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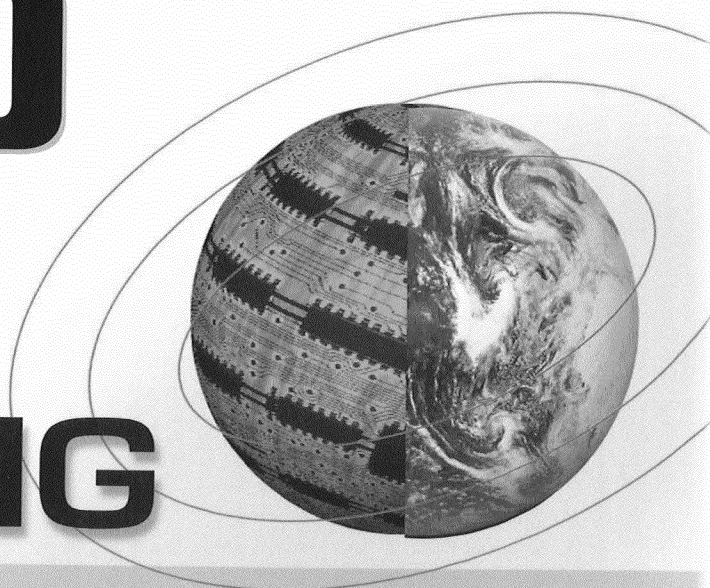
**internet**  
**WORLD™**

**Hosting Web Communities**



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# **internet WORLD™**



## **HOSTING WEB COMMUNITIES**

**Building Relationships, Increasing  
Customer Loyalty, and Maintaining  
a Competitive Edge**

**CLIFF FIGALLO**



# **HOSTING WEB COMMUNITIES:**

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, INCREASING CUSTOMER LOYALTY, AND MAINTAINING A COMPETITIVE EDGE**

*Cliff Figallo*

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*To Nancy and my kids who have inspired and endured my virtual life.*

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What Well Engaged adds to its product besides its design is extended consulting support. As Well Engaged describes its ongoing involvement with clients on its homepage:

*Without this expertise, your experience of community might be like going to a gardening store, purchasing a bunch of seeds and hoping that you'll have a successful garden. We are committed to your success, and we provide the training and guidance you'll need to have a thriving community, just like a good gardening store will become familiar with your own needs and coach you over the years on how to make a thriving garden.*

Another option unique to Well Engaged is its service bureau, which provides the technical hosting of the conferencing platform on machines supplied and maintained by Well Engaged technicians, operating through their own Net connections, and sparing the client the expense of installing and maintaining the hardware and software themselves. They claim that the total costs for using the Discussions interface in this way is less than the client would pay to install lower-priced software on its own site. The idea and the formula apparently sells to some very high-end customers.

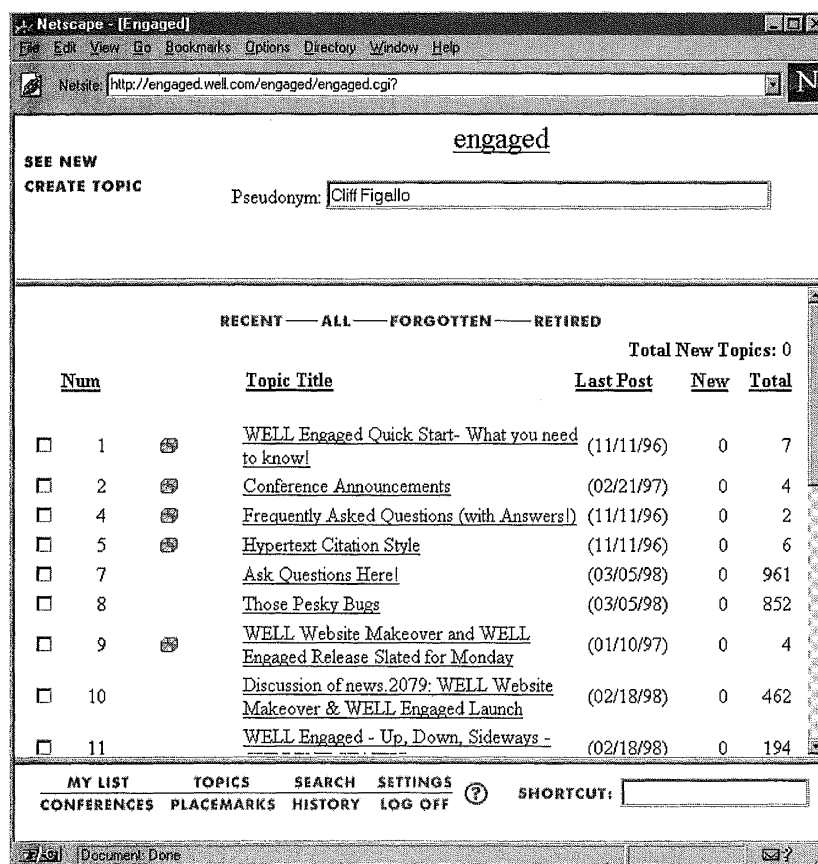
Discussions can be customized to match the look and feel of the rest of a client's Web site. It includes client-configurable profanity filters and registration routines. All of the major forms of banner advertising can be incorporated into the interface, and user traffic throughout the forum can be logged in detail. Spellchecking, moderated and private conferences, topic bookmarks, and searching are also part of the package.

By the time you read this, a new version of Discussions will be in release, but Figure 8.13 shows some of the topic control features of the current version that help hosts and users manage the volume of topics presented to them in a busy forum.

### **Caucus**

Screen Porch was founded in 1996 "to provide organizations with powerful, effective software that is flexible and extensible yet simple to use." In Caucus they have succeeded. In fact, the main collaborators behind Screen Porch, Charles Roth and the Metasystems Design Group, have been working together for years using the pre-Web version of Caucus to help organizations and teams

**Figure 8.13** The Well Engaged Discussions interface, working on the WELL. The little ice cubes designate *frozen* topics where no further responses can be added. *Retired* and *forgotten* topics disappear from the default topic view and must be asked for specifically by the user.



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work together online. Rather than aim at the mainstream commercially based market for cyber-conversation, they have chosen all along to serve the much more specialized needs of business, government, and educational groups who actually need solutions to increase productivity and communication within their working environments.

Caucus adds some twists to the linear discussion interface used by WebCrossing, Well Engaged, and Motet. Like these others, Caucus organizes its discussions by a hierarchy of conferences that contain *items* composed of lists of responses. When you visit a conference, it gives you a list of options from which to choose your view of the conversations. Figure 8.14 shows the drop-down menu of choices and you can see the flexibility offered by these choices. The form window adjacent to the menu allows the user to enter the parameter associated with the choice. For “items active since (date)” the date would be submitted. For “items created by (author)” the user name of a person would be entered.

What I most appreciate about Caucus is the elegance of its interface design. It offers many features that are useful to habitual users, but it manages to keep its screen looking uncluttered. It pays good attention to the needs for flow in its use as you can see in Figure 8.15. A user arriving at the response window can pass on responding and be taken to the next item on their itinerary, or the user can write a response, then choose to either post it and view it as part of the conversation or post it and go directly to the next item.

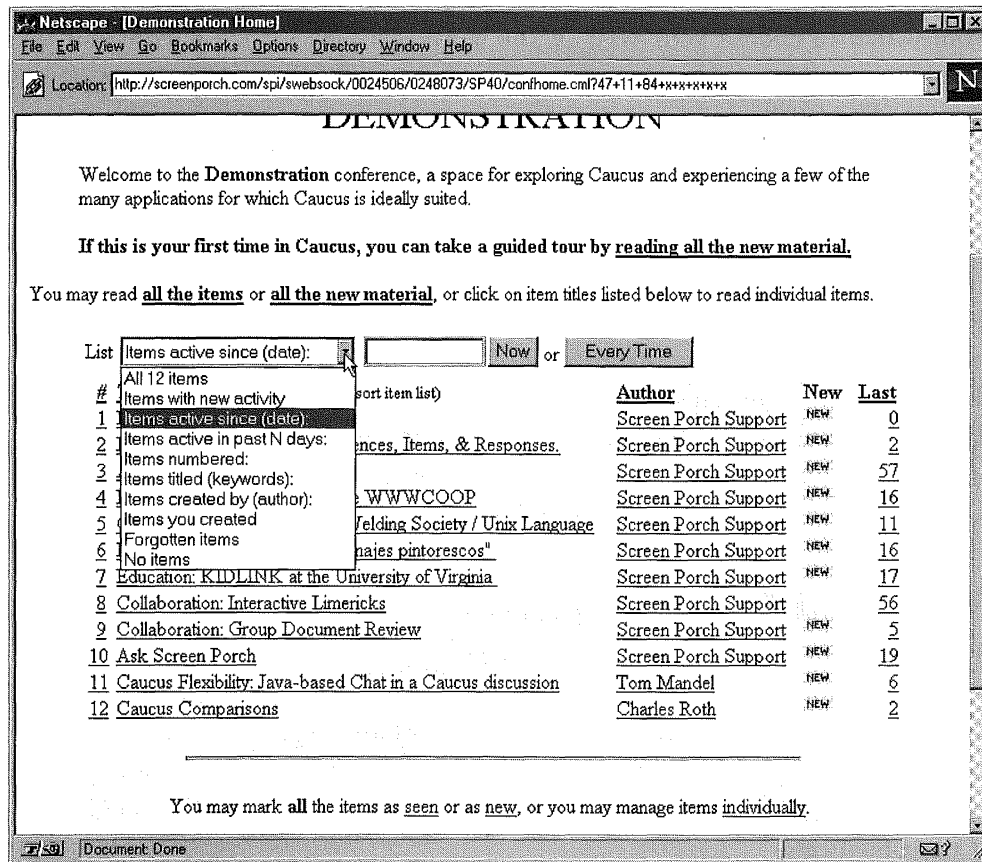
## Packaged Forum Services

Buying or licensing a forum software package is one way of establishing a place for your community to interact, but not everyone is ready or financially able to run their own server or spend thousands of dollars. What do you do if you're one of those people? You find a place that runs an asynchronous conversation environment and provides space for unrelated groups to use partitioned areas of their facilities.

This is a different arrangement from allowing members to host specific-interest communities within a large discussion environment like the WELL or Café Utne. On those systems, each subcommunity—a Parenting conference or a Digital Culture conference, for example—is recognized as part of an integrated social and business system. In the new commercial *custom forum* environments, there may be no gateway at all between the communities that establish themselves on the same server. What the communities share is the use of a common technical structure within which each community founder is



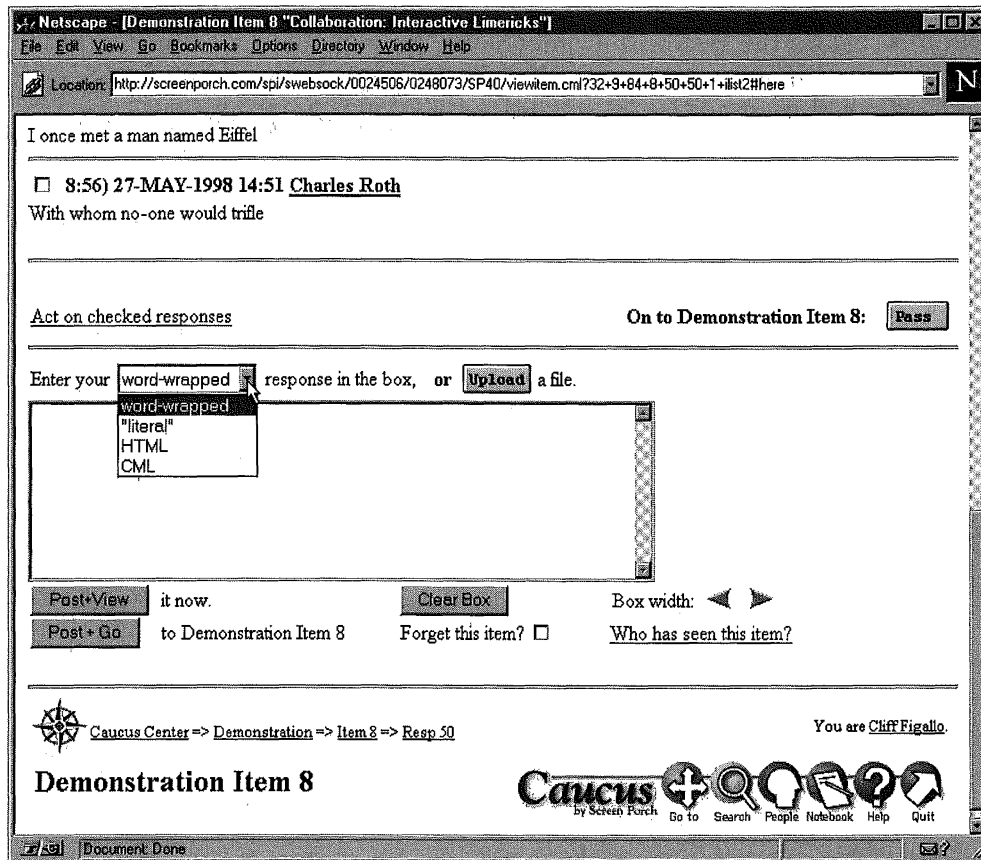
**Figure 8.14 Different users at different times have needs for different views of a collection of discussions. Caucus provides a wide selection of perspectives through its drop-down menu.**



able to customize her own discussion site and have access to a given amount of discussion space on a shared platform.

I referred earlier to the importance of providing templates that allow nontechnical users—who just may be natural community initiators—to create full-featured online community locales with minimal expense and business hassle. I pointed to GeoCities and The Mining Company as examples of

**Figure 8.15 Posting a response in Caucus, the user has four formatting options, the ability to easily upload a file to the response, and the choice of seeing the posted response before leaving or just moving on to the next discussion.**



prefab template providers. Now I will introduce two more examples who specifically emphasize the forum platforms they provide to groups and individuals, one under a payment arrangement and the other for free but with the understanding that the forum user's community will benefit the forum provider. With these descriptions I'm moving closer to the subject of Chapter