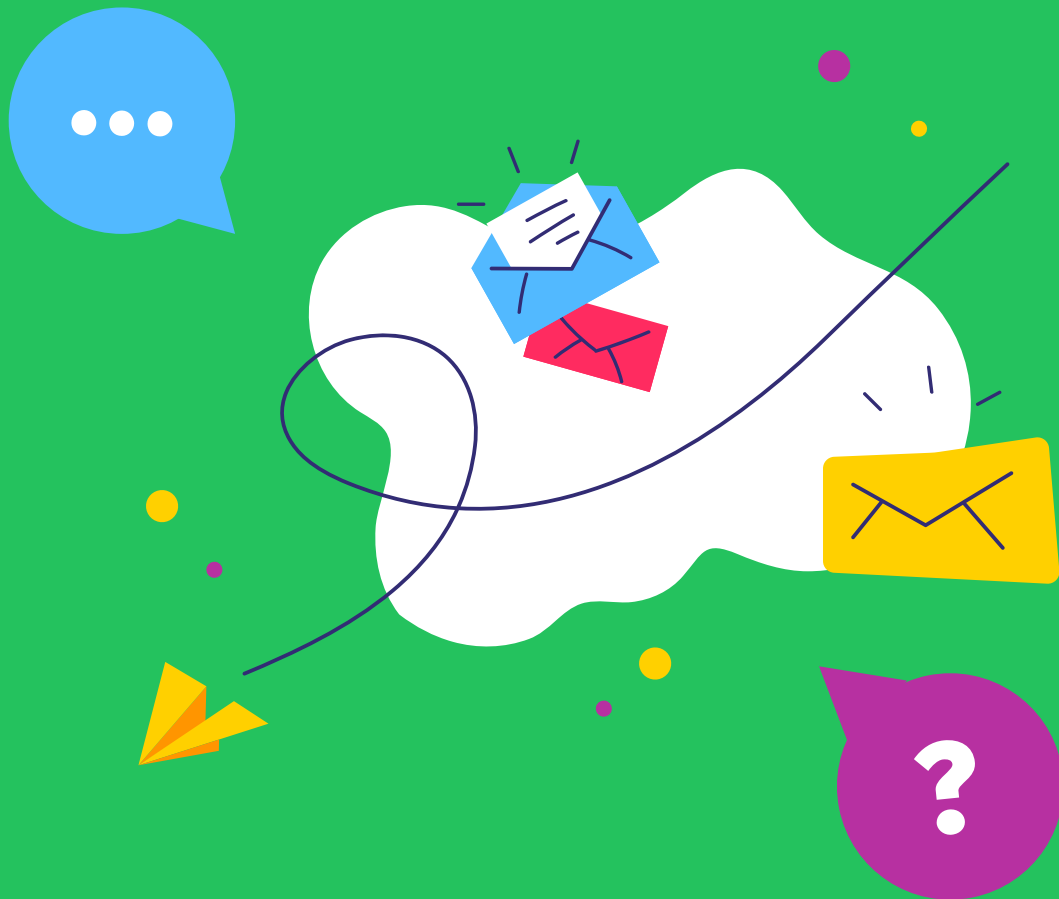


The Community Platform Comparison Guide



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This guide is your complete and total resource for selecting community software. Whether you're actively searching for the best community platform to fit your needs or still considering whether a customer community is a logical strategy for your brand - you'll find all the guidance you need to make your next step right here.

You've likely already come across one or two successful online customer communities. Today, online communities powered by customers, product users, enthusiasts and brand advocates play a hugely important role in how we find and gather information. Think of the last time you had a question about your mobile phone contract or a problem with one of your electronic devices. Chances are, you hopped on to Google and it led you straight to an online customer community, where other folks just like you were already discussing the topic and helping each other out. This is the power of communities for brands. The ability for companies to provide a space in which their customers can get their questions answered and their problems solved - at a fraction of the service cost of traditional call centers.

How to choose the right platform?

Perhaps you've already come to the conclusion that implementing an online community makes sense for your business. Great! But before you dive in and potentially lose your footing, it's first vital to understand what makes a good community thrive. How should you approach building your first community? What do you expect it to bring to your business? And what software should you buy? There are a whole lot of options out there, each offering different features, use cases, functionality and integrations. Choosing the right one for your company can be a real challenge.

Don't panic!

This is exactly why we've created the Community Platform Selection Guide - to help you through the process of determining the right strategy and finding the best-fit vendor for your needs. It covers everything community-related to help you truly scale your customer service through community success. We cover the essential steps you need to take before you even start the vendor selection process, touch on the evolution of online communities over the past couple of decades, give you some practical top tips for building an effective community, and help you with a comprehensive feature comparison to use during your vendor selection process - that covers both necessary features and instrumental services.

What is a customer community?

"An online community is an interactive group of people joined together by a common interest. It's also one of the most powerful tools a marketer can deploy for customer retention, word of mouth, and customer insight."

FORRESTER

What's in this guide?

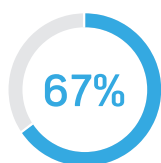
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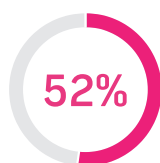
What are the benefits of having a community?

So, you're considering implementing a customer community. That's great news! There are numerous reasons for brands to adopt a community: some leverage their community to conduct customer research and others use theirs for marketing and engagement. By far the strongest use case, though, for customer communities is as a support channel – with the ultimate goal of increasing customer satisfaction and retention.

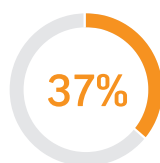
Customers quickly become impatient with poor service, so customer service leaders must strive to deliver effortless or pain-free support. They also need to streamline the process so it's possible to deliver the right, complete, and contextual answer to a customer's questions. What makes communities so effective is that they infuse 'real' conversations into digital brand experiences. The internet offers boundless opportunities to connect with your customers – and communities let brands harness these opportunities within a single platform



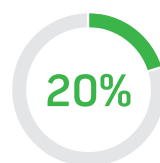
customer service /
retention



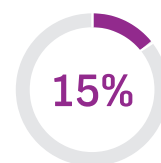
gather ideas around
products & services



to support brand
champions



replace or supplement
events



generate new revenue or
leads

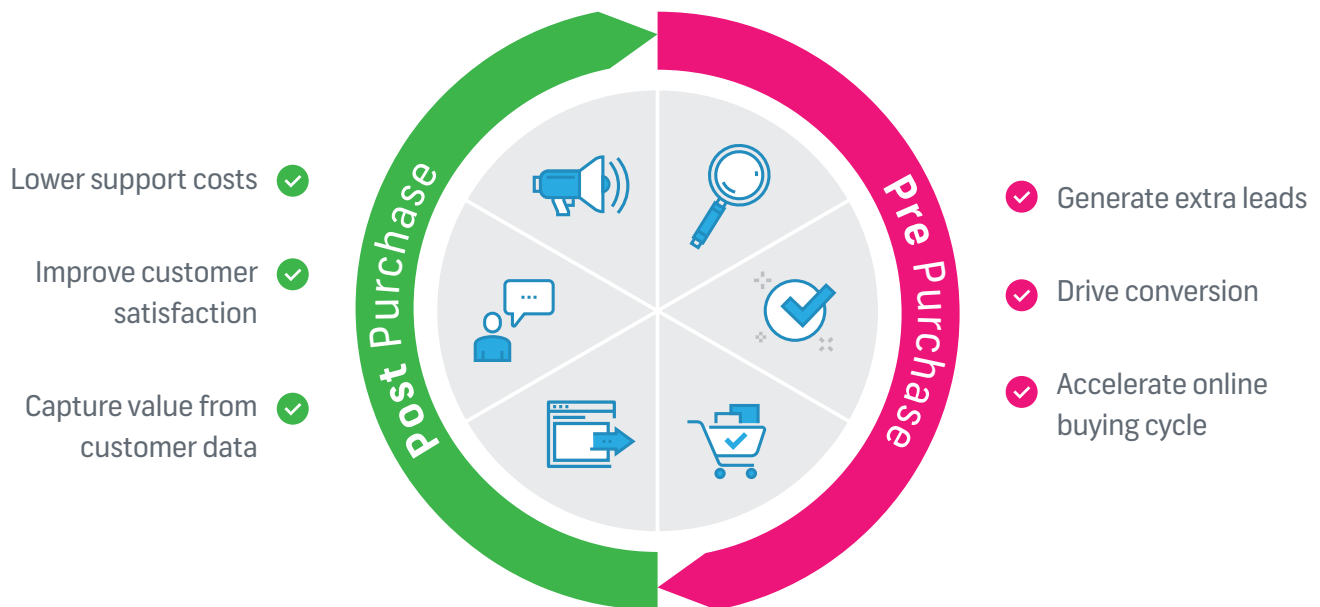
Source: CMX / Leader Networks, Keys to Community Readiness & Growth, 2016



Communities make it easy for your customers to share information, best practices, and how-to tips with each other, as well as get advice without needing to interact with your agents. On average, 30 people are indirectly helped with any given community answer.

Positive impact at all stages of the customer journey

Customer communities have a role to play at all stages of the customer lifecycle. In the pre-sales phase, for example, having a community Q&A can address prospects' questions and help them make a more informed decision - and purchase! - faster. In the post-purchase phase, communities help you to drive down service costs and improve customer satisfaction by providing customers with a high-quality self-service channel.



Some extra traffic? Yes, please!

So, not only do communities offer authentic peer-to-peer recommendations and advice, they also help drive potential buyers from Google to your product pages. Research has shown that well integrated customer communities that embed their content across an entire site or app, rather than remaining siloed, help businesses generate extra leads, drive higher conversion and accelerate the online buying cycle.

How to set up a Sonos speaker with the Sonos Controller app for iPhone and iPad

1. Launch the Sonos Controller app from your Home screen.
2. Tap on ** Set up a new Sonos system**.
3. Tap on Next on the welcome screen. ...
4. Tap on Standard Setup. ...
5. Tap Next on the Standard Setup screen. ...
6. Tap Next on the Connect To Power screen.

More items...

[How to set up and use Sonos Controller on iPhone and iPad](https://en.community.sonos.com/how-set-and-use-sonos-controller-app-iphone-and-ipad)
<https://en.community.sonos.com/how-set-and-use-sonos-controller-app-iphone-and-ipad>



Self-service content from a community directly highlighted in Google search results

Convinced? You should be!

Now that we're clear on the multitude of business value that implementing a customer community can bring, let's move on to review what you need to consider before you launch your own.

What to consider before you start a community

So, you're pretty certain that implementing a customer community is the right move for your business. It's going to accelerate your online buying cycle, optimize your support costs and increase your customer satisfaction and retention. However, before we jump in, there are a few other elements to consider and plan well before you go ahead and get started.

1. Get clear on your community concept & objective

It's critical to define the business case for your community before launching an implementation plan or even selecting the platform you'll use. Not only will this secure buy-in and support from your executive board or leadership team, but defining the community's strategic function will guide your planning and rollout agenda - making sure you maximize the return on your investment from the first day your new community goes live.

So get to work on creating the right community concept. Namely: what should your community accomplish for your users? You will likely opt to make support its primary function, but if you also have plans to utilize the community for product ideation, you need to bear this in mind during the vendor selection process. Your desired community concept will determine whether your community can function as a standalone silo - separate from the rest of your website and digital presence - or whether you're better served by a modern community solution that integrates across your entire website, app and external channels, so your users can engage wherever they may be.

PRO TIP: Start off with a single objective, then expand. Communities that are intended to serve many purposes - sales, service, and product ideation all in one - all too often fail. Too many stakeholders with conflicting objectives spell disaster for a community. Start small, achieve success, and only then expand your community objectives.

2. What functionality do you need to meet your objective?

As we touched on briefly above, customer communities can be extremely valuable across a variety of applications - self-service customer support, product ideation and development, as well as marketing and branding activities. What's important to note, though, is that the intended use case for your customer community will significantly affect the features you need and the type of platform or solution that suits you best.

In most cases, the strongest business case to be made for implementing a customer community is to enable to reduction of service or support center costs and allow customers to get their questions answered quickly, easily and without leaving their existing digital homeland. With this in mind, determine what features you'll need in your community platform in order to achieve your desired community concept and objective. Discussion forums, knowledge bases, gamification...? The possibilities are (almost) endless!

PRO TIP: Don't forget to map out how you'll measure success at this stage! Will you report on the number of calls your online community has deflected from the call center? Will you track the purchase behavior of community members against non-members to prove its impact on customer retention and share-of-wallet? Make sure your chosen platform has the reporting power to tell you what you need to know! Get clear on your metrics now, so you can build and launch a community that will meet your goals.

3. Custom build or configurable SaaS?

Take some time at this stage to decide whether you're willing to invest a large amount into IT resources and ongoing development costs, with a custom-built platform, or if a flexible, configurable and future-proof SaaS solution better fits your needs. If you decide to custom-build your community platform, you'll enjoy absolute flexibility and control over your functionality and features - but your initial investment will be much higher, and another downside is that you'll fall behind in terms of technological features unless you're willing to invest significant resources into a dedicated development team. On the flip side, SaaS provides you with a future-proof solution - continuous new front end features and improved UX - and no additional budget or resource required.

4. Hey, that's mine!

At this stage, you can start to confirm roles and responsibilities - such as which department(s) will handle the community implementation process, and ultimately who will own the community? How will it be managed on a day-to-day basis? Have you already allocated resources internally to take care of the key community roles, such as community managers, moderators and channel managers? Align internally and answer these questions to ensure the community rollout goes smoothly and you are set up for future success.

5. Ready, set ...

Whilst you won't finalize your launch plan until you've selected a vendor and planned the implementation, it's still essential to give some forethought to how best to launch it with a bang. Now is a good time to involve key community stakeholders. A good launch plan would typically involve members of your company's support, marketing, IT, and management teams. Take the time now to align these departments on messaging so that you can maximize traffic to your new community and get a head start with members. Something to take into consideration during vendor selection is the level of support each of your potential suppliers offer at this stage. Will you enjoy a working in a partnership that's committed to your successful community launch and onward growth, or will you be left to fend for yourselves?



What does your business need?

The concept of online communities has been around for a long time. These digital destinations originated as static forums and message boards (who remembers Usenet newsgroups?!) and over time have evolved – along with our digital capabilities – into interactive, embedded, gamified and instant solutions for connecting peers wherever they happen to be online.

From forum to standalone community to a fully integrated online community solution - the range of options available is broad, and it's now up to you to decide which type of community will serve you best. We've put together a handy chart to help you understand just how online communities have evolved over time.

Forums / message boards 1990s - 2005	Standalone communities 2005 - 2015	Integrated communities 2015 - today
✓ Structuring info in categories ✓ Creating topics ✓ Responding to topics ✓ Engagement in a separate community destination	✓ Structuring info in categories ✓ Creating topics ✓ Responding to topics ✓ Engagement in a separate community destination ✓ Gamification (badges, ranks) ✓ Highlight best answers ("marked as answer") ✓ Direct messages between users	✓ Structuring info in categories ✓ Creating topics ✓ Responding to topics ✓ Engagement in a separate community destination ✓ Gamification (badges, ranks) ✓ Highlight best answers ("marked as answer") ✓ Direct messages between users ✓ Community engagement on web pages and in apps ✓ Content wherever your user is

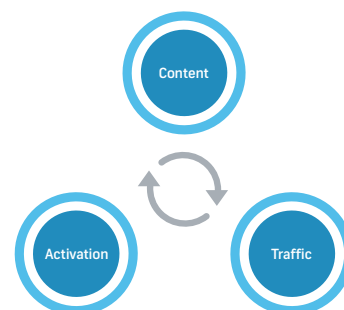


Top tips for a successful community

Successful communities immediately begin producing results. But in order to do this, it's vital that three key elements come together: content, activation, and traffic.

The content-activation-traffic flywheel in customer communities is what drives the long-term value of your community. Regardless of its underlying goals, it's important to look at your community as an entity that requires some serious care and effort to flourish. With the right strategies in place, you'll ensure that the value your community brings to your business continues to increase as time goes by.

Let's take a look at the three elements that make up the flywheel so you can get a feel for what to include in your implementation and growth plan:



Content

Content is essentially what's posted to the community. Early on in a community's life cycle, moderators should be prepared to create initial content, seed discussions and respond to customer posts, when appropriate. What's important is demonstrating that you're actively involved and encouraging users to participate in conversations. Over time, user-generated content will begin to take center stage and propel your community forward.

PRO TIP: Find a vendor who offers smart search functionality and an intuitive user interface on their platform. The faster and easier the user experience within your community, the higher your engagement and activity rates will be. So make sure that valuable user-generated content is easy to find!

Activation

Activation addresses how you get people active on the community after their first visit. What compels them to create an account and come back? Let's face it, communities are all about human interaction, so the activation element is analogous to building a relationship. As with any relationship, the more you invest, the more you get back. So make sure to give people a warm welcome and motivate them to participate!

PRO TIP: Gamification, like awarding users badges or allowing them to 'climb the ranks' based on their community behavior is a tried and true way to activate your customers and prompt engagement. It's vital to find a community platform that offers strong gamification features.

Traffic

Traffic refers to the flow of visitors to your community from outside sources. Of course, the content you create will be a key driver of traffic to your community. The easier it is for Google to index your community content, the more traffic you'll get. We've found that content in established communities drives millions of relevant impressions each month on search engines, with up to 4x higher click through rates than paid search. That's a serious tool for your digital marketing toolbox!

PRO TIP: Choose a platform that will ensure your content is SEO optimized and well indexed by Google. To really create standout impact and engagement, consider using an integrated community rather than a standalone destination. This will infuse your community content into your existing digital channels - for example, using embeddable widgets across all pages of your website or app so users can access relevant content wherever they are in their user journey.

Community platforms feature evaluation

So, you've clarified your objectives and now have a good understanding of what you're looking for in terms of a platform. Use this handy overview to decide which features you do and don't need, and evaluate the vendors you're considering against it.

Once you're happy with the product features, you'll need to consider the services and customer success approach offered by the vendor, too, but we'll cover that in the following section.

Email sales@insided.com to get access to the inSided Community Platform RFP template.

Feature index

- [General community, security & deployment features](#)
- [User management](#)
- [Community integration & SEO](#)
- [Content types](#)
- [Moderation & analysis](#)
- [Modification & branding](#)
- [Gamification](#)

General community, security & deployment features

Your general community features cover the basic functionality of what you need your community to do for you. Basic communication, security and notification functionality - which all vendors should be able to provide.

General community features

Set community access	Ability to make the community accessible only to logged in visitors or all visitors
Flexible community structure	Ability for moderators to define the community structure by creating and arranging categories and category groups
Basic community functionality	Visitors can vote / like and respond to topics
Private messages	Ability for users to send a private message to another user or moderator
Subscription / messaging	Ability to subscribe to a topic or category in order to receive updates on new replies
Live search	Increase the chance of finding the right content / answer by suggesting content when using the search functionality
Rich file types	Ability to upload and attach files in .pdf .zip, .xml, .txt, .csv, .doc/docx, .xls/xlsx, .ppt/pptx, .png, .jpg to community content

Globalization

Multi language	Possibility to support clients in their own language
Local compliance	Ability to disable the uploading of media to be compliant with local law
Global moderation	Ability for moderators and community managers to collaborate intercontinentally

Spam filter

Basic spam detection	Ability to filter spam based on community sentiment/vocabulary
Advanced spam detection	Availability of self learning spam detection based on machine learning and natural language processing
Spam correction	Ability to correct false positives and negatives
Multi-language support	Ability to support spam detection in all languages which are supported by the community platform

Deployment model

Deployment model	Platform is deployed in the cloud and provided as a service and automatically scales up on peak traffic
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Data security

Comply with key standards	Company is officially certified for the ISO/IEC 27001:2013 standard on information security management. Hosting provider is officially certified for the ISO/IEC 27001:2013 standard on information security management.
Regular audits	Company is audited yearly on the performance and reliability of the Information Security Management System by an external and objective IIOC member inspection firm.

Content types

When you're selecting a community platform vendor, ensure you won't be limited when it comes to the different types of content you and your users are able to create and host. Remember, different people learn and absorb different information in different ways, so make sure your platform is going to support rich, user-generated content.

Questions and answers

Create questions and answers	Users can create questions and answer these
Organize questions	Ability for a user to link a question to a category
Notification	Ability to receive email notifications on new questions or replies
Mark as answer	Ability to mark a reply as the answer by the user who posted the question or by the moderator
FAQ creation	Ability to create FAQs based on popularity of a question

Discussion forum

Create discussions	Users can start a discussion
Organize discussion in categories	Ability for a user to link a discussion to a category
Notification	Ability to receive email notifications on new reactions
Highlight discussions	Ability to highlight discussions by making it sticky on a category page

Articles / blog

Create blog posts	Moderators can create articles and blogs
Comment on posts	Ability to leave comments on a blog/article
Social sharing	Ability to share a blog/article on social media, based on open graph data

Ideas

Ask for ideas	Ability to proactively ask for ideas on different community pages
Vote on ideas	Ability for community users to vote on ideas
Indicate idea status	Ability to set custom labels for ideas indicating the status of an idea
Show top ideas	Ability to show top ideas on different community pages

User management

Single sign-on is now a hygiene factor for registration-based platforms, and users expect a smooth and easy to use experience from start to finish. Keep an eye on the user management functionality your potential vendors offer and make sure you won't be offering a sub-par community experience.

Registration and authentication

Register and login	Ability to register and login from within the community application or using SSO
Registration token	Ability to provide a registration token for registrations to a private community
Support SSO standards	Ability to use SAML2.0, OAuth2, and OpenID standards for SSO authentication
Support social login	Ability to use Facebook and LinkedIn for SSO authentication
Link with CRM	Ability to automatically register on the forum using CRM or SSO. Ability to connect with a CRM application during login and registration.

User profile and permissioning

Avatar	Ability to use an avatar / profile picture for users in the platform
My environment	Ability to extend community profile into the my environment
include / exclude	Ability to limit participation for specific user groups
Follow	Users can follow and unfollow other users
Personalization	Personalize content streams and pages based on user role

Moderation & analysis

Competent moderation is the lifeblood of a effective community, so make sure you're setting your staff up for success with a platform that gives them the management tools they need - moderation views, clear workflows and the analytics to review what's working in the community and what needs to change.

Moderation workflow / curation

Flexible view of topics	The moderator tool has a default view that shows all topics and can select from this: all unanswered topics, all reported, all new etc
Moderator assignment	Show moderators who are assigned to a topic
Workflow	Ability to moderate and collaborate with an unlimited amount of agents. Ability to collaborate with other agents by queuing topics on urgency, SLA, expertise

Content analysis

Analyse posts and other content	Ability to report on sentiment analysis and content insights for the benefit of other departments like Marketing, Product Development, Customer Service, etc.
Reporting	Ability to provide stakeholders data reports based on tagged/annotated community content

Reports and analytics

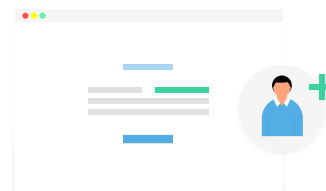
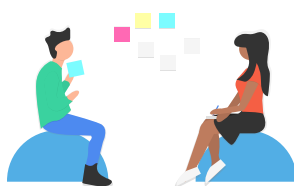
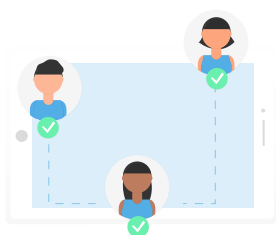
Key stats and trends	Availability to display a visual analytics dashboard in the community management tool, with charts and trend lines, on key statistics and trends: topics, comments, views, users, activity
In-depth reporting	Detailed reporting, eg on answered / unanswered questions
Integrate with 3rd party reporting	Ability to integrate Google Analytics as an external analytics tool to get an end-to-end view of community impact

Gamification

Gamification is a vital element of strong and dynamic customer communities. In order to create and maintain a thriving space, community managers must find ways to incite user engagement. Gamification triggers this engagement by creating moments of user gratification which hook community members to keep coming back for more. Features such as user badges, interactive polls and displaying user ranks and roles are perfect for this.

Gamification

Create ranks and roles	Ability for a moderator to create/manage a rank / role through an administration console - without programming
Automatic ranking	Ability to automatically give a user a rank / role / badge based on community activity
Custom icons and badges	Ability to define an icon for a rank that will be displayed on the users avatar
Notification	Ability to send a notification when a user receives a rank / badge / role
Display ranks and badges	Ability to show the last earned badge in a user's avatar



Community integration & SEO

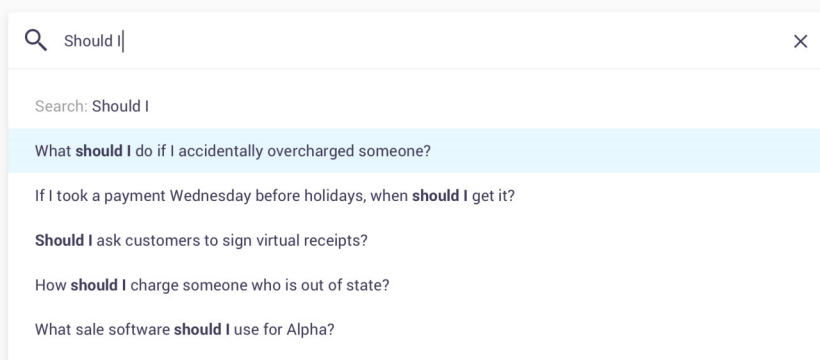
Your customer community can become a serious traffic driver for your brand. Strong search engine optimization (SEO) on community content combined with integrating your community content across your other existing digital channels will help you to increase traffic to your community. Effective SEO on your content will ensure you rank strongly for brand and product related keywords on Google. Integrated community content will provide a seamless user experience and meets customers right where they are. Make sure you select a platform that incorporates these capabilities.

Integration in channels

Embeddable widgets	Integrate community content and engagement in company website, without programming
Customization	Customize the appearance and content of the embeddables
Social channels	Ability to show community content on other digital channels, pages or blogs.
REST API and webhooks	Integrate community content and statistics in websites and apps and get updated proactively about events, members and content

Organic search optimization

Ensure high ranking in Google	Highly effective community ranking and content recognition, interpretation and adaptation by Google. Integrate with Google Search Console / Google Webmaster Tools for optimal web crawling results and data analysis. Support Open Graph metadata for community pages to provide automated crawling context to Facebook, LinkedIn, Google and Microsoft
Optimize pages for search	Optimized header and page structure semantics within community templates for optimal page crawling and ranking results
(Sub)domain support	Ability to support custom (sub)domains within the client to host entire platform on

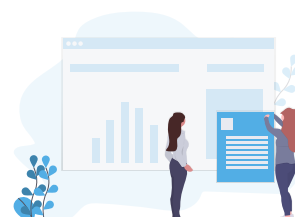
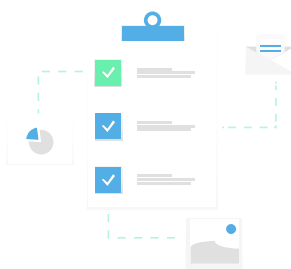


Modification & branding

While you don't want to pay through the nose for an entirely custom-built community platform, you still need to have some decent control over the look and feel of your community and make sure it sits in line with your brand guidelines. After all, this should be a seamless user experience for your customers, so take the time when assessing vendors to pick a platform that gives you the flexibility and modification you need - no developers required.

Community branding

Community branding	Easily change community branding (colors, button style, images, icons) from console, without any programming needed
Change layout	Change layout of home page and category pages from console without programming



Service offerings: is it a partnership for success?

A community platform is just one click away. Community success is not. A vital element when it comes to select the right community platform vendor for your business is ensuring that they take the right customer success approach and are committed to working with you not just to launch your community but to continue fueling its growth so you can exceed your business goals.

Here are four areas to focus on when considering the success services your potential vendors offer.

Getting your community started

Ideally, your vendor will support you with creating relevant, traffic-driving content and creating a content calendar optimized for fast growth. They'll be there to boost your starting traffic by integrating your community content across your entire digital presence like your webshop, app, social media and existing website. The perfect vendor will also lead you every step of the way to activating your first users and bringing them on board to become brand advocates.

- ✓ Initial content
- ✓ Starting traffic
- ✓ User & advocate development

Ensure community health and continuous growth

Once your community is up and running, that doesn't mean you want to be left high and dry. Look for a vendor who will continue to support you to make the right decisions - they may do this by performing community health checks (analyzing your community stats against industry benchmarks) as well as giving you clear ideas for growth and concrete actionable next-steps you can take to bring your community to the next level.

- ✓ Health checks
- ✓ Clear next steps
- ✓ Practical advice

Goal setting and benchmarking

Any community platform provider worth their salt will have a wealth of experience and insights about what makes a successful community. They should be willing to share their expertise with you and collaborate with your team to set ambitious yet realistic goals that are guided by their own community performance benchmarks. They should also be a proactive partner when it comes to monitoring and reviewing your community performance so that you can always report back to your management team a strong business case for the community.

- ✓ Clear strategies & goals
- ✓ Close ROI tracking
- ✓ Peer benchmarking

Education and training: build a world-class community team

The best vendors aren't just creating a successful community for you - they are upskilling and empowering you to do the same for yourself. Look for suppliers who offer in-depth training sessions as well as on-demand help content like how-tos and tutorials. Additionally, make sure you are partnering with a supplier who can offer you a dedicated success manager and a single point of contact when it comes to challenges or growth opportunities around your community. The best of the best in community platform suppliers stay ahead of industry trends and keep their customers fully up-to-date with digital sessions, webinars, innovation sessions and inspiring customer events.

- ✓ Skills & knowledge training
- ✓ Dedicated advice & support
- ✓ Peer insights & trends

So ... what's all this going to cost?

Alas, a community platform does not come free of charge. Of course, costs will vary from vendor to vendor, dependent on features, functionality, service and support, and whether you want to host your solution yourself or license a SaaS product.

Do not be lured by seemingly lower monthly or annual costs. When assessing your chosen suppliers on investment, make sure to take the total cost of ownership, or 'TCO' into account. Hidden costs of on-premise solutions, like hardware and software costs (dedicated servers, backups, etc), ongoing maintenance fees, one-off installation fees, IT hand-over costs, project management costs, updates, and security testing can run you so far over your budget you'll give yourself sleepless nights.

Custom development will increase your costs significantly. If you decide to go for a SaaS platform, ensure that you can get the configuration you're looking for within quoted costs, and that you won't run into unexpected high fees for modifications later on during the build. And of course, you'll also need to work into your calculations that great moderation tools will significantly increase moderator productivity, and therefore reduce the budget you'll need to spend on community management headcount - perhaps an investment with strong ROI in the long-term.

To find out more about the different community platforms available and to compare service providers and pricing, we recommend visiting feverbee.com/communityplatforms/. FeverBee is the leading impartial resource for all things online communities.

About inSided

The Community Platform Selection Guide is brought to you by inSided, a provider of leading edge solutions that help your customers find better answers to their questions.

inSided is an advanced community platform provider that helps brands leverage the power of the crowd to provide relevant answers, give quality service and improve customer satisfaction. With 100+ successful communities implemented, inSided customers typically see a 15-25% reduction of support costs, a 10-15% increase in NPS scores and customer advocacy, and an 8% reduction in churn.

Some of our happy customers

