

## Book Review: Building Online Communities

Reviewed by Michael Upshall

Millington, R., 2012. *Buzzing communities: how to build bigger, better, and more active online communities*. FeverBee.

Ng, D., 2011. *Online community management for dummies*. Wiley

Online communities are fundamentally different to other websites. While most websites these days give you a feeling of conscious design, even if the execution of the design may have been well-organised or muddled, many online communities have an independent feel to them; they appear to work without the heavy hand of a controlling designer's vision to guide each step of users' journeys. Although a community may be elaborately and very carefully designed, the users of such a community may not notice exactly what it is that makes the community site work. It just works, they will say when asked. It's quite revealing that a website (<http://www.thebiggestboards.com>) that measures all the communities on the Web by number of members and number of posts has predictable subjects in the top ten: war-gaming sites and websites for users of individual car models like the Ford Fiesta. Users of these sites are not the kind to worry too much about site design and usability. Perhaps, in other words, some communities work best without a self-conscious "designed" feel to the site.

If this implies that online communities are born rather than made, you might imagine that creating an online community would be impossible to teach from a book. Managing a community site, like designing it, can't be done too overtly. The best sites just work. Of course, the more carefully designed and managed

the website, the more it “just works” - but it doesn’t draw attention to its design.

Despite all this, books are published in a steady stream claiming to teach how to build and to manage an online community, and these books are not lacking in assertiveness as to what makes a community successful. The two books examined here are typical: both of them claim that after reading them, you will have the magic ability to create and maintain a community.

Unfortunately, like so many how-to books, both of these titles descend rather too readily to platitudes. There is no question of the good will and earnestness of both authors - Deborah Ng from her CV clearly has oodles of experience of building and of managing communities, while Richard Millington has an authoritative tone that sounds as if he has been in all the situations he describes. Yet, however well-meaning the advice, the recommendations are about as helpful as books that tell a teacher how to teach. Millington’s suggestions include, for example, that you should build the simplest possible sign-up process, and who could deny that? As for creating content, “Try to avoid the content sounding like a corporate press release.” It would be more useful to give examples of good and bad content that explains what she means.

Millington’s book is by far the more detailed of the two, and in addition he has a clear theme for his book: that analytics is the key to developing a successful community. For Millington, collecting data is more important than simply responding to voiced opinions - a few annoying individuals who post a lot of comments may use up too much of the community manager’s valuable time. Millington then goes on to give very specific guidance on how community managers should allocate their working week.

However, as is the case with many how-to guides, the author is better at exhortation than in providing examples. Like many would-be teachers, Millington believes that simply telling the reader a principle will magically instil that maxim into the reader’s mind. Without examples, principles remain empty words, particularly when they are somewhat cryptic, as for example the recommendation to “ensure social density is consistently high without being too high”. It’s difficult enough to encourage feedback and posts from your users

without asking yourself if the social density (whatever this may be) is at the correct level. Actually, to be fair to the author, social density is a perfectly intelligible concept: it represents the level of activity in a given area. You don't, for example, want your community spending all its time talking about football if the community is designed to cover all sports equally. However, the author's instructions for how to fix such a situation are non-existent, and in any case I suspect the best communities talk about what the users want to talk about, not what the manager wants them to talk about.

Rather more insidiously, *Buzzing Communities* attempts (albeit for the best of reasons) to list in bullet points how a community manager can become liked by the users, with recommendations such as "Show genuine interest in other people ... Make the other person feel important, and do it sincerely". Anyone who needs instructing in these matters is unlikely to learn it from a book like this, and appearing genuine is not usually instilled by telling someone to look genuine. Of course community managers need to be liked, but trying to appear liked runs the risk of users questioning the community manager's sincerity. I start to question the sincerity of the author when he recommends praise as a way of getting users to participate in a community site. "Praise, always a great way to begin a conversation, can be as simple as "I like your shoes." At this point I have to remind myself that successful sincere communities can exist, like Ravelry ([www.ravelry.com](http://www.ravelry.com)), a marvellous community for knitters, without manipulative community managers. Next time somebody says they like your shoes, beware. They may be an online community manager and they don't really care about your shoes at all.