

Willco Guide to Launching an Online Forum

Successful online forums require more than functional, scalable technology. Willco is pleased to provide not just technology but also support, advice and assistance for community owners seeking to develop active, successful online forums.

1. Planning

As with most business initiatives, the planning you put into your online forum is a critical part of success. Answer the following questions to start to create the foundation for a successful forum:

Members of this forum include:

List as many as are appropriate for your forum. Know who you are building relationships with as much as possible in order to be able to meet their needs and make the relationship productive.

Members will join by:

- Invitation, but open to all
- Invitation, private forum
- Finding it on their own via searching, outside referrals or other methods
- Other:

The methods and policies for joining the forum will have an impact both on content (for instance, the willingness of members to discuss sensitive issues and share knowledge) as well as how you market the forum to potential participants.

Members are motivated to participate in the forum because:

Consider carefully the motivation of members, because it will make or break your efforts. Describe motivation as specifically as you can. Consider asking a few potential members or current members what benefits they get from participating in a forum.

The business purpose of the forum is:

Forums take time and energy. Be sure your energy is well-placed by establishing clearly what the purpose of the forum is and how you will know it is succeeding.

If successful, the forum will have the following impact on business:

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2. Design

Willco makes forum design a seamless component of your existing web presence. Contact support@willco.com if you need assistance setting up the standards for your forum.

Answering the following questions will help you use the Forum Admin interface and/or communicate with Willco about how we can help you.

Categories members will use to post messages include:

Categories make it easy for users to find the topics they are interested in; Willco forums can be sorted by category or date.

Forum digests will go out on the following schedule:

Digests integrate your forum with your List module. You can set up digests to go out any day of the week, to a list you designate in your List Module. You will be able to review and edit digest mailings before they are sent.

Digests will include:

- Full text of messages
- Subject line only
- Additional information (e.g., advertisements)

Terms of Use have been written and published:

- Yes
- Not yet

Establishing and publishing terms of use for your forum can prevent problems with misuse or misunderstandings down the road.

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3. Seeding

No one wants to hang around an empty party. Be sure to seed your forum with engaging content prior to official launch. It is best if some of the seed postings are from members other than the community owner and cover a reasonable range of the topics of interest to members and potential members.

This checklist will help you define and create effecting forum seeds:

- Post resources, questions or other information in each of the categories of interest to members – at least two postings in each category, with at least one or two responses to each posting
- Post specific questions or problems – specific questions get more response than open-ended questions
- Invite “household name” or known individuals to post particular questions or resources
- Make it personal – invite members to post a brief introduction in a “membership” thread to start to build a sense of who is participating (introductions are helpful even if members of the community have met offline as well)
- Focus on motivation of members – craft messages and focus responses based on the personal motivation of the community

Be sure the forum contains quality content prior to issuing invitations to participate or sending out your first digest.

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4. First Phase of Growth

Once you have launched your forum, you enter the first growth phase of your community. Depending on the business goals of your forum, the makeup of your membership and the activity in the forum, growth may happen quickly or slowly. You can support growth through the following:

Monitor postings

You can set up your Willco forum to be closed or open. You (as the forum administrator) will receive email notification of all new postings, but you can control who has access to the forum. Anyone can access an 'open forum', but a 'closed forum' is restricted to members only (or specific groups of members).

Promote activity

Forward messages to members you think would be interested in responding or at least following a thread of discussion; thank members, online or off, for thoughtful and/or particularly helpful postings.

Reward the behavior you want to encourage

Give public recognition (in the forum, through your digest, or in other ways) to those to contribute in a positive, proactive manner. You may also consider offering occasional premiums or small rewards for quality contributions, or inviting stellar members to join an advisory board or other honour.

Enforce your policies

Immediately remove postings that violate your terms of agreement; have a process for reviewing questionable postings and be able to back up your decisions by referring to written policy.

Create the narrative to support the community

Human beings respond to pattern and story; if your forum lacks coherence, members will not understand how to use it or how they function as an online community. Digests are a great opportunity to summarize recent activity and tie postings in to the larger goals of the forum – both yours as the owner and that of the members

Encourage referrals

If your forum is designed to be open to others, explicitly invite members to forward postings to colleagues who might be interested.