



Research communities: how to get better engagement from your members

Research communities offer an innovative and effective way to conduct agile qualitative research both on and offline. You can uncover game-changing insight, but ultimately they are only as good as the participants. That's not just about who those members are, but how engaged they remain during the life of the community.

So what can you do to keep the members of your research communities engaged and motivated to stay active? Our extensive experience working with communities for insight and innovation, on behalf of a variety of clients, has shown us the value of employing the following strategies during the four major stages of the process.

Stage 1: Recruitment

In real life, there are both good communities and bad communities. It's not enough just to establish a community – it has to be one that people truly want to be a part of, and it has to grow and develop over time with a clear strategy in place to achieve. That's why the actual management of the community is key to the continued participation of its members.

A big part of managing research communities is actually being a part of them, so it's good to build relationships, with members and clients alike. That can initially start with something as simple as facilitating introductions with members. Then, as the community gets off the ground, you should progress to offering praise and recognition to those who are performing well. This helps members to feel that their presence and contributions are valued, further solidifying their engagement in the research community.

Develop a voice in the community, one that inspires trust and promotes openness and social sharing. You want to make members feel comfortable, so they are willing to share their honest thoughts, moments and opinions with ease. Remember that these are human beings that you're communicating with, not just respondents, so treat them like real people with real lives. Also, give them an opportunity to see you the same way! You want to speak their language, so that they can relate to you.

You should also try to maintain a good level of energy, which can be infectious and help keep the members that you are interacting with interested and engaged in their activities.

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Stage 1: Recruitment – continued

Behind the scenes, you should be regularly reviewing your communications and the responses you gather to see if you can make any improvements. Consider your writing style and calls-to-action. You should always be asking yourself: *Is this motivating? Would I complete this? Would it make sense to someone from a different walk of life?*

Make sure that your communication is well-organised and that it is regular. When it isn't regular, that's when you risk losing members focus and attention, and they may start to feel distant or disinterested in the research community.

Of course, regardless of your efforts, there will always be members who disengage and you need to be on the lookout for these people.

Try to re-engage them and encourage them to become active again. If they continue to be unresponsive, then you need to be prepared to quickly and efficiently remove and replace them with new members.

You can also make managing your research communities easier by providing helpful resources to members. For instance, consider creating video testimonials from clients, members, or yourselves to help get them on board and to increase engagement. Sharing a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page about the community can also be of enormous help to members. It will save you time in the long run as it will answer their questions in advance, leaving you more time to tend to other aspects of the community and the engagement of its members.



Stage 2: Planning your community and activities

The next trick to ensuring engagement from the members of your research community is to design an environment (and activities) that will make them want to become an active part of the community. Start the planning process by reviewing levels of participation in previous research communities to see what worked well and what didn't. That feedback can help point you in the right direction as you carefully consider activities and topics for a new community. Bear in mind that your approach to planning should always be iterative, not prescriptive, and give you room to adapt.

Keeping in mind the aims and objectives of the research community, design activities and discussions that will connect with members on a personal level as well as research topics.

Developing that personal connection is a critical aspect of member engagement. It is also important to keep the community activities and discussions varied – by appealing to members imagination with different, interesting tasks. Don't present activities for no reason, and remember to consider how your plans for the research community meet your overall objectives against the brief.

From the outset, you should emphasise that the community is meant to be a structured, collaborative experience. Share the purpose and intent with members so they are aware of the aims, objectives and tasks from the start. This will also help members be more prepared about what is expected from them from the start and have a vested interest in it. Consider using an 'About the team' page to introduce everyone involved in the research and be absolutely certain to allow time for on-boarding. In every way you can, you want to break down barriers to participation so that it is always as easy as possible for members to be involved.



Stage 3: Creating tasks

When you begin creating tasks for your research communities, don't be afraid to try out brand new tasks and formats that you haven't tried before, if you think they're likely to appeal to the members and deliver fresh insight. Keep it fun and creative, and think of inspiring activity titles that will intrigue community members.

Make it easy for the participants by providing clear, concise instruction, so you never introduce barriers to engagement. For example, if video is becoming too complex, provide them with an alternative using pictures or text. Also be sure to write an activity plan to keep track of the tasks that you have in mind.

Start with light-touch tasks and build as you go along. As members become more embedded within the community, you can make the tasks more involved, but do remember not to overload participants. Ideally, the tasks should feel more like fun than work. However, you will often need to create extrinsic incentives to motivate members – cash incentives plus prize draws and bonus prizes work particularly well at promoting engagement.





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