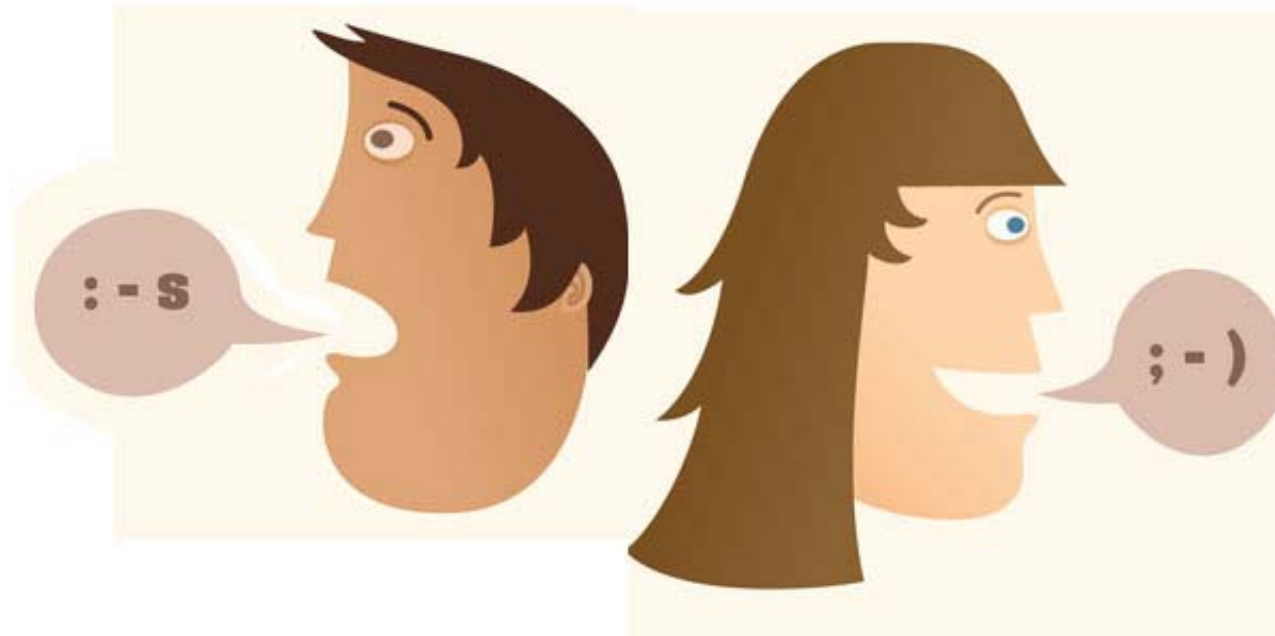




White paper



Talk, Why Don't You

9(+) Tips for Increasing
Online User Engagement

by Steve Outing





INTRODUCTION:
The majority of people who come to your website just come to see what's there, without ever truly engaging ... Let's change that

It's pretty much accepted by media professionals -- and increasingly by marketers -- that it's a GOOD THING to let your audience or your customers in on a conversation with you. (Why? More meaningful and intimate consumer relationships.) Gone is the era when organizations spewed corporate messages and avoided backlash by ignoring the feedback.

It's easy to see why. Most media sites now allow users to comment on content. ... Youtube has made it brain-dead simple to share amateur video, and conversations even revolve around the vids. ... Amazon.com customers can (and do!) share their reviews of books, music, and other products. ... A growing number of marketers are running contests where they ask consumers to create advertisements for their products. ... Photo-sharing sites support amateur photographers' desires to share their images with the world. ...

The online global conversation is thriving! And it's not just individuals; organizations are getting involved now, too.

BUT... *not everyone is willing to talk.*

As a media or marketing professional in charge of your website, you're by now wanting people to engage with you, and with each other. You've probably built in to your website(s) features and tools that enable and encourage conversation by your audience or customers.

But odds are high that the majority of people who come to your website just come to see what's there, without ever truly engaging, joining the conversation, or sharing their thoughts or content.

This brief white paper offers some tips on how to get your website users (your customers) to be more engaged and participative.

Read on. ... And at the end, you'll get the chance to have your say. :)





The 90-9-1 Rule: We can do better

Most anyone who has run an online community has experienced the 90-9-1 rule

Before we get to the tips about how to get people to engage and participate more -- to be less shy online -- let's first look at typical behavior in online communities.

Most anyone who's run an online community -- where members and/or visitors are encouraged to provide feedback and/or share their own content -- has experienced the 90-9-1 rule. (It's often referred to simply as the 90-10 Rule.) Typical site user/visitor behavior will break down like this:

90% - users who only read or view what's on the site

9% - users who occasionally post a comment or submit content

1% - users who are super enthusiastic and share lots of comments and content

There are definite benefits to establishing deeper relationships with your users or customers. There's great incentive to work to shift those numbers -- especially to lower the 90% figure.

McKinsey & Co., for instance, found that community features (such as chat, discussion boards, user feedback, and consumer product review pages) created "substantial value for both retail and content sites." In other words, websites that adopted the model of promoting user interaction and dialog sold more.

On the follow pages are some ideas to encourage more and deeper user engagement, based on my experience with grassroots media over the years, and the Enthusiast Group's experience publishing participative online communities like YourClimbing.com and YourMTB.com.





Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

If you want to encourage more participation, allow user comments everywhere



Tip No. 1: Support and encourage user comments

OK, yeah, this is pretty obvious. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention this no-brainer. If you want to encourage more participation, allow user comments on just about every piece of content on your website.

For articles, photos, and videos, let users have their say. For product listings (if you're a retailer or marketer), let people post their reviews. If you truly want to adopt an engagement strategy, then allowing user comments throughout your site is a great way to do that. (I'll point to Amazon.com as the classic example of successfully adopting this strategy; its user reviews are essentially the same as user comments, but with some rating bells and whistles added.)

Yes, this is easier for a media property where the content is information, compared to a product that's being marketed. There's more danger with the latter. But if you've got a killer product and aren't afraid of consumer negativity, then go for it.

Marketers trying out user comments or reviews also have the option of moderating (approving before publication) user submissions, and creating ground rules within a terms of service that allows blocking of inappropriate comments.

Comments: (325)

Showing: ▾



lili2007 wrote: 2d 23h ago

Gene mentions talking about the truth. Ok glad to:

I grew up with a working mom. Today I am 40, as happy a most anyone I know (as I have always been) and extremely close to my parents. I have an amazing job, a wonderful husband, and unbelievably happy kids. But how can that be? My mom worked, and so do I. No dishonesty in our homes.



Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

This is a simple technological trick can increase your comment numbers significantly



Tip No. 2: Use alerts to keep comment threads going

On YourClimbing.com, we often see comment threads on photos, videos, and blog items go well over 100 posts. A major reason this happens is that everyone who comments on a piece of content (and the content creator, too) gets e-mail alerts whenever an additional comment is added to the thread. (On a busy comment thread this can generate a lot of e-mail, so site users can opt to not get these alerts.)

Without such alerts, a comment thread can die prematurely, because people initially involved don't realize that the discussion is continuing.

Greetings, steve outing.
A thread to which you have subscribed has been updated.
Today's long run
Thanks Steve, Anything to
To view the thread, navigate to http://www.YourRunning.com/blog-todays_long_run#comment-4684

This technique should apply to consumer reviews, too. If someone posts a product review on your site, give them the option of receiving alerts about subsequent reviews by other users.

This is a simple technological trick that can increase your comment numbers significantly.

Of course, do make it easy for someone receiving a comment thread's alerts to unsubscribe, in the event that high volume becomes annoying for them. A "daily digest" -- a single e-mail that aggregates all thread comments posted in the last day -- also can be given as a user option.

If you want to get a bit more sophisticated than e-mail alerts, another option is to create a "newsfeed" connected to users' profiles. The newsfeed can contain a listing of activity on the site by friends, as well as notices when someone posts a comment to a thread that the user has contributed to. (If you're familiar with Facebook, you'll understand the concept of these types of personal newsfeeds.)



Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

Celebrities and executives have been 'untouchable'; not any more

Tip No. 3: Get your key people involved in comment threads

We found on Enthusiast Group websites that getting our celebrity editors to post comments and participate in comment threads was effective. Especially if your organization has a celebrity or executive involved in the website, when those people show up in the mix of user comments, users feel good about it -- because they sense that your organization cares enough to get into the conversation.

There's also the sense with celebrities and corporate executives that they are "untouchable." After all, that's historically been the case. So when those people start engaging directly with website users, good feelings abound. This is a great way to build a stronger bond between website users and your organization.

katie says:



Glad to see you back on the site! This is probably going to sound stupid, but I didn't go to highschool, so bear with me. What is JROTC?

Cross country huh? I ran cross country during my couple years off climbing. Loved it! Oh, and it's okay if you're only getting out on the weekends. Every little bit helps, and this way you'll want it more instead of getting burned out.

by [katie](#) on Sun, 2007-09-02 09:37

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Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

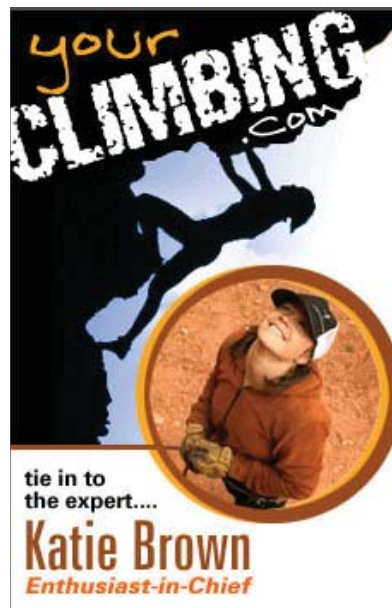
People don't have conversations with corporations, they have them with people



Tip No. 4: Have a human leader -- preferably a celebrity

If you want your website to engage people and have them contribute content regularly, it can't look too sterile or corporate. Put a human -- preferably, if you can, a visible person or celebrity -- in position of website or community leader. That person's job (which does not have to take much time) will be to 1) interact with users, 2) respond to them and answer questions, 3) encourage them to participate and contribute content, and 4) educate them, provide tips on how to submit good content, and suggest ideas.

What we're talking about here is a website as place of conversation. People don't have conversations with corporations, they have them with people. So make sure that you have a strong human feel on your site if you expect to increase user participation.



World champion and pro climber Katie Brown blogs, shoots video, answers questions, and participates in discussion threads as "enthusiast-in-chief" of YourClimbing.com






Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

Users who want to amass lots of points can simply add a bunch of frivolous comments

Tip No. 5: Develop a user points system

When it comes to user contributed content, most organizations shy away from paying for it. I think you do need to “pay” people to participate, but that doesn’t have to involve money.

Everyone is familiar with incentive programs where you earn points: You get them for charging stuff on your credit card, for flying with the airlines, for buying lots of stuff at the grocery store, etc. Websites that want more user contributions and participation likewise can develop a system where points are earned for specific types of user behavior.

Colts Leader Board						
Ranking	User	Profile	Blogs	Photos	Surveys	Overall Rating
#1 90.22 rating	 manningharrison Total Points: 15694	100.00 Rating	62.33 Rating	98.56 Rating	100.00 Rating	90.22 Rating
#2 56.99 rating	 gordon38 Total Points: 4208	46.38 Rating	100.00 Rating	37.70 Rating	43.87 Rating	56.99 Rating
#3 54.84 rating	 ereeper Total Points: 4416	51.17 Rating	21.98 Rating	58.07 Rating	88.12 Rating	54.84 Rating

The Indianapolis Colts’ MyColts.net social network gives points to its user-contributors. Rankings are based on how often a user’s content is viewed by others, plus ratings from users.

You can dole out different point amount rewards depending on content type. For example, give 10 points when a user posts a photo; 20 points for a video; 1 point for posting a comment; 15 points for answering another user’s question in a Help forum; etc.

On awarding points for user comments, that’s one you need to think through carefully. Users who want to amass lots of points can simply add a bunch of frivolous “me too” comments, which is not something you want to encourage. So it might be wise to either 1) not award





Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

There's high psychic value in being awarded guru status in front of your passionate peers



points for user comments, or 2) limit the number of comment points that a user can collect in one day (say, 5 points).

An alternative system is to award points based on how much traffic a user's content gets, combined with quality ratings from other users (and/or site editors).

What should users get when they amass lots of points? A couple possibilities:

1) Award prizes from sponsors, or gift products from your company, or discount vouchers. Your most active users can earn stuff as compensation for their strong activity on your site. It's a way for them to get "paid." But this is tricky, because if the prizes are good enough, you end up encouraging users to post a lot of stuff, even if it's crappy. If you choose to go this route, I encourage you to also incorporate a content rating system into a point-awarding algorithm. For example, add user and/or editor ratings of content into the calculation, so that a user who contributes 10 great things will earn more points than a user who submits 30 lousy pieces of content. A system based on content traffic may avoid these problems, but not entirely.

2) Given the complexity of coming up with a point-awards system that people won't try to game, you might decide to stick to non-tangible awards. By this I mean something like rewarding special status -- "Guru" or "Gold Member" -- to someone who accumulates, say, 1,000 points. Earning this special status within an online community that you care about can be highly motivating.

Online community guru Kathy Sierra, an expert in Creating Passionate Users, is an advocate of deploying "levels." For members of targeted websites, especially, where users come to "learn how to kick ass more," in Sierra's words, there's high psychic value in being awarded guru status in front of your passionate peers. So a great technique to encourage more participation is to create levels that your users advance through by participating more and more. The higher level you attain, the more you are perceived as an expert by the community. That's a great way to get people hooked in. The most points per activity can be reserved for things that help others or demonstrate your personal expertise.



Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

There should be some sort of compensation to these individuals, whether monetary or non-tangible

Tip No. 6: Cultivate and promote volunteer site editors or moderators

For a participative website where users are contributing lots of content, it may make sense to create a special class of super-users. If the site is primarily a forum with lots of participants, your most active and loyal users can be given moderator status, so that they have special administrative powers. This is especially useful if your site has so much user activity that staff can't keep up with monitoring it. You can utilize volunteer manpower, and selected super-users -- because they are so devoted to the online community -- are happy to take on this role.

There should be some sort of compensation to these individuals, whether a modest monetary allowance or non-monetary rewards such as visible enhanced social status on the site.

The existence of this "reward" can entice other users to try to attain this level, by contributing more to your site.





Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

One innovative prize was a phone call from an Indianapolis Colts player to the winning fan



Tip No. 7: Everybody loves contests

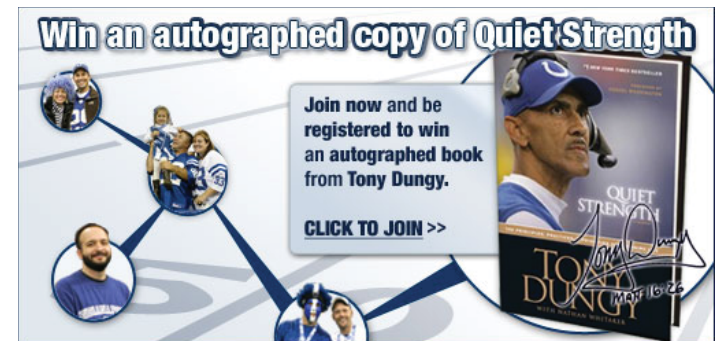
Count me as being uncomfortable with taking users' content on a social media-based website and not giving anything back -- making money from what users give you. So contests are a great way to give back. And they have the extra benefit of being a way to encourage high quality content.

On Enthusiast Group sites like YourClimbing.com and YourMTB.com, we award prizes for the "Post of the Week" (the best user-submitted photo, video, or blog) and "Member of the Month" (for the website member who's contributed the best content in the last month). Prizes come from sponsors. Our users love the contests, and express their affection for the sponsors.

At MyColts.net, a social network for Indianapolis Colts football fans run by the team, best-photo contests have included such prizes as free Canon cameras, tickets to Colts games, and pre-game sideline passes. One innovative prize was a personal phone call from a Colts player to the fan who submitted the best camera-phone photo of themselves showing "Colts pride" at a recent game. (The site's sponsors include AT&T and Canon.) The site also awards raffle prizes just for signing up for a free site membership.

That last prize (player phone call) should remind you to get creative with prizes. A phone call from a Colts player costs the organization nothing, yet generates excitement among the Colts faithful. So think outside the box when it comes to contests.

Clearly, a strong contest strategy can generate lots of user participation and content submissions.



Join MyColts.net for a chance to win a book autographed by the Colts' coach



Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

Being identified from among your online peers and being put on display for being good can be reward enough

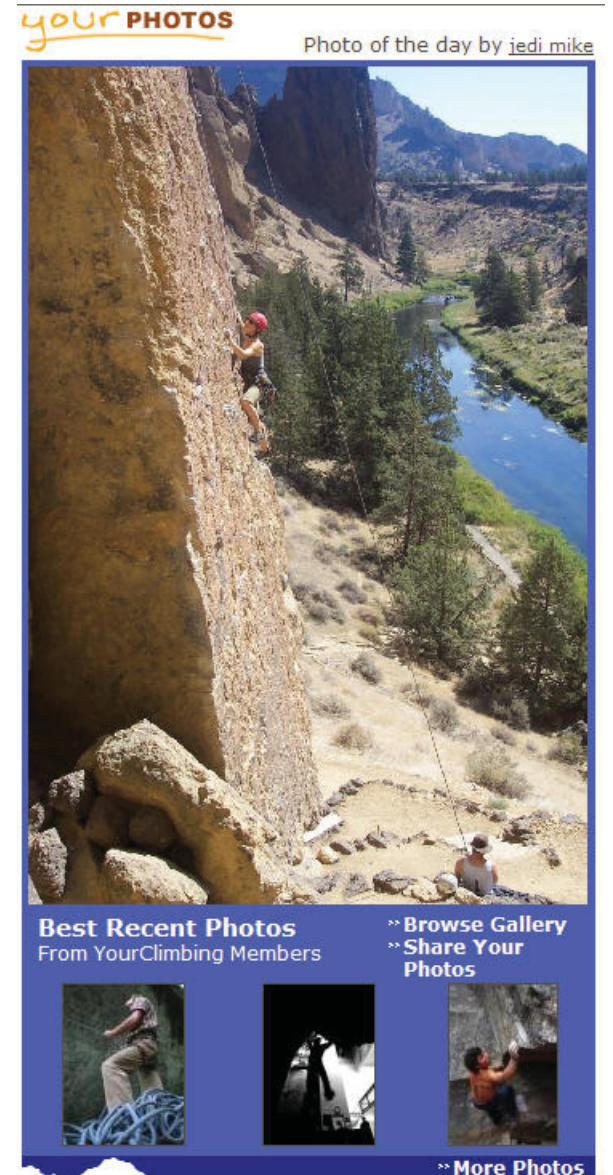


Tip No. 8: Showcase the best from your users

Returning to psychic rewards, a great way to encourage participation and contributions on your website is to reward users with site "fame." If you accept photos from your users, feature the best ones on the homepage. Highlight the highest quality user contributions so that people feel excited about being selected. Being identified from among your online peers and being put on display for being good can be reward enough for many people.

We consistently see that on our sites like YourClimbing.com. Users notice when we promote them to featured status on the site's homepage, and comment on it when friends' contributions make the cut.

Having your photo show up on the "front page" of YourClimbing.com is an honor



your PHOTOS Photo of the day by [jedi mike](#)

Best Recent Photos
From YourClimbing Members

[Browse Gallery](#)
[Share Your Photos](#)

[More Photos](#)



Tips for increasing user engagement on your website

A good newsletter feature is to list the top users by points, in a leaderboard chart



Tip No. 9: Produce a newsletter featuring the best from users

Another nice way to show users that what they contribute to your website is important is to produce a newsletter for them, and highlight their best stuff.

Here's an example from MyColts.net:

<http://view.email.colts.com/?j=fe6015727c650c7f7d14&m=ff001671756202&ls=fde311747c6d037b7010727c>

And here's on from the Enthusiast Group's YourMTB.com:

http://www.yourmtb.com/blog/the_weekly_ride_59

A good newsletter feature is to list the top users by points, in a leaderboard chart.

The e-mail newsletters serve to remind users about the website in case they haven't visited lately, as well as remind them that you want them to participate and contribute. (They'll want to be included in next week's newsletter.)

MyColts News

Colts keep winning and MyColts keeps growing

Over 12,000 Colts fans from around the world are now registered and active in the mycolts.net community. Thanks again to everyone for your passion and your participation. Here's a quick look at what Colts fans are doing inside mycolts.net.

Colts fan visits [Zack Legend](#) in the "bean" lot, and uses Webcam to tell about it...

You gotta hand it to [Jeffro1947](#). At 60 years old he's still got game! Check out his profile page and enjoy his down-to-earth video recap of his experience at the Broncos game, and more!

And the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Jeffro1947's daughter, [BlondeCam](#), has moved up to #10 on the Colts Cred leaderboard. That's one happy, Colts luvin family!!



More tips ... from YOU!

This paper doesn't have all the answers, but perhaps you do ... Won't you share your ideas?

Join our Facebook discussion to add your tips to this white paper

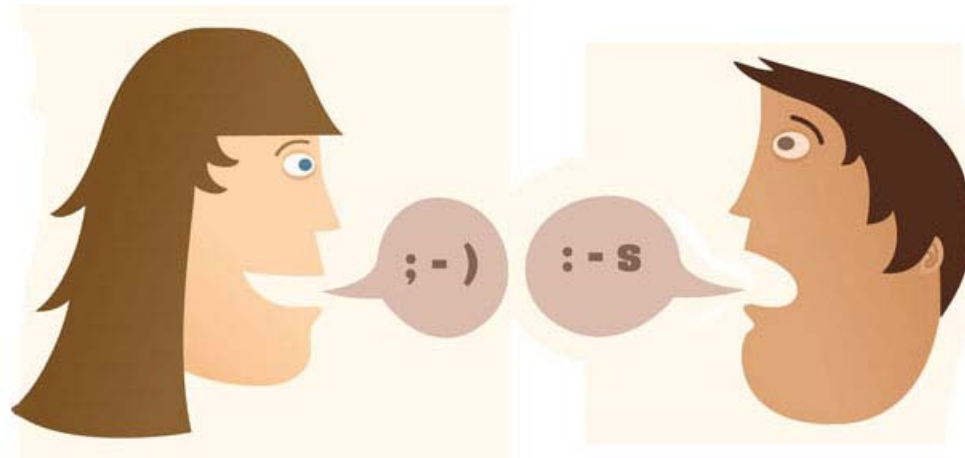
The ideas presented in this paper will get you started on the road to greater and more meaningful website user engagement. But we bet that YOU have additional ideas for altering the 90-9-1 rule for the better.

We've created a discussion area for our white papers on Facebook, and we'd love to have you stop by and share what you think. Add your suggestions about increasing user engagement and participation to our list.

(Yes, you do need to create a Facebook account -- which is free -- if you haven't already.)

Join in at the web address below:

<http://www.enthusiastgroup.com/userengagement>





Help me!

If you're considering a social media or social networking strategy -- or just want to learn more about the information presented in this white paper -- please feel free to contact us at the Enthusiast Group. The company provides a social media/marketing online publishing platform, called E++, that combines powerful website technology with online community management and social media and marketing consulting services. Let the Enthusiast Group devise a social media and/or marketing program for your company.

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Steve Outing is an online-media pioneer, an expert in grassroots media, and longtime journalist. Currently publisher and founder of the Enthusiast Group, he previously was senior editor at the [Poynter Institute for Media Studies](#), and has written an interactive-media column for [Editor & Publisher Online](#) since 1995.

