

TOOLS, TIPS, TRICKS AND PROCEDURE FOR BUILDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY



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1. Choose the right software

Community-building hubs can be developed using a number of free applications. Because there is a strong business case for using pre-existing networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc) we would recommend that open source tools are used – ones that allow you to build a highly interoperative website that can be used to host content and develop a number of networks. Blog platforms include Google's Blogger.com and Typepad could be used for these. Both are very easy to use but they are comparatively restrictive and they don't have a user community that is *that* active. More attractive alternatives include Wordpress (either the slightly restricted version that can be set up in minutes using the website at www.wordpress.com, or the more sophisticated configurable version (wordpress.org) that can be installed on your own webspace. Slugger O'Toole resells webspace for this purpose at the website www.sluggerhosts.com – this space includes the free 'installatron' software that makes Wordpress management very easy.

The final option is NING groups. These are very easy to set up and offer limited customisation options. Users can pay to have the some features turned on (i.e. pointing to a web-domain for example) or others turned off (the irritating Google Ads that are there by default. Everyone has different needs, but we have found NING groups to have a number of problems. Firstly, they seem to be targeted by spammers. Secondly, the controlling company have changed the terms of use in the past in ways that are either irritating, or actually project threatening. And finally, email from NING seems to be being treated as spam – so it often doesn't get through.

There is an application called 'Buddypress' that will soon work on all Wordpress sites, and our early assessment is that this will give Wordpress sites all of the functionality that Ning offers – with none of the drawbacks.

Our verdict? Use Wordpress.org if you can – it offers you the option to install lots of useful tools.

2. Preparing to build a virtual community using Wordpress

If you are establishing a virtual community using Wordpress, the following accounts will enable you to unlock a number of free tools that will improve the performance of your site:

- a) A wordpress.com account – go to www.wordpress.com and register. It will give you the option to set up a blog or just get a Wordpress account. If you are installing your own wordpress, just get an account. This will allow you to access an API key that you will need for Wordpress web-stats and for their excellent Akismet spam-filtering software
- b) A Google account. Just go to www.gmail.com and set up an e-mail account that you can use for all site management issues. Once you have this, you can set up the following free tools that will help you build an active community around your website
 1. **Google Reader** – [watch this video](#) and then set up your own account – use it to subscribe to blogs and websites that are likely to be of interest to your readers. You can then install a Google Reader widget on your website that automatically picks up shared items and displays them on your site. You can see this illustrated in the 'Seen Elsewhere' section of the sidebar

on this site: <http://blog.localdemocracy.org.uk> Encourage visitors to follow you on Google Reader so that you can build up a community of people who share good content.

2. **Feedburner** – just Google it and set up an account. You can use this to make your RSS feeds more elegant, and allow you to easily create a mailing list on your site. This can be configured to send all subscribers a daily digest of all of your recent postings to the site. If you want a quick reminder of how RSS works, [use this video](#).
3. **Google's web-tools**. Google Analytics is a great web-stats package. Register for an account and then get the unique code that you will need to get stats for your website. You will need to use a Wordpress plug-in to add the code to your website easily and this can be installed easily. Also, use Google's webmaster tools to help you publicise your site more effectively. Bing and Yahoo also have these tools – use them if you can. There are tools that allow you to embed the code for Google / Bing / Yahoo webmaster tools easily

3. Other good community building plug-ins for a Wordpress site

Twitter is a great tool for building an informal community with. It can also be a surprisingly good referrer of traffic to your website. Every time you post something to your website, it should automatically be hosted to your community's Twitter feed. There's a great little plug-in called WP-Twitter for this purpose. This will work more effectively if you go to www.bit.ly and set up an account that supports URL shortening.

You can also use a plug-in that shows every link that Twitterers make to your site – it's called **Topsy** and I've also installed it to the site at <http://blog.localdemocracy.org.uk> as an illustration.

It's a good idea to get a Facebook Fan Page for your community. If you do this, Facebook give you free widgets that you can add to your website's sidebar very easily. I've just done this a few days ago on a small North London community website called www.finchlinks.com and you can see these here. They're great for creating online communities around your website.

Identify your community manager. Ask them to register your site with NetworkedBlogs via their facebook page.

Then make them the admin of your Facebook fan group and change the settings so that everything that goes on the website also goes on the Fan Page. See <http://www.thecentreforschoolsdesign.com> as an example of this.

Create a LinkedIn group around a subject that you care about and link to it. Also, create a YouTube channel and embed the most recent / best videos in your sidebar. If you have a bank of interesting photographs, load them up to Flickr, link to your site and register them as 'Creative Commons' pictures. This will encourage others to blog / write about your pet subjects.

4. Create a 'keydoc'

This is a single document that has your account names and passwords in it. If you can get these in one place, it will make things easier if your staff move on and you need to move the site. It is, however, a security risk so be careful what you do with it. The keydoc should include...

- The payment account usernames and passwords and web-address for your hosting company
- Your hosting management panel usernames, passwords and web-address
- The admin username and password (and web-address) for your site
- Usernames and passwords for all accounts you have (wordpress, feedburner, google etc)
- Any important contact details for people who have helped develop your website.