketing Benefits"

"Case Study: Dow's Formula for Social Software"