

Chapter 5

Policies and Policing

...Setting, Communicating, and Enforcing the Rules

He liked cheese.

That's all I knew about "Dangerman" when he posted to my personal site (powazek.com). He liked cheese.

Unfortunately, he posted that comment to a long, emotional story I'd told about growing up. My twenty-eighth birthday was on its way, and I'd grown nostalgic for my college days. I wrote: "So I'm sitting here on this rainy Friday, in an apartment in San Francisco, almost 10 years later, looking out over the rooftops of the city. I'm wondering if 10 years really is a long time or not. I'm wondering if this is the kind of melancholic nostalgia that old people feel."

"I like cheese," he posted.

Cheese.

So I deleted the post. It was easy enough to do. And it seemed so clear—everyone else was posting appropriate comments to my stories. He must have been confused, or perhaps he had a screw

loose. In any case, it was my site, and the post was inappropriate, so I deleted it.

And, in doing so, I walked into a trap I should have seen coming.

The post reappeared a few minutes later. “I like cheese.” I deleted it again. The poster wasn’t leaving an email address, so I had no way of contacting him to explain the problem. Instead, I banned his IP address from the system, so he would be unable to post again. Then I went to sleep.

That night, Dangerman’s friends started showing up. And they, too, liked cheese.

“I dreamt of cheese.”

“Cheese is in!”

“I like cheese too. Cheese rules.”

This was war.

I deleted all the posts, banned all their IPs, and closed off the thread. Eventually, I got to Dangerman’s site to find my site, and my person, being burned in effigy. Bravely (or perhaps stupidly), I posted there, myself. I politely explained why I had deleted the posts and was resoundingly booed off the stage.

Lesson Learned

In the wake of what has become lovingly known as The Great Cheese-Off of 2001, I began to reevaluate the cues my site was giving to users. It’s true that most people had been able to figure out what was appropriate and what wasn’t without much guidance from me. The only verbal cues I’d provided were a disclaimer right above the posting button. It said:

This is my personal site. It’s like my living room. I don’t let anyone come into my living room and say whatever they want. Posting to my site is a privilege, not a right. If

you post inappropriate things, they will be deleted, and you will lose the ability to do so in the future. In other words, be nice. Thanks.

While this seemed pretty clear to me, it was obvious that it wasn't doing the job. So after some reflection, I made two changes to the user experience of my site.

Change 1: Change the disclaimer

First, I changed the disclaimer above. Even though I felt it was perfectly clear before ("If you post inappropriate things, they will be deleted"), that statement was getting lost in the text. Also, it never defined what "inappropriate things" were.

The new version was:

This is my personal site. It's like my living room. I hope you'll come in, have a seat, and be cool. But if you're not and you post something off-topic, mean, or just plain stupid, I will delete it and kick you out. **I reserve the right to delete any post for any reason.** I also reserve the right to believe that people are essentially good, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Thank you.

In addition to defining what the verboten behavior was ("off-topic, mean, or just plain stupid"), the line in bold was the most important touch. The new phrasing was much more direct, and the bold made sure it was hard to overlook. And the whole disclaimer was placed below the posting form and above the button that users would click to commit to their post. Its placement was designed to make it hard to ignore.

The placement of the rules should make it hard to ignore.

add a comment

comment

name

email

url (optional)

note This is my personal site. It's like my living room. I hope you'll come in, have a seat, and be cool. But if you're not and you post something off topic, mean, or just plain stupid, I will delete it and kick you out. **I reserve the right to delete any post for any reason.** I also reserve the right to believe that people are essentially good, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Thank you.

or

<< back { current } next >>

Change 2: Get an email address

Next, I made the email address field required. Before, leaving an email address was optional. That meant when Dangerman posted his inappropriate post, I had no way to communicate with him outside the forum. If I had, I might have been able to avoid the whole scenario by emailing him privately. Making this change also meant introducing some new error messages and explanatory text that clarified that the email address was only required for our records, and would not be posted publicly.

Would someone be able to spoof the email address requirement? Of course. There's nothing stopping anyone from posting to the site as "billgates@microsoft.com" or "foo@bar.com." But, interestingly, since making this change, no one has.

The idea here is to give me a way to contact people who are posting inappropriately *by mistake*. If someone with good intentions accidentally violates the rules of the site, he'll be happy to hear it from me personally, instead of just returning to find his post missing.

Of course, if someone is looking for trouble, he'll always find a way to make it, and requiring an email address will only slow him down for a moment. But I'm not worried about offending troublemakers by removing their posts. I'm only worried about contacting those who make an honest mistake.

And I'm happy to report that, since making these changes, the comment forms on my site have been completely free of cheese.

Unseen Rules Aren't Rules at All

Like it or not, every community site comes with a set of rules. There is behavior that is welcome, and behavior that is not. And no matter how elegantly designed your site is, when push comes to shove, you still need to have rules.

The challenge, then, is to set the rules wisely, communicate them clearly, and enforce them fairly.

Step 1: Set rules wisely

Nobody likes following the rules, least of all the average Joe on the Net. The Internet, even now in 2001, is still rich with the ethos of the hacker. The web is the place where everything is free, and you can do whatever you want, remember?

So it's up to you to set the rules for your site. If you don't, your users may set them for you. And you may not like the ones they come up with.

Thinking up some rules for your site can be a worthwhile exercise, because it forces you to think critically about what kind of material you want from your users. No matter what kind of site you're

going to have, take this opportunity to ask yourself some tough questions: What is it you want your users to contribute? What do you want them *not* to do? Would a post like “I like cheese” be acceptable on your site? Can you think of a post that would be unacceptable?

Aside from the personal considerations, there are also some legal issues to consider. **The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)** was signed into law in 1998, but its effects are still being sorted out.

Among other things, the DMCA stipulates that site owners are responsible for their site’s content, even if it’s a community site where members can post whatever they want. That means if one of your users posts, say, the lyrics to an entire song to your community site, you’ll be held liable when the lawyers come calling. (Don’t confuse this with Fair Use, which would be the case if your user posted one verse from a song in a discussion about great songs. Using a portion of a copyrighted work for comment and critique is still fair game—just like all the screenshots in this book!)

But don’t worry, compliance is easy. The DMCA spells out, in excruciating legal detail, the process by which a complaint must be filed with you, and what you must do to make it right. Here’s the Cliff’s Notes version: Put up a notice on your site that specifies where copyright complaints should go (this is your Designated Agent, in legalese). If someone submits a copyright complaint, investigate it right away, and if there is indeed a copyright violation (someone has posted something that he does not own the copyright to, without the permission of the owner, in an instance that is not Fair Use), remove the material right away.

If you want to be ultra-secure, you can post a DMCA compliance page on your site that goes into greater detail about what a copyright infringement is and how to report one. For a great example of a compliance page, take a look at Bianca’s, a long-standing web-based chat community that has a very specific compliance page (bianca.com/misc/dmca.html).

The bottom line is clear: Site owners are responsible for the content of their community areas. As a result, many sites state up front that reposting of copyrighted material in the community area is strictly prohibited. So long as you remove any disputed material in a timely manner, you won't have any legal worries.

In general, my advice to clients is to use that magic line from above: "I reserve the right to remove any post for any reason." This covers you, no matter what. And while users may not like it, if you prove that anything within the bounds of acceptable behavior will stay on the site, they'll still participate. In the end, the "any post for any reason" is just a great last-ditch insurance policy.

Once you have a roadmap of what you do and don't want from your users, it's time to figure out how to break the news to your users.

Step 2: Communicate rules clearly

Rules are all well and good, but if they're not communicated to the user in a clear way, they might as well not exist. So the question becomes how to best communicate the rules in a community space?

First of all, there are several traditional documents that communicate the rules of a site. Depending on the depth of your community features, you should consider including some, if not all, of these documents on your site:

About—This page introduces the people and ideas behind the site.

Help—This is the user's first stop when she feels lost.

FAQ—The Frequently Asked Questions list can be a great way to help users do what they're trying to do. But be warned: If you keep getting the same questions, you may want to look for ways to insert help text where users need it, before they go looking for the FAQ.

Privacy Statement—This document outlines the user’s rights in your community space. Here is where you should outline exactly what personal data, if any, you collect on each user and what you will and won’t do with it.

Terms of Service—This is where you want to be as clear with your users as possible about the service you’re offering and the terms it comes with.

Posting Guidelines—Sometimes, this is part of the Terms of Service; this is where you should outline what is and isn’t allowed in the community areas.

These documents provide a wonderful opportunity for you to communicate with your users. I encourage you to use them to do more than simply tell your community what isn’t acceptable, but to also explain a little more about who you are. How you communicate in these documents sometimes says more about you than your About page.

Ben and Jerry’s, a company that makes some of the tastiest ice cream on the planet, has a site that does this quite well. Its Privacy Statement (benjerry.com/privacy.html) states very clearly what information it collects, and what it does with it. But a personal voice comes through to make you feel comfortable.

We keep everything we find out through our Web site to ourselves. Usually, we (the WebHeads) don’t even share it with the marketing folks. We do not send spam, we do not solicit personal information from children, etc. We do accept voluntary subscriptions to e-mail and/or snail mail newsletters. If you want to hear from us, you have to ask.

Since Ben and Jerry’s is a company that makes ice cream, it has to be clear about its relationship with children. So their Privacy Statement addresses them (and their parents) directly:

Hey KIDS! If you are under 16, please get your parents’ permission before contacting us. We’d love to hear from you

and your parents.

Hey PARENTS! Ben & Jerry's encourages children to ask their parents before submitting any information to us. There is software available that can keep children from giving out personal information online without parental permission. Of course, there is nothing better than personal supervision of your children while surfing the Net. For more information about parental control tools, please consult the "Privacy Action" page of the Direct Marketing Association home page (www.the-dma.org).

There's no reason you can't have fun with these documents, too. CitizenX.com, a community site that includes webcams and chat rooms, has a very entertaining Terms of Service document (citizenx.com/reg/terms.asp). It includes gems like: "If you're being a jerk, we have the right to de-activate your account and put gum in your hair." And: "In this lawsuit-happy day and age, we should probably add something here about liability. Basically, we're not responsible. Got it? If you see someone on their cam, you fall in love, then they turn out to be a deadbeat—it's not our fault."

Step 3: Communicate rules visually

Not long ago I got to watch the mother of a one-year-old baby in action. It was inspiring. Every time the child did something wrong, like pick up a sharp stick, the mom did not scream, "NO!" and whack it out of the infant's hands (which, admittedly, would have been my first reaction).

Instead, she simply offered him something more interesting. "Hey! Look at this!" she said, waving a red plastic lid in front of his face. "Woooo!"

And every time, the baby dropped the sharp thing and latched on to the toy like magic.

In the same way, it's always easier to guide users along the path than it is to bully them into behaving. Instead of being heavy-handed about it, a simple visual cue, at just the right time, can work wonders. (And, yes, I realize I just reduced all users to a metaphorical one-year-old. Sorry about that.)

Take, for example, the Blogger Discussion area (blogger.com/discuss). Blogger is a web application that I worked for in late 2000. Since the tool was web-based, it made sense to also have a web-based discussion area for peer-to-peer support. I oversaw the creation of what ultimately became Blogger Discuss.

The team and I used non-verbal cues in several places to guide the user at different stages. Icons turned orange to indicate activity, while inactive conversations turned gray, for example.

I also decided that we needed to communicate the rules of the site directly in a posting guidelines page. I wrote it to be short and to the point, with the most important ideas in bold for easy scanning:

Thanks for taking part in Blogger Discuss. Please keep in mind a few simple rules for posting.

- 1. Stay on topic.** If it's about the thread starter topic, everyone is happy. And please remember that this is a discussion area for Blogger. If it's not related to Blogger, it's probably off topic.
- 2. Be nice.** Flames, insults and put-downs will be deleted.
- 3. HTML will not be rendered.** That means you can include code examples, and they'll be visible. If you want to include a link, just start it with `http://` and end with a space, and it will become a link.
- 4. Replies are limited to 5,000 characters** (about a thousand words). If you submit a reply that is over the limit, you'll be asked to make it shorter.
- 5. Blogger retains the right to delete any post for any reason.**

Now that we had the rules all spelled out in a document, I just had to figure out where to put it. If we put it in the About section, it would be completely out of sight. If we linked to it from the Discussion homepage, it would be more prominent, but still easily forgotten, since it was possible to navigate from section to section without ever going back to the homepage.

Then there was an additional problem: context. I wanted to place the posting guidelines as close to the actual posting mechanism as possible. But if we linked away to it, it would actually harm the users. Because, if the users had a half-composed post in the form and clicked away to a new page, they'd lose what they'd typed so far. And we couldn't just run the guidelines in the margin of all the

By the way, I am publishing on Blogspot, if that makes a difference.

Thanks,
- razor grl [5/1/2001 3:01 PM]

See if this works: after you select a new template, click change template, say OK, and you get to the page that says "Your template change has been made" instead of going directly to republish, click the link for "template HTML view" - you'll be able to tell if you are still stuck with geek, because about the fifth line will be
body {background: url(/images/geekbg.gif
if you are still a geek. If not, scroll down and click "save changes" and then publish. No real reason why that would work, but then there's no real reason why the regular way wouldn't...

- Phil Ringnalda [5/1/2001 10:50 PM]

POST A REPLY [POSTING GUIDELINES](#)

I think Phil is on to the right idea, but I'd suggest

<<< Getting Started

[Home](#) [About](#) [How To](#) [Directory](#) **[Discuss](#)**

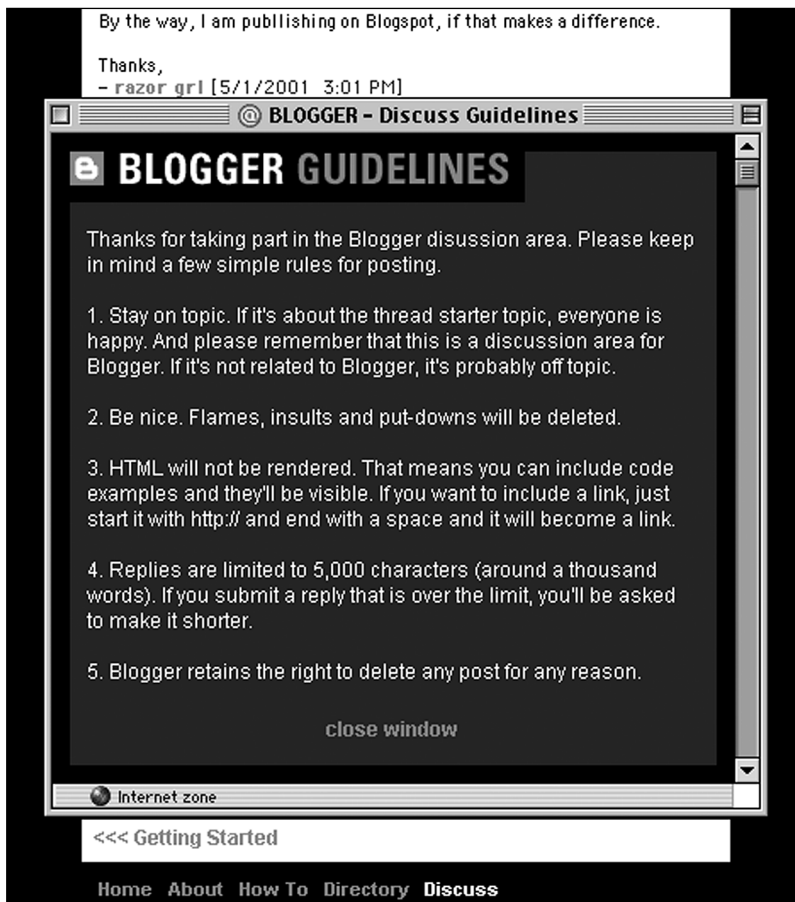
Note the "POSTING GUIDELINES" link above the post entry form.

threads—that would be a waste of space, not to mention visually annoying.

After a lot of thinking, I decided to insert the guidelines into the process where users were likely to need them: as they're posting. And instead of just putting the text on every page to the point of annoyance, or linking away to a new page, I placed it in a pop-up window, linked prominently from every posting form.

So, as users are posting, they're given a visual cue that there are posting guidelines. In fact, that link serves as a reminder, adjacent to every posting form. And the link's placement over the posting form reinforces its importance. The near-universal “new window”

The posting guidelines' pop-up window.



icon to the left of the text tells users that this click will create a pop-up window (and won't take them away from their post).

If users click the link, they're presented with the posting guidelines in a pop-up window.

The guidelines are designed to be a quick read. Then, with the click of a mouse, the window is gone, and users are right back where they were, in context, with their half-composed post undisturbed.

Enforce the Rules

If you've done a good job of setting rules wisely and communicating them clearly, this last job should be something you don't have to do with a heavy hand. Or, at least, hopefully you won't have to do it too often. You never know when a cheese-lover is going to show up.

Unfortunately, no matter how elegant the design of a community space is, at some point you may have to step in and lay down the law. When that happens, it's time to call on your host.

The host of a web community is akin to the host at a party. In addition to enforcing the rules, the host speaks with authority, sets the tone, and makes sure all the guests are getting along. The importance of the role of the host depends on the depth of the community area and the complexity of the tools. But make no mistake, every community site has a host. And if you can't name who that person is, it's probably you.

Job description of a host

This is not a job for the faint of heart. The host acts as an enforcer of the rules, guardian of the gate, helper to those in need, and example to the community of how to behave. The host is the human face of the community, setting the rules and then sticking around to examine their impact. This is the person who people come to if they've got a beef or a question.

Clearly, this is a big job. In my experience, I've found that good hosts are harder to find than good designers. There's a certain Zen about hosting a web community. You need to be active enough to lead the way, but know when to fall silent and let the community lead itself. You need to know when to rise to the challenge of an angry user, and when to leave the flame bait alone. You need to be friendly in the face of trolls looking for trouble, to always act as an example of how you'd like the community to behave.

In other words, it shouldn't be you.

Let me explain. This book is primarily for designers, so when I say "you," I'm talking to the designer of the community space. All too often, the designer winds up acting as a host as well, a practice I've been a victim of on more than one occasion. Unfortunately, in my experience, the people who are very good at designing websites are usually not the same kind of people who are good at hosting and moderating them.

There are other reasons besides the personality dynamics. As the site designer, everything about the site is going to be obvious to you. But the host should be more attached to the community than the site. When the users cry out for a change (a new thread, a new feature, whatever they're passionate about), it's good for the host to be on their side. It's always easier to manage the community when you're with them than against them. But a site designer may be too attached to the site to hear the criticisms with an open mind.

So my advice is always to find someone to be a host besides the person (or people) who built the site. You can have multiple hosts, if your site is big enough, and you can even cull them out of the community itself. Just don't underestimate the importance of the role. Your hosts will create many users' first impression of the site. You want to make sure it's a good one.

How important is the host?

That depends on whom you ask.

Traditionally, “hostliness” has been next to godliness in the virtual community world. And many virtual community theories center on the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful host to guide the community out of the darkness and into the light.

But, like most things on the web, it depends.

In some ways, the role of the host was overplayed in the past. When a system is poorly designed, or too large in scope, or just plain new to everyone, the role of the host is, of course, going to become hugely important.

On the other hand, if you’re using the kind of small, elegantly designed, tightly focused community features advocated in this book, the role of the host is diminished. There is always a host—make no mistake. But the importance of the role depends on the complexity of the community space.

For example, ZDNet News (zdnet.com/zdnn) is a technology-related news site. There, each story is followed by a discussion



The call to action at the bottom of a ZDNet story.


thread on the same page as the story itself. The interaction here is bare-bones simple. A user reads the story and is presented with a call to “Talk back!” Clicking this presents the user with a form with just a few fields, only two of which are required: a name and a comment. There’s not too much to explain here. (Not that the addition of a host would be unwelcome here—harsh words between posters are not uncommon.)

The ZDNet
posting interface.


The screenshot shows a web form titled "TALKBACK CENTRAL" with a subtitle "Comment on 'Time for a computer magazine comeback?'". Below the title is a large text area labeled "Comments:". To the right of the text area is a vertical scrollbar. Below the text area are four input fields labeled "Full name:", "Email address:", "Location:", and "Occupation:". Below these fields are three radio button options under the heading "Posting options:". The first option is selected and is labeled "OK to print name and email address". The second option is labeled "OK to print name only". The third option is labeled "Please do not print this message". At the bottom of the form are two buttons: "Submit Comment" and "Cancel".

On the other hand, there are complicated sites like Table Talk (tabletalk.salon.com) and the discussion boards at CNN (community.cnn.com), where the user is presented with a barrage of options and a less than perfect set of visual cues. What to choose? Where to go? How does this thing work?

The river of blue links on CNN's community homepage. Where to go?



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discussion
messageboards

You currently have Guest access: Please [sign-in](#) or [register](#) if you would like to contribute to these discussions. You may also take a [Guided Tour](#) of the message board system before you register.

Message Boards		
Hot Topics	U.S.	World
Peace in the Balkans (42041 messages)	Violence in America (16579 messages, 1 new)	Futhanasia law (183 messages)
China-U.S. relations (62227 messages, 93 new)	National security (931 messages)	Foot-and-mouth disease (931 messages)
Mid-east peace (99590 messages, 63 new)	School safety (1352 messages)	Missile defense system (1310 messages)
Abortion: Whose choice? (13441 messages, 1 new)	The U.S. military (13441 messages, 1 new)	The Americas (4 discussions)
India-Pakistan relations (65919 messages, 38 new)	People in the News: Franklin Graham (28 messages)	Africa (6 discussions)
Cincinnati violence (1835 messages)	Power crisis (2200 messages)	Asia (7 discussions)
The first 100 days (26966 messages, 36 new)	Tackling immigration (4135 messages)	Europe (8 discussions)
	Previous U.S. discussions (8 discussions)	Middle East (3 discussions)
		Previous World discussions (1 folder, 32 discussions)
Politics	Issues	Law
Judicial appointments (274 messages)	Women in society (1654 messages)	Sports nicknames (102 messages)
Taking and spending: Bush budget (10919 messages, 2 new)	Religion today (4582 messages)	Limits to freedom? (165 messages, 1 new)
Bankruptcy legislation (232 messages)	Church and state (15812 messages)	Censorship on the Net (479 messages, 2 new)
Education reform (1582 messages)	Gay rights (26189 messages, 2 new)	Guns under fire (3408 messages)
Health care reform (4409 messages)	War on drugs (44647 messages)	Greta@Law (123 messages)
Political philosophy (12256 messages)	Death penalty (18211 messages, 3 new)	Courts and the constitution (859 messages)
Previous Allpolitics discussions (1 folder, 22 discussions)	The state of race relations (27046 messages, 2 new)	Previous Law discussions (1 folder, 17 discussions)
	Previous issues discussions (5 discussions)	
Space	Sci-Tech	Health
Moon landing: myth or fact? (2057 messages)	mp3 wars: Napster (2764 messages)	Tobacco use (1019 messages)
Destination Mars (9945 messages)	Environmental issues (1094 messages)	Genetically modified food (2306 messages)
Human spaceflight (1824 messages)	Security on the Net (1474 messages, 1 new)	Organ donation initiative (11 messages)
UFOs (4632 messages, 2 new)	Evolution (37612 messages)	Human cloning (859 messages)
Stargazing (1265 messages)	Sci-tech Space Archives (1 folder, 17 discussions)	AIDS prevention (2498 messages)
CNNfn	Entertainment	Previous health discussions (1 folder, 14 discussions)
Career: Personality match (85 messages)	In memory: Joey Ramone (93 messages)	
Symphonic careers (61 messages)	Great songs (263 messages)	Travel
The state of the economy (1326 messages)	Reality TV (201 messages)	Air safety (1705 messages)
Tax season (174 messages)	Violence in entertainment (680 messages, 1 new)	Airline strikes (264 messages)
SUVs: Monsters or misjudged? (2654 messages)	Movie reviews (787 messages)	Travel troubles (835 messages)
Previous CNNfn discussions (10 discussions)	Entertainment archives (3 folders, 10 discussions)	Previous Travel Discussions (7 discussions)
		Suggestions
		Technical issues (1210 messages)
		Suggest a topic (844 messages, 1 new)

SEARCH CNN.com
 Enter keyword(s) [help](#)

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It's obvious that some sites will come to rely on hosts more than others. In general, the more tools you give your users, the more important the role of the host becomes. Good site design and clear navigation can minimize—but not eliminate—the role of the host.

If you're trying to decide how important the role of the host is to your site, try this test. Ask a friend or a relative to come participate in your community. This person should be a novice web user—a person with some experience in the web, but not an advanced user. Ask your volunteer to visit your site and participate in some way (more than just reading). If your volunteer has questions or comments, they should be written down in an email and sent to you.

If you get one or two questions, you're doing okay. Three or four? A host is pretty important. More than that and a host is downright critical (and you may have other problems in the design and interaction of the site, too).

Looking the part

No matter how important you determine the role of the host is in your site, having one user post with more authority than the others creates a design issue. It is crucial to communicate the host's authority visually; otherwise, any user could say, "Hey! I'm in charge! Listen to me!"

Sound fanciful? Tell that to whoever took the moniker "KVETCH CONTROL" in Kvetch.com. That person, whoever it was, told the visitors to Kvetch that they would all be evicted if they did not behave appropriately. He said that the site would be shut down if people didn't spell correctly

Of course, he wasn't the host—I was. But that didn't stop users from taking the posts seriously. When KVETCH CONTROL posted that the website had been infected with a virus, I got some very concerned emails from community members.

Aside from deleting the posts and fantasizing about smacking KVETCH CONTROL upside the head, there were only a couple of things I could do about the situation. Since Kvetch didn't require a registration, I couldn't ban the user. But I could block the user out by his IP address (which was available in the server logs). I also instituted a design change: From then on, whenever I posted something official, it was prefaced by "MODERATOR:" and the color was changed slightly so that the community would know that it was official. There was no way for anyone else to format his posts in the same way.

The main issue is that when someone with authority posts in the common space, his post has more weight. So his words should be differentiated visually as well.

Another good example of this is a site I designed for business guru and author Tom Peters in 1998. It was his first foray into the web, but he took to it with enthusiasm. At the top of his list of things he wanted out of the experience was the ability to converse with his readers—an ability his books lacked.

So when I designed his site, it came with a full complement of community tools. But Peters soon found that when he jumped into the community space, his words got lost in the cacophony.

The solution was a simple design change. When Peters posted to the community area, his comments were called out visually with a different background color. This subtle design change underscored that this was his site, he was the authority here, and everyone took notice.

If you have hosts actively participating in your community space, you should consider a similar design solution. The change should be subtle, but different enough to be noticed. And it should be something that the community members are incapable of mimicking, lest you wind up with a KVETCH CONTROL of your own.

Barriers and Hosts

The egalitarian, inclusive, idealistic web is not dead. Far from it—the joy of the Internet is that everyone can have a voice, and there’s always someone out there who wants to hear it. There really is a community out there for everyone.

But communities will implode without some structure, rules, and guidance. The rules you set also define your community, setting the tone for all the members. And the hosts maintain that tone, and nurture the members along the way.

When these elements work in concert, it benefits the entire community. The right people, with the right tools and just the right amount of guidance, can work wonders.

A Conversation with Caleb Clark

For the inside scoop on the Zen of hosting, I went to someone with more experience in the field than almost anyone I know.

Caleb Clark has been a host to countless communities over the last five years. From big sites like Netscape's Professional Connections, to smaller ones like Y-Ride, a community site for teenagers. Clark has the unique ability to be both supportive yet administrative, encouraging yet authoritative.



Caleb Clark

I spoke with Clark via email in early 2001 about what he's learned hosting communities in virtual places. His interview demonstrates all the things that make him a good host—he's exuberant and engaged, creative and attentive. Notice how he even compliments me on my questions. Clearly, this is a man who knows how to have a conversation.

I hope you find him as insightful and entertaining as I did.

Caleb, please give us a brief introduction to who you are and what you do, specifically your work in community and the web.

I'm a techno geek born and raised in the crossfire hurricane of the late 1960s, a flower child, not to be confused with a hippie like my mother. See man, my revolution is technology, power to the geeks. Grab your ray gun, Annie, we're going sci-fi story hunting!

OK ... that was strange. Anyway, along the path of growing up, I was steeped in consensus-run groups, both successful and unsuccessful. There was a commune in the redwoods of Mendocino, California, the Haight in San Francisco, and three small free schools in New England that I attended up to sophomore year in high school.

This all resulted in a fairly flaky resume, elusive purpose at the hands of tremendous freedom, and 7 years/4 schools for a BA from ASU. My first formal flirtation with media and groups came with being a production assistant on several Hollywood feature location shoots. This was

my first taste of a small group totally focused on one clear goal (screenplay), whose success depended a large part on good communication.

When the first *Wired Magazine* came out, I found myself working as a carpenter in Santa Fe, NM, while I freelanced for a local newspaper. After learning HTML and getting online, I followed *Wired* by moving to San Francisco and the web revolution in the mid-1990s, where I freelanced and wrote shorts for *Wired*. In January 1996, I was a lonely, small corporate webmaster so I started NoEnd, a group of web heads and artists hell bent on Humanizing Technology. My idea being that there must be other lonely webmasters out there doing a job they could not share, nor explain to hardly anyone.

We met upstairs in a North Beach cafe/bar and asked each other how our weeks were. Each week more and more people started showing up by word of mouth. Then a freelance web worker friend of mine, named Paul Vachier, who was thinking along the same lines groupwise came to a meeting with a bunch of folks he worked with. Paul and I then partnered up to grow this new entity called *NoEnd*. Since few people in the world had had weeks like ours, let alone understood our acronyms, the sharing became very popular, and we started using a warehouse for meetings. Big companies lined up to present to us. When they did, we insisted they sit on futons in the circle just like us, and cut short their presentations for ruthless Q&A. And they still came. We very quickly started a listserv that runs to this day. A hallmark of the NoEnd list is poetry, travel essays, family news, and personal sharing sprinkled in with a very high signal to noise ratio. I say without hesitation that the success of my professional and personal life is due in a large part to the people of NoEnd. NoEnd's success was definitely partly the luck of good timing and location, and it expanded quickly to what it is today, a quiet but vibrant and respected group of very experienced professionals who strive to humanize technology.

In 1997, I moved to San Diego to get a Masters Degree in Educational Technology at San Diego State University. I studied online community, usability, and stories. During this time, I was fortunate to work for

Netscape Inc. (Pre-AOL) as a host in their “Professional Connections” online community from Beta to launch and for a year of heavy participation, due to Netscape.com being a very high traffic site. After my MA, I taught graduate web development courses (both in person and online) at SDSU for a year with each class having its own online community. This gave me the interesting opportunity to host the birth to death cycle of six communities. I recently completed a year of doing the dot-com dance as director of online community and project management at an irrational, exuberant start-up. At the time of this writing, I am the Director of the BAT_LAB (Ballpark Advanced Technology) for the San Diego Padres’ baseball team. We’re working on evaluating integrated advanced technologies for the new ballpark and surrounding 26-block re-development zone in downtown San Diego.

You’ve been a host at many web-based communities. Why are hosts important?

Groups need leaders to achieve goals. Hosts are leaders. Let’s take a cocktail party, for example. A good party usually has a good host. The host of a party provides structure, information, and a single point of communication. At a good house party, people don’t pee in the bushes because they know who to ask where the bathroom is—OK, that’s a weird example. How about: The partygoers don’t drink warm drinks when the ice runs out because the host gets more ice, or if there’s a fight, the host calls the cops and talks to them when they get there.

But online it’s even more important to have a good host, and here’s why. Imagine a cocktail party with 200 people under a tent. You’re talking to two or three people in a din of other unintelligible conversations. You move from group to group and keep talking, and you can’t hear what everybody else is saying.

Now compare this with an online community of 200 where, because of the way the technology is structured, you can read what every single person is saying. It’s a lot more information and takes a lot more leadership (hosting). It’s as if someone at a real life party quieted down the

room and said, “Ok, we’re all going to be quiet while one person talks and the rest listen.” And then tried to keep it going with all 200 people while the party chemicals of choice kicked in. Hosts provide communication, macro-structure, information, and the law of the land—some fundamental basics of any community.

What makes a good host? Any helpful do’s and don’ts to share?

A good host is the person most in touch with the community, the one who holds the group’s goal safe and communicates it so the group will recognize its own success. Good hosts are more concerned with the community as a whole than with their own issues or any one person’s issues. This does not mean they spend as much time actually in the community as some of the regulars, however. It just means they are the most tapped into the group as a whole entity than anyone else.

Specifically, they are good at posting short question posts that spur posts from others. They are good at giving more than getting and fostering gift economies. They know when not to post and let things take their own course. They are known by the community as the host and respected as a leader. They welcome new members and explain the “rules” of that particular community. They also respect the members of the community and know when to communicate one-on-one with them. They are strong enough to deal with trouble quickly so it does not destroy the community. Also, good hosts understand that they are not really in control of the community’s future. They get that it’s more like being a farmer than a construction worker. While you can build a community space, you can’t force a community to use it and grow. It’s more like a garden with the host making sure the soil is good: There’s fresh water, the right amount of sun, and then planting seeds and helping them grow. It’s all about environmental control. Good hosts should also have fun and obviously love their job.

What role does the host play in guarding the community? Can a host sometimes act as, or work to create, a barrier to entry?

Barriers to entry, good question. In my experience, the forces that govern the community set up barriers to entry. For example, the

university that controls the number of students in an online class, the corporation that decides to run a normal web community where you can read for nothing, but have to register to post. The professional organization that decides to start an email list, or the moderated community that decides to approve each post. Rarely is it just one person/host.

So, a host usually plays the role of enforcing rules set down by a group. What I think is really important is that there are filters. A listserv can only handle a few hundred folks, a web community can handle as many as can register, but without rules of content, decency, and thread and subject control, can easily become a ghost town to half-started subjects and empty threads.

I believe exclusivity is not inherently bad, and that having to work to get into a community is often empowering. Perhaps barriers to entry are a result of the equation of the goal of the community balanced with its resources. I think of it like communities in real life. There are small towns whose barrier to entry is geographical. There are cities whose size means they have more good and more bad. Reminds me of Groucho Marx saying, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

In your time with virtual communities, you've come up with a great standard set of topics to spur conversation. What are they, why are they important, and how did you come up with them?

Over the years I've invented and tested three topics.

1. How was your week? If I could have only one topic in a community, it would be this one. It is the single most powerful tool for community growing that I've come up with.

This topic was born during the NoEnd Group's early days when a bunch of webmasters would meet in a bar and go from person to person asking that question. I moved the group along by timing about 10 minutes per person (an example of why hosts are needed). The

answers were always different, personal, entertaining, and started mini-discussions of sharing experiences. Two hours later, we'd have gone around the circle, and everybody had a strange feeling of comfort and release. Very different from being a spectator at some boring talking-head meeting.

Later in graduate school, I learned that this had a lot to do with identity and stories. From Judith Donath's work at MIT's Media Lab, I learned that everybody has an identity, but online it's tough to establish because we are separated from our bodies that help anchor our "real life" identities.

I found that a successful way to get around this is to always have a space where people can express how their weeks were. Seems trivial, but it's very powerful. As soon as someone writes, "This week was bad, my 10-year-old got sick just as I had a big presentation at work, which I botched," they've made themselves unique from everybody else by sharing personal details with the community—a mini story. When someone writes back, "I hear you, I've got enough trouble juggling work and home life, and I'm single! More power to you"—then you've got a community.

I started a permanent "How was your week?" in my Netscape forum, and it was successful enough for several other hosts to make it a permanent topic in their forums.

2. Outside. I came up with "Outside" after a WWII veteran told me a story about bar fights in New York city right after the war. He said there was a lot of tension and anger among the GIs coming back, so there was a lot of drinking and fighting, and the bars he went to adapted a system to handle it.

When two guys started getting in each other's face, the bartender or bouncer would grab some chalk and take them outside where he'd draw a circle on the pavement. Then he would make sure they had no weapons, and let them go at it. When one gave up for whatever

reason, he'd make them go back into the bar and have the winner buy the loser a drink.

This is about the fact that fighting in a community is inevitable. But fighting is not the problem: It's where and how the fights take place that makes for problems. Most often fights, or flames as they're called, happen in the middle of the forum and make everybody angry. This is not appropriate, but stopping fighting is not realistic either.

Well, I thought why not have an "Outside" in an online community? A place to go when what you are doing is bothering other people, but you still need to do it. Most people hate to be told what they can't do. But they don't seem to mind so much a little structure on what they can do. So it's worked great whenever I've tried it. When I encounter flames sparking up, I send an email saying, "Take it outside." It's a great re-director of bad energy in a community. Interestingly, it seems to take the gas out of flames very fast, since there are not bunches of people "watching" the flame.

I've also found that people will go use an "Outside" topic to just pretend fight, thus limiting real flames. Very interesting...

3. Random Babble. We can't categorize everything people want to talk about, so I always have a Random Babble area. It's like a steam valve for a community, a rule-less place to play where you don't have to talk about anything that makes sense. As a host, your job is often to keep people on topic. If you're discussing politics and people start going off on entertainment, you need to either create an entertainment topic if there's enough need, or gently refocus the group on politics. But what about when you have something to say that doesn't fit into a topic and yet isn't fitting for starting a new one? Thus, random babble.

Surprisingly, the discussions can be amazing in such a topic, from silly to heartfelt. It's a place to blow off steam and be crazy, which makes it easier to stay on topic on the other forum because you have one that has no topic at all.

Has a virtual community ever surprised you?

Constantly.

I've seen people from the farthest corners of the globe connect with each other. For example, small business people from New Zealand connecting with ones deep in Mexico and sharing information that helped save both businesses.

Once a virtual snowball fight broke out in an "Outside" forum I was hosting. For two weeks we just wrote back and forth things like "Caleb falls to the ground from Sharon's ice/mud ball, but his force field protected him enough to stay conscious. Reeling, he calls in his secret alien ship and creates a storm of snowballs!"

Last question: If you could give one piece of advice to new hosts, one guiding principle, what would it be?

Grow, don't build.