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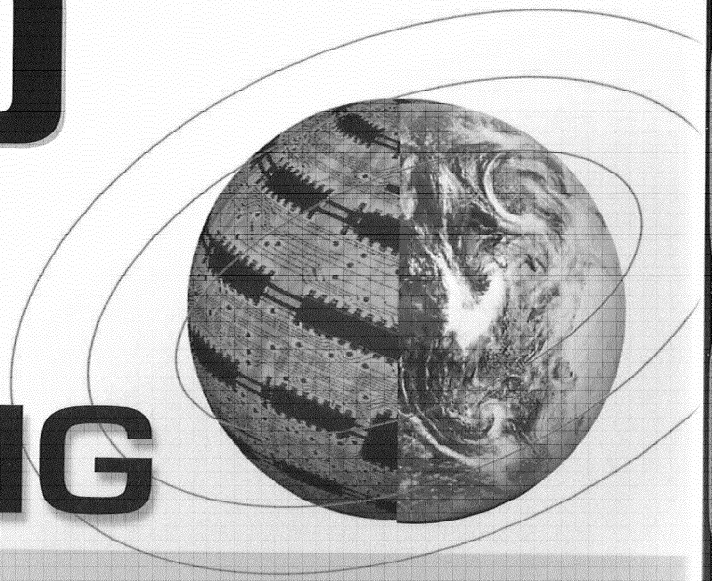

HOSTING WEB COMMUNITIES

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

CLIFF FIGALLO

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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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Appropriately, just about everything I've done in the way of community since 1971 has been collaborative and derivative, so there are many people to whom I owe thanks. They have provided the ideals, the examples, the philosophical underpinnings, the encouragement, and the technical magic that have kept me working as a communitarian for most of my adult life. They've helped me to realize the value of personal relationships to the definition of *community*, and they've demonstrated the practices that build and maintain them. Those who demonstrate the importance of such social anchors as trust and integrity are as much teachers as they are colleagues and companions, and I've been blessed with many such guides and mentors, whether they were aware of their roles or not.

I spent the early 1970s learning from a Zen cowboy named Stephen Gaskin. He taught a mixture of ancient religion, philosophy, and common sense with the Golden Rule at its core. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" was, he explained, the basic operating instruction for being human. Hundreds of people based out of an 1800-acre village in Tennessee practiced the rough-and-tumble daily realities of collective living using Stephen's analogies and anecdotes as our guides to just getting along intentionally with each other. My real-life community experiences have been great resources for dealing with people and groups on electronic platforms which are, like our experimental Tennessee enclave, shared environments. To Stephen and all my former housemates, crewmates, and fellow travelers on the spiritual journey that we called "the Farm," I extend the deepest appreciation.

As the 1970s ended I spent two years directing nutrition and potable water projects in Guatemala. Our team lived on the edge of a Cakchiquel Mayan village in the highlands. The people of Canton San Bartolo demonstrated to me the essence of village life and relationship—the most stripped-down practice of human community I'd ever been exposed to. Without the trappings of modern civilization, wealth, and media, they lived amidst a family-like bond of trust that went back for generations. The contrast of that trust with the level of deadly treachery that was poisoning their country as a civil war broke out made the indigenous community all the more remarkable. I emphasize trust in the establishment of online community, but we can hardly relate to the life-and-

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death stakes that my friends in San Bartolo faced. Getting flamed online is, after all, only a *virtual* insult.

The 1980s marked my introduction to computers and networking, but positioned above both of these in terms of my personal education, I hold the influence of Stewart Brand and his Whole Earthian perspective on tools and ideas. What most defined the WELL was its intentionally blurred boundaries between information providers and information consumers. Stewart had innovated this relationship in his print publications going back to 1968 and the first *Whole Earth Catalog*. He invited writers to submit articles and to review books and products useful to the New Age pioneer. He invited readers to become writers. He recognized the vast talent pool that seeks outlet through publishing a full quarter century before the Web did the same thing using PCs and phone lines.

Stewart described the WELL and all *Whole Earth* ventures with another circular definition, "business as service, and service as business." You'll find a lot of that posture in this book. And he put the driving force behind the Web's meteoric growth into words years before there was a Web with the observation that "information wants to be free." As low key as Stewart is as a personality, I believe that his vision and approach to the sharing of information and publishing has been as influential as any other individual's to the direction information culture has taken in this century.

The WELL was where I cut my teeth in the online world, and working with three friends who'd shared my background at the Farm was invaluable in helping to transpose what was useful from communal life to the virtual community. Matthew McClure, the WELL's founding Director, whose hands-on participation set the WELL's course in terms of management-user interaction, left the business in my hands with traditions already established. John Coate, who served as the WELL's ambassador and chief diplomat in the user community for most of the six years that I worked there, was a friend, a supportive partner, and an intrepid explorer in what, to us, was untried social terrain. John knew how to work the backchannels, establishing key alliances and friendships with WELL members in what was often a very contentious milieu. Nancy Rhine, with whom I have a wonderful offline relationship, helped me to refocus on the needs of new users at a time when the community of established users had come to monopolize my attention and define the WELL. She also reacted to the male-dominated culture of the online world and went and did something about it, founding Women's Wire in 1992 as one of the first commercial online communities to address a specific demographic.

Of course the users of the WELL included a remarkable collection of performers and innovators. They showed me the potential of the online medium to be pushed ahead by its participants in ways that I'd only seen before in the realm of rock and roll. In fact, the WELLers' conversations were often like ensemble music. It could be sweet

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and harmonious or harsh and cacophonous, but it was always changing, always bringing something new, always demonstrating that people were the most interesting content you could ever hope to provide day after day. I'll surely be leaving out many valuable personages, but the following users of the early WELL stand out as some of its most ground-breaking characters. (To them I say, "You know who you are!") Thanks to *mick* who voluntarily wrote the first WELL user manual and to *bandy* who gave the gift of real-time messaging to the community. Appreciation to *nana* for starting the WELL office parties and to *jen* for her great eggnog and brave hosting of the Sexuality conference. Here's to *mandel* and *hlr* who widened the dimension of our personal identities by founding the True Confessions conference. To *pokey*, who later became *jef*, for inventing pokeybux and the bozofilter. To *bryan* who cracked the programming mysteries of the WELL's Picospan conferencing program and opened it up to multilevel searching with his Extract program. To *casey* who never let anyone rest on whatever laurels they might have thought they'd earned. To *maddog* who evolved into *tnf* and to *marye* who became *microx*. They brought the tumult and artistic sense of the Deadhead community to the WELL. To *loca* who created the Weird conference and thus ruined forever our ability to take ourselves too seriously. And to *boswell*, born as *trend*, who was just too smart for his own good. I may not have been friends with all of them, but they all certainly left great impressions on me.

The Web now has many leaders and pioneers attempting to build and foster community and, in researching this book, I owe thanks to more of them than I can name. Getting permissions to use screenshots required the cooperation of people in roles from sole site creator/sponsor/author to media relations people for large corporations. Without their help and feedback, many of the pages in this book would be unfinished. And of course I acknowledge the creativity and commitment that it takes to stick with an idea and keep a group of people meeting online over time. It's not easy, and it's actually reached a point where it's competitive. We never felt the pressure of competition in the early years of the WELL, but it's here now. The founders of community-based sites like Talk City, Tripod, and GeoCities have obviously struck nerves in the Web-using population. They are in the process of proving and sustaining new revenue models to keep large systems growing and expanding. And the developers of new discussion software platforms must be given credit for recognizing the ways in which people communicate online and for providing tools that speak to their needs. Without the right tools, there is no virtual community.

Thanks to Pam Sobotka, who shepherded me through the book-writing process and to Cary Sullivan who took me on as a new author. John Wiley & Sons has made the process of putting this book together as painless as possible. The discomfort has been all of my own creation.

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Finally, I'd like to recognize my kids who have lived through the past 12 years of my life as an online leader. For many of those years, as they grew up, Dad spent hours at a time staring into a little TV screen as words scrolled by. Sometimes he laughed. Sometimes he grumbled. Sometimes Dad yelled and stomped around. It took them a while to comprehend just what it was all about. I thank them for their patience and understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

My involvement in hosting online communities began when I took the job as general manager of an electronic conferencing system called the WELL in 1986. Since then, I've watched networked group communications evolve from slow modems and slow computers passing text back and forth on plain screens to fast modems and fast computers passing text back and forth on colorful screens. In some ways, the medium has changed radically, and in some ways, it's much the same but with many, many more people taking part and a lot more money being spent.

The purpose of this book is to identify the factors and practices that are most necessary to host a successful community on the Web. Although it describes the features of technical platforms and delves into the models that are used to justify hosting communities from the financial point of view, I regard these as the least stable elements of the community formula in the midst of this media revolution. Technology and business strategies have been in constant flux over the past two years and will continue to be so for quite a while. Selecting the appropriate discussion platform, providing the appropriate tools, and applying the appropriate revenue model are all critical decisions for the site provider. But it's the human part that is most important to insuring success and longevity.

Why I Wrote This Book

Three themes run strongly through this book because I believe them to be the basic truths underlying the success of community on the Web. The first is that community is a social constant looking to take hold in an environment of unrelenting change. The second is that trust is essential for community to happen. And the third is that meaningful relationships, far more than size, determine the success of online communities.

I decided to write this book because I recognized a need for some clarification of terms in the marketplace that is the Web. I saw the word *community* being associated with so many different things that I began to wonder if the idea was in danger of being watered down into meaningless jargon. For me, community has always been an important, almost sacred term preserved for relationships that have more than trivial meaning. I suspected that it was the same for most people, that if they thought about it for

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a moment, they would find that the word *community* conjured up an image from some experience or circumstance in which interpersonal relationships made them feel an integral part of a group rather than a lone individual.

I knew that my time at the WELL had centered around being familiar with an ever-changing but very recognizable cast of characters that seemed to live inside my computer screen. We'd argued incessantly about the use of the term *community* to describe what we were doing, yet even in that arguing we proved ourselves to be a group of people who met regularly and discussed a subject we all cared about. We'd gotten to know each other. I began to wonder, seeing it used so frequently, how the word was being used in so many different settings on the Web. I didn't want *community* to lose its meaning, especially since the Web and its evolving toolkit was so well-suited to bringing people together, and I wanted to do something—to write a book—to redefine community in terms of the environment and marketplace of the Web.

Just as Howard Rheingold's book, *The Virtual Community* (Addison-Wesley, 1993), stirred me to recognize the diversity of electronic social models that had grown up in the pre-Web world, *Net Gain* (Harvard Business School Press, 1997) by John Hagel and Arthur Armstrong forced me to realize that community in the age of the Web was being regarded as part of a major revenue model. I reacted strongly to *Net Gain*, both because I appreciated two respected researchers putting together a formula that recognized the strong human-centered motivations that drive communities, and because I feared that in hooking their formula into a fast-growth model they might be prescribing a process for extinguishing community spirit just as it was beginning to take hold. I felt that a book that put the emphasis on the dynamics of human relationships under different Web business configurations might help site hosts resolve the conflicts between the need to grow fast and make profit and the need to nurture social development.

Tools, Techniques, and Trust

These are the three legs that support online communities, and they are the basis for all of the chapters in this book. Without the tools—the discussion platforms, the Web itself—the communities can't exist. But once the tools are there and the users have begun using them, it's the hosting techniques that convince people to participate and stay. And it's the business techniques that assure that the community will be financially supported over time. Underlying those techniques is the framework of trust between users and site providers that makes the gathering of people on the site more than simply a passive audience relationship. For people to engage in the exchange and openness that defines a community, there must be an understanding that in doing so, they are safe. Trust is the social lubricant that makes community possible.

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Community-Hosting Technologies

There will be a lot of material in this book about the tools being used today and developed for tomorrow to facilitate group social interaction. These tools support many different formats of conversation, from simultaneous meetings of dozens of chatters to extended collective correspondence about weighty topics in online forums. There are tools for conversing in what would seem to be *locations* on the Web, and there are tools for conversing outside of the Web page, in what feels like undifferentiated Web *space*. There are virtual auditoriums and stadiums, and vivid, graphic-rich worlds in which participants appear as cartoon figures floating in three-dimensional environments. And there are whole suites of tools that now allow Web users to build their own community homes and associate around them. Tools determine the shape and dynamics of the groups who use them to gather and communicate. And as the tools evolve, improve, and diversify, the social formats change and adapt to them. Hosting a Web community is a function of the technical platform that you, as host, choose to be your social environment.

The Practices That Help Community Happen

The techniques used to host a community depend to a certain extent on the tools being used, but there are many core elements of the practice of hosting that don't change with the technology. *Hosting* is an appropriate term for inviting users into a virtual location and treating them as guests. It's a service role with a purpose, which is to make the guests feel comfortable, appreciated, and, in some cases, empowered. There are hosts who act as discussion moderators and hosts who act as traffic cops. But I expand the definition of the host to encompass the entire staff of a Web site. Hosting is not just one person's job, it is the mission of the entire company that provides a Web site. It includes the means that the site uses to pay for its existence, whether it relies on advertising or selling product or being subsidized by an owner or sponsor. Hosting involves every element of the Web site's operation, from design to customer service to marketing. And the relationship between the user and the site as a whole must be coordinated and monitored by one key person—the Community Manager—who takes on the responsibility of keeping that relationship a good one. Which brings us to trust.

Trust—The Essential Element

One thing that is always brought up when discussing the differences between online community and real-life community is the lack of visual and auditory cues in electronically mediated relationship. You can't see the twinkle in the eye or the cocked eyebrow or hear the lilt in a person's voice to tell whether he's being serious or playful, angry or sarcastic, when he types a simple message in an online forum. People have cobbled together codes for signifying their feelings and emotions in text, but there remains that separation between what people are really like and what they appear to be like

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online. Trust between users, and between the users and the site providers, is something that must be assumed in the absence of physical presence. Yet trust is essential for people to *buy in* to the idea of community. There is no community without a minimum level of belief, on the part of the users, that the site provider will not somehow exploit their participation. So the theme of trust—of winning it, of maintaining it, of engendering it between the users themselves—comes up repeatedly throughout the book.

The Flow of the Book

My chapters are organized to first get us all on the same page about what a community is, then examine the site provider's role in relation to the user population, and then describe the various technologies available for hosting Web communities. Five chapters stand alone at the end: one on the practice of discussion hosting, one on the rise of the free homepage services that I call *Web worlds*, a chapter on revenue models for supporting communities, a projection of trends and the future of communities on the Web, and a final chapter describing three of my real life experiences managing online communities.

Defining and Describing Communities

Although tools are basic to the existence of the Web community, I don't begin with their description. Instead, I spend Chapters 1 and 2, "Defining Community on the Ever-Changing Web," and "Identifying Group Styles and Needs," respectively, clarifying and describing the playing field: what a community is, and how different profiles of community differ from one another on the Web. How is a community site distinguishable from any other site on the Web? Can't any site refer to its visitors as a community of people who visit the site? Such circular definitions are, I'm afraid, too rampant on the Web today. If you've deliberately decided that you're going to host a community, you should expect to gain some specific benefits from it. I describe what those benefits are and how they can legitimize your claim of hosting a community.

I also provide a system for categorizing communities according to their distinctive behaviors and tendencies. Every community is unique, and whether its character is determined by its interests or by the platform it uses for discussion or by your hosting techniques, it can be compared to other communities based on its levels of interactivity, focus, and cohesion. My system for profiling communities even gives names for the various archetypes along these continuums: cafés, theaters, malls, and families, among others.

Your Relationship to Your Community

In Chapter 3, "Establishing and Maintaining Key Relationships," and Chapter 4, "Involving Your Staff," I describe the role of the site provider relative to the user, and the

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roles of the specific staff positions that interact with users and customers. Depending on the style and scale of your community, you will be seen by users as an active participant or a remote presence. Yet, as long as people are using your facilities, they will have some opinion of you, formed by their experience with your site's design or support or hosting representatives. You should use your role to learn from your users and customers and to win their loyalty in any way you can, for it's a lot easier and cheaper to retain a customer than it is to win a new one. Loyalty pays its way by providing reliable and continuing traffic and by bringing in new traffic as word is spread to other Web users.

The individual staff members on your site each play a role in relating with customers, responding to suggestions, anticipating needs. It's difficult for your site designer to understand how community members use your site unless she either uses it consistently herself or has a reliable source of feedback from users that describes to her exactly what they need. The Community Manager often serves in the role of feedback conduit between staff and users, but the more your staff can identify with the user perspective, the better they will be at serving the users and winning trust and loyalty.

What the Community Sees and Uses

By this point in the book I assume you're prepared to design your site's interface, and Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," describes just that, dealing with various approaches that will meet the needs of the different community profiles described in Chapter 2, "Identifying Group Styles and Needs." A site for communities based in chat rooms will not have the same features as one based on information delivery about a specific subject. Some communities spend most of their time communicating, while others use communication to augment content displayed on the site.

Chapter 6, "Tools That Enhance Group Interaction," catalogs the selection of technologies that are currently being used on the Web and some that are just beginning to see use. These range from chat and message boards—which are covered in more detail in the following chapters—to utilities like streaming audio, Web pagers, and the traffic-tallying tools that you'll need to keep track of how your members are using your discussion environments.

Chapter 7, "Platform Alternatives for Chat," and Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments," present representative selections of the commercial platforms that are available for real-time chat and asynchronous discussion on the Web. These range from freely available software to industrial-level, full-featured platforms with comprehensive support from their vendors. I describe their features and how their diverse designs fit with the needs of the various community profiles. There is a growing selection for site providers to choose from, but comparing them feature for feature is complex since no two platforms use the same terms to describe them.

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Chapters 7 and 8 also explore some of the major locations on the Web where chat and discussion take place. In the case of chat, I refer the reader to chat *hubs*, sites that provide access to their own chat platforms and selections of chat rooms and events. It's common to find thousands of users participating simultaneously on these sites and they have been expanding their features to take advantage of the presence of so many people. Forum sites don't attract nearly as many simultaneous users, though simultaneity is not their strength.

Where the Host Meets the Community

It's through the discussion hosting that the site provider, whether it be an individual or a skyrocketing corporation, interacts directly with the site's users. This is the subject of Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion." As with the other aspects of site design, the host's role depends on the type of community, certainly on the description of the discussion platform, and to a lesser extent on the interest that draws the community together and defines it.

The hosting role can be that of a master of ceremonies, a meeting facilitator, or a digital custodian. There may be elements of entertainer, justice of the peace, and group therapist in the host's job description, but in any case, the host should be a liaison between users and site management. It is the host, more than any other staff member, who gets to see the site from the user's point of view. And it's the host who should be relied on to interpret that point of view for management.

There are many different relationships of hosts with the site, and many different ways to handle compensation. I describe the alternatives, from fully paid staff position to pure volunteer and community initiator. A good host can make a community happen and a poor one can allow a community to dissolve.

Where Niche Communities Bloom

I devote Chapter 10, "Web Worlds," to the relatively new phenomenon of membership-based sites where users can build free homepages, use chat and message boards, and form communities around shared interests. The reason these get so much attention in the book is that they represent a level of empowerment of the individual user to build communities on a more personal scale rather than relying on well-funded companies to build sites to meet their interests. Looking mainly at GeoCities and Tripod, two homepage farms that claim over a million members each, I tour their features and describe how the individual settler goes about setting up a *homestead* (in GeoCities' terms) or *pod* (in Tripod's).

For the Web to continue growing, it must provide the means for nontechnical people to take advantage of what it has to offer. Having your own homepage on the Web is a symbol of citizenship, and the Web worlds make building homepages painless,

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both technically and monetarily. And by allowing homepage builders to associate themselves with others expressing similar interests, they introduce new Web citizens to the concept of community.

Paying the Bills and Making Money

I assume that many, if not most, of the readers of this book are looking for ways to make their Web community pay for itself or even turn a profit. While cautioning you that profit is still a dream for the vast majority of Web-based enterprises, Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," offers traditional wisdom (go with banner advertisements) but adds my own ideas for innovation and experimentation. There are actually some credible alternatives to reliance on advertising and I fit these to the different reasons you might be wanting to build a community on the Web.

Community has applications in the areas of publicity, public relations, customer service and support, and as a way to get fellow hobbyists together. The tools have become cheap enough and easy enough to use that the investment required to start and host a community on the Web is within reach of the individual enthusiast just as BBS systems were used by thousands in the 1980s. When it comes to making the big bucks, though, I concede to the recommendations of the *Net Gain* authors: To attract copious advertising dollars, you have to go big. And to go big, you have to be especially careful in how you design and care for your community.

What the Future Holds

In Chapter 12, "Trends, Hopes, and the Future," I take a look at where things appear to be headed, not only in the realm of technology but in the evolution of community-hosting practices and the acceptance of the community model by business. Of course it's hard to see clearly into the Web's crystal ball because technology is in the midst of such headlong change that any predictions are liable to be derailed by a single new discovery, release, or merger. Yet there are some undeniable trends that bear following, and I offer my takes on what they mean for Web community development over the coming year.

Three Lessons from Real Life

In Chapter 13, "First-Hand Experiences and Case Studies," I conclude with three accounts of educational community management experiences from my professional career. It's difficult to separate out the specific lessons from the whole of such adventures, so I've included longer accounts of the circumstances surrounding what I call the *Lessons*. I recount the essence of my six-year experience managing the WELL in the 1980s, and the one-year test trial of the Virtual Places chat platform that I managed for

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America Online—an experiment that AOL eventually abandoned. Finally, I describe the intense two-week-long discussion community that I managed for IBM's Deep Blue versus Kasparov chess match in 1997.

Who This Book Is For

The material in this book is useful for everyone with an interest in the Web as a platform for social interaction, whether they host a Web site yet or not. Especially if the term *community* comes up in describing one's site or site-to-be, the perspectives offered here can help clarify exactly what kind of community will be hosted and which practices, technologies, and financial support models will be appropriate. Building, maintaining, and hosting a community site can be a very different endeavor from doing the same on a site dedicated to commerce or content delivery. When community enters the equation, the self-defined community members have different expectations than passive viewers and the host must understand and anticipate their needs.

This book also offers helpful tips for Web-based site designers, business managers, recruiters, customer support managers, and those who assemble internal company networks. It can be expensive in both time and dollars to implement the wrong design or software platform for group interaction. My intent has been to help match the tool with the application within the broad general definition of community.

Continuing Help and Ideas on My Web Site

Precisely because the Web community story continues to unfold even as I write these words, I am providing a Web site to accompany this book and to update its references as the facts and conditions change. On my site at www.well.com/user/fig/hosting and on Wiley's site at www.wiley.com/compbooks/figallo, I will provide links to all of the sites described within these pages and will post additional facts and news that I find to be relevant to readers of the book. Although most of the material I've written about the definitions and descriptions of community profiles, the relationships of site providers to users, and the practice of hosting will endure regardless of technological change, the specific features of the software and community sites I describe will surely evolve.

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1 DEFINING COMMUNITY ON THE EVER-CHANGING WEB

Communities on the Web are made up of individuals, each of whom brings a very personal and unique perception of community into Webspace. We all have our own ideas and images of what a community looks, acts, and feels like. These are formed from our experiences in the places we grew up, went to school, and live today. Maybe we were also impressed by TV shows and movies we've seen in our lifetimes, but in terms of person-to-person interaction, our internal models of community have been formed through real-life associations.

Partially for that reason, community is difficult to define because it means different things to each of us. Like the individuals who populate them, communities vary widely in their descriptions and in our interpretations of them. The Web has provided an environment in which more people than ever before have the space, the tools, and the opportunity to put their personal versions of community into practice. This has resulted in an amazing variety of creations and expressions. It's not the real world, but it has the potential to both complement and transcend the real world. There are communities on the Web that could not happen within the constraints of real-world time and space.

So, the definition of community, already elusive, also has these new and evolving technologies with which to contend. New social entities have taken form in this blossoming environment: newsgroups, listservs, chat rooms, forums, and virtual worlds. Community, as a feature of the modern Web site, is a proven attraction to online explorers. More sites every day claim to be hosting

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community or offering community services. Because so many now employ the term, the Web has increased our collective exposure to it to the extent that it's fair to question how much of what is referred to as *community* on the Web fits with any of our personal images of it.

For some, a community is a specific group of people meeting and conversing daily in a chat room or message board. For others, it's a Web site designed to attract interested customers to a product, a company, or a service. Some think of community on the scale of a city, while for others, nothing larger than a neighborhood could possibly fit the description. There are those who identify online community only in terms of people engaged in conversation, and there are those for whom the conversation component is subordinate to higher priorities such as serving the buying preferences and information needs of a focused market of consumers.

When people visit self-described *communities* and compare what they find with their personal expectations, they are liable to be disappointed and confused. The term is increasingly used to describe aggregations of people who aren't motivated to interact with each other and have even less in common than superficial interests and consumer tastes. *Community* has become, in many cases, a conspicuous piece of marketing jargon with connotations far removed from the ideal most of us hold of its being about people and their relationships.

But even as the word is being co-opted and misapplied, the expanding availability of modern software platforms, utilities, and services has opened up possibilities for many people to create and host sites matched to their very personal definitions of community. Thus, the term and its definition are being swept along by two seemingly divergent trends: one toward larger, mass-traffic, marketing-driven services, and the other toward smaller, more personal, grassroots gathering places. Being stretched across that range, the definition of community is anchored only by those meaningful images held in the hearts and minds of the people who populate and host them on the Web. As we'll see throughout this book, those two trends are not as divergent as they seem.

Home, Home on the Web. . .

It's important that we resolve at least some of this confusion of meaning and definition before heading deeper into the nuts and bolts of building and hosting

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communities on the Web. I will point out some instances in which the term *community* is used as a convenient description but serves no practical purpose. These are sites where you're likely to find yourself wondering, "What community are they *talking* about?" It's my belief that community should be a practical and useful thing for people to join.

I'm also going to challenge a current contention about the priorities of online community as a commercial enterprise. I'll present and explain my own definition, which, like everyone else's, has its origins in personal experience. But my experience in the realm of virtual communities is relatively deep and broad, and I at least want to get us all thinking of community in the same terms through the rest of the book. I attempt to provide a definition that not only addresses the essence of every community, but accommodates as many of our different personal community concepts as possible.

Over the past 12 years I've participated in many online conversational groups, and in many hours of intellectual noodling and debate, online and off, about the proper definition and practice of this techno-social concept of community mediated by computers. I've stirred up my share of long-winded discussions and I accept some blame for the poor word's manipulation and overexposure, but there was a time when the idea of online community was revolutionary. Howard Rheingold's landmark book put the word *community* in everyone's cyber lexicon.

In *The Virtual Community* (Addison-Wesley, 1993), Rheingold wrote, "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." He presented examples of the variety of forms that online communities were taking before the popular adoption of the World Wide Web protocol. Through Rheingold's eyes, the reader could see that, in spite of their different technical and social configurations, what all of his examples had in common were meaningful human relationships.

Four years after *The Virtual Community*, John Hagel and Arthur Armstrong, two media experts from the McKinsey & Company consulting firm, put a commercial frame around the idea of virtual community and attracted the attention of business and venture capital people with their provocative and

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widely read book, *Net Gain* (Harvard Business School Press,1997). Community, said Hagel and Armstrong, not only *could* be part of a successful Web-based business plan, it *should* be. They advanced the idea that markets could be expanded through adoption of a community-building perspective. They provided models showing how the commercial power of virtual communities could be leveraged to create and sustain revenue streams. Yet even they, unequivocal cheerleaders for the concept, lamented the watering-down of the term, saying, "It now seems that any Web site can lay claim to the mantle of community, even if all the site offers is a few pages of text and graphics."

Any definition of *community* is subjective, and the one I'm going to use as our working definition throughout this book is no exception. Even within its restrictive boundaries, this definition—actually a list of attributes by which you can recognize the existence of community—leaves a huge amount of room for variations, and it's those variations that will both impact and be impacted by your site design, the technology you use, your staff, and the way you maintain your community's home on the Web. A *home* is, after all, what you provide as a host; a place that people return to regularly, where they feel comfortable, connected, and part of something greater than themselves.

Twenty Sites That Use *Community* in Their Descriptions

It's November 22, 1997, and, to support my point about the varied uses of the word on the Web, I've just done a search for the word *community* on Yahoo! and found 14,973 matches. That's a lot more than I'm willing to deal with, so I restrict my next search to sites describing themselves with both the words *community* and *online*. Ah, much better. Only 1062 matches. Scanning through them, I pick a sample of 20 sites that would appear to illustrate a representative range of *community* interpretations in the Web setting. I call these my Tentative Twenty because, in spite of the use of the word in their titles or descriptions, I don't know yet how (or if) they fit my definition. Also, as with all Web sites, I don't know how long they'll be around. By the time you read this, many of them may no longer exist, and the ones that do will have changed their appearance, description, and business models. I list them here, frozen in time, in Table 1.1.

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Table 1.1 The Tentative Twenty, Found through a Yahoo! Search for "Community" and "Online"

Site Name	Site URL	Site Description
Chiropractic OnLine Today	www.Chiro-Online.com	A "NewsZine" for the chiropractic profession and the health care community.
Cupid's Touch	www.cupidstouch.com	An online dating community, live chat, message boards, personals, games, virtual postcards, songs.
Defense News	www.defensenews.com	The independent newsweekly of the international defense community. Includes news stories, photos, downloadable files, bulletin boards, and an online store.
Diabetes.com	www.diabetes.com/site	An information resource and online community for diabetics.
HealthLinks	www.healthlinks.net	A virtual community for health care professionals that provides a number of ways to exchange ideas and opinions with other experienced professionals, and facilitates easy access to information.
Innovate Online	http://innovate.sgi.com	An information resource and interactive community for content creators.
LiveWorld	www.liveworld.com	A virtual community.
Molson Breweries	http://139.142.2.18:8100/fcgi-bin/bestguml/home/main	Presents "Molson Indy" and "I Am Online," a net community with a distinctly Canadian flavor.

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Table 1.1 The Tentative Twenty, Found through a Yahoo! Search for "Community" and "Online" *(Continued)*

Site Name	Site URL	Site Description
Neighborhoods Online	http://libertynet.org/community/phila/natl.html	An online resource center for people working to build strong communities throughout the United States. Includes issues guides, community development resources, and more.
Nonprofit Online News	www.gilbert.org/news/	Presents news and opinion of the nonprofit online community, focusing on organizational renewal, outreach, and Internet strategies.
Outside Online	http://outside.starwave.com/index.html	An interactive, electronic outdoor community. Includes expert info on outdoor and adventure activities, *Outside* magazine, and an extensive calendar of events and discussions.
Poplar Bluff's Online Community	www.semo.net/index.asp	Helping to link Poplar Bluff to the world.
The Grateful Dead Community Page	www.frognet.net/~scott/dead.html	Perpetuating the music and spirit of the band. Includes the Song Finder, with lyrics for several hundred.
Space News Online	www.spacenews.com	The independent newsweekly of the international space community. Includes news stories, photos, downloadable files, bulletin boards, and an online store.

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Table 1.1 *(Continued)*

Site Name	Site URL	Site Description
Utne Online	www.utne.com	A biweekly Web periodical facilitating thought and discussion about new ideas and the emerging electronic culture.
VIETnam onLINE	www.vietline.com	An online connection of the Vietnamese community. Consists of a business directory, bulletin boards, classifieds, and editorials.
Virtual Community of Associations	www.vcanet.org	A service of the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives. Provides an online forum and information service for association members and the general public.
Webstock '96	www.webstock96.com	A four-day (November 1–4, 1996) cyberfestival showcasing the latest online technology in order to entertain and educate a new generation of community leaders.
Who's Who Online	www.whoswho-online.com	A searchable biographical and professional database of people of accomplishment who are part of the worldwide Internet community.
Women's Web	www.womensweb magazine.com	A community of women online.

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You'll be reading more about some of these sites throughout the book, but for now I want to point out the different uses of the word *community* demonstrated by their titles and descriptions.

- Some sites define their communities as the people who are online and have interests that match what their sites are all about. I refer here to Outside Online's "electronic outdoor community" and the Cupid's Touch "online dating community." This use of the term lures users to the prospect that community will add value to the dating and outdoors focus of the sites.
- For some, the community being served seems to be defined by a group that exists exclusive of the Web and is being invited to come online; for example, the "Vietnamese community" and the "eye care community." Again, we don't know if community on these sites is real or hoped for, but we assume that there are potential community populations out there, waiting to discover places to meet.
- Neighborhoods Online serves populations defined by their geographical location, closer to the classic image of a real-world community. The description makes it clear, in fact, that the communities referred to are not online at all.
- The Virtual Community of Associations and Nonprofit Online News each address what would seem to be collections of organizations that share certain challenges and information needs. A community of associations seems at least a step removed from one composed of individuals, and Nonprofit Online News "presents news and opinion," which sounds more like one-to-many broadcast communication than a many-to-many conversational model.
- We have a product-related site represented in Molson Breweries, the purpose of which appears to be to build goodwill among its current and potential customers by providing a place on the Web for entertainment and recreational conversation.
- There is a Web-based business, LiveWorld, that describes itself succinctly as "a virtual community" indicating that its mission is to be a successful one of those.

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- We expect that at least some of the visitors to Poplar Bluff's Online Community will know each other in real life because of its regional definition. We don't know to what extent neighbors in Poplar Bluff use the online system to enhance their real-life relationships, but the site's description gives the impression that its priority is to connect the local residents to the rest of the world, rather than to each other.
- Then there are the uses of the term that stretch both imagination and credibility. Of what practical use, for instance, is "the international defense community"? Or "the worldwide Internet community"? Or the "global community of multilingual people"? Have multilingual people ever thought of themselves as a community before now? One wonders. The term is often used in this rhetorical or hopeful sense, rather than to name an existing group and its relationships.

It's understandable that the term would be applied loosely to describe so many levels of association, given that the Internet and the Web are being used by so many individuals and organizations to summon people together electronically. There are, perhaps, too few words in the English language for describing a group of people with similar interests. A community can conceivably be *any* group of people who have anything whatsoever in common and are liable to visit the same site. Community fills the vast conceptual space between *audience* and *family*.

But I've got only about 400 pages to work with, which won't allow me to rationalize every idea of what a community on the Web could possibly be. So I've narrowed my definition to one that requires that a community deliver *benefits* to the host who supports its activities. I assume you're looking for practical ideas from this book, so *community* deserves a practical definition.

The Benefits of Fostering Community

A practical definition is more useful than theoretical. It contains elements that you can observe and act on as a Web site owner and manager to make your community work. A community that works is a living thing that requires special care but will learn to take care of itself. A working community is a productive asset.

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It's active rather than passive, and brings tangible and measurable benefits in response to your efforts. How does it do this? In several ways:

- It creates steady streams of fresh user-originated content.
- It weaves a web of personal relationships that bind their participants to the site.
- It acts as a social flywheel, maintaining the momentum of interaction by feeding back into itself, drawing its members in and stimulating them to remain active and productive over time.
- It contributes to its own support and rejuvenation, attracting, training, and socializing its new members, and forging its own new directions for growth and expansion.
- It tells you, the host, what its members want and how to make your site more attractive and useful for them.
- It spreads your marketing message through the trusted grassroots grapevine of the Net in the testimony of satisfied participants, and in the stories that come out of its group interaction.

What do you need to do, as host of a site, to reap these benefits? The most important thing of all is to win and hold the trust of your users.

The Leverage of Trust

The presence of community on your site means that you have a core of people returning on a regular basis. These *members* come back because they feel a connection with your site, sometimes through its content and personality, but more significantly through the people they find there. Members not only visit regularly, they refer their friends and associates to your URL and spread the word by pointing to it from their own homepages. They contribute to its improvement by submitting suggestions and criticisms, engaging creatively in its group discussion, playing its games, entering its contests, and purchasing the products it sells. They do all of this because they feel sufficient trust in what they find there: you, your business, your content, your staff, and most importantly, the other members. Chapter 3, "Establishing and Maintaining Key Relationships," has a lot of information about trust and your relationship with the members of your community.

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What You Can Learn

Community is about communication between people and, as host, you must be in the communications loop. You have a privileged relationship with the community and can learn from it in two ways: directly from its members, and indirectly from their activities and behavior.

A community that trusts you will confide in you, providing sincere feedback and advice directly when asked for it. You may also hear from users who don't trust you, but that can be even more valuable since your friends won't always tell you what you most need to hear. The multipath communications channels in a community bring new ideas and criticism to your attention that would have nowhere to go on a site devoted to one-way publication of content.

You learn indirectly from your community by observing and measuring what its members do. Membership, for most sites that provide access to chat or message boards, involves a registration process. Registered members are no longer anonymous Web surfers just passing through. They are individuals whose use of the site tells you more about their preferences and habits than they would likely reveal about themselves if you asked them directly.

Measuring Success

Enjoying the benefits from hosting a community is one thing, but will they lead you to success? That depends entirely on your definition of *success*. You may begin with a preconceived idea of what your community will be like, but that won't guarantee what you'll end up with. Business plans have numerical milestones to mark their progress, or lack of it, but success in fostering community is much more subtle and difficult to gauge along the way. It may come wrapped in surprises even if (especially if) you prepare well.

A thriving community is energetic, generating momentum and direction from the constant interaction between its members. It can develop a self-concept and a mind of its own, bubbling up original ideas that you may decide are better than the ones you'd originally planned. You may be surprised by where your community leads you, but the surprise won't be shocking if you initiate and maintain contact with your members from the beginning. That connection is the foundation upon which a healthy community grows. Certainly, you will

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have parameters that tell you if you've succeeded or not, but the true measure of a community is in its participation, enthusiasm, and loyalty.

Community and Commerciality

In *Net Gain*, Hagel and Armstrong put forth the idea that one of the greatest benefits of community on the Web was the revenue potential of a loyal mass of customers who identify themselves to advertisers, marketers, and vendors by the choices they make of where to spend their time online. Communities on the Web define reachable market segments that become more valuable the closer they come to a point of critical mass. When that point is reached, a kind of process called *increasing returns* takes effect. The community itself becomes a vital resource for its members and its success breeds more success. In Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," we'll revisit the Net Gain theory, but meanwhile, in line with that theory, the authors offered these five "defining elements" of a virtual community:

- Distinctive focus
- Capacity to integrate content and communication
- Appreciation of member-generated content
- Access to competing publishers and vendors
- Commercial orientation

Net Gain was the first book to make a strong case for virtual communities as expanders of online marketplaces. Keep in mind that their model is intentionally fitted to today's Web-based, corporate-driven businesses that aim to grow fast, dominate markets, and make big money for their owners and investors. You may not describe yourself or your site that way, but these defining elements apply to any self-supporting community system on the Web today.

Distinctive focus means that a community has a specific core interest that draws people to it. Common interest is a good first step toward building a loyal user population.

Capacity to integrate content and communication merges the editorial publishing model with the conversational publishing model to create an attractive hybrid that plays to the Web's strengths.

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Appreciation of member-generated content describes an important distinguishing aspect of the relationship between site management and the community in which the members' contributions are encouraged and regarded with respect on par with editorial content.

Access to competing publishers and vendors is another aspect of the publisher-user relationship. In providing this access, the host serves the best interests of the community by taking advantage of the assets of the interlinked Web.

Commercial orientation is Hagel and Armstrong's contention that a successful virtual community should be business focused. If the community is to be self-supporting, its management must think in terms of generating revenue. *Net Gain* is quite aggressive in the advice it gives about staking out territory on the Web because advertising dollars go first to the sites with the most traffic.

But commercial orientation can be overemphasized as a requisite of successful community. There is a cost to allowing early profit-making considerations to overshadow what is basically a relationship-building process. In their book, Hagel and Armstrong specifically cited the WELL as an example of a community that was "not business oriented." Having managed its business operations for six years, I beg to differ with them.

The Commercial versus the Sustainable Orientation

In fact, the WELL was forced by the reality of its minimal startup funding to be very business oriented just to survive during the years when it earned its reputation as a virtual community. While it was not founded to make its owners rich, it did have to pay its own way, and earned enough through subscription fees to support both its operations and expansion into a million-dollar-a-year business, all at a time when better-funded online businesses with more ambitious goals were losing money and shutting down. As an online community, the WELL fulfilled its intended purpose of *selling its users access to each other*, meaning that it deliberately attracted and won the loyalty of people who were themselves attractions to others. I would describe it as a conversation-oriented, rather than commercially oriented, community.

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Many Web-based communities today can, like the WELL, fulfill their goals without adopting a strictly commercial orientation. The opportunity now exists for community building on every scale imaginable, beginning with operations that cost no more than the price of a regular ISP account. I prefer, in this book, to emphasize a *sustainable* orientation, for there are many noncommercial reasons for hosting groups on the Web, and one of the points of community is, after all, to last.

Diabetes.com is a worthy example, supported through an educational grant by Bayer Corporation's Pharmaceutical Division and the sponsorship of Sun Microsystems. Molson Breweries is a community site funded by its parent company not to bring in direct revenue, but to be a worthwhile cost of doing business in the same category as its customer service and public relations operations. Communities must first be oriented toward serving the ongoing needs of their members. If you can do that effectively while in commercial mode, good for you. If you can't, there are alternative strategies to follow.

The Effects of Size and Growth Rate

Communities are unique social entities and each one grows at its own natural rate to its own natural size. Forcing a community to grow unnaturally fast brings diminishing returns. People leave if they don't feel comfortable and cared for. If forming a community is your goal, it's not wise to race to a critical mass of users in an effort to lock up the market for a given theme. To draw a large and loyal user base around a shared interest, you must deliver quality in the features that matter most to your target audience. Huge size and rapid growth are rarely among those.

Clearly, there's limited room in the world for dominant communities while there's almost infinite room for small, personalized *niche communities*. Such focused populations can grow large enough to be profitable for the host, and, given the right amount of care, can be long-lasting. The social reality that I think we all recognize is that people will find and adopt the communities in which they feel best served.

Forcing a community to grow quickly in order to achieve dominance in a market interferes with the nurturing process of the early interpersonal and

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customer relationships that set the foundations for the community. Growing an enduring social system is a delicate and sensitive process in which large size has little meaning except as a threat to the individual's feeling of significance. Communities, even as defined by the five elements in *Net Gain*, tend more toward smallness than hugeness. The key question for sites that depend on very high traffic for survival is, "How many of these small communities can they actually serve?"

As populations grow in size, they divide socially as each subgroup realizes and consolidates its distinct focus, identity, and core of relationships. If you are host of the original and overarching community—the *metacommunity*—you'll find it necessary to subdivide *yourself* in order to stay in contact with the multiplicity of special interest groups that will find themselves looking for space on your site. So, if it's a market-dominating community that you look forward to hosting, be careful what you wish for. Dominating the market won't mean much if you lose the community magic in the process.

The Attributes of Online Communities

The attributes I present here as a definition of *community* are about social dynamics more than hard commercial realities, which means that they focus on the actions, needs, and attitudes of people rather than on marketing strategies and revenue sources. They represent practices, activities, and values that distinguish online communities from other online formats and activities. That image of community you carry in your mind? Hold it up against these and see how it fits. In a true community on the Web:

- The member feels part of a larger social whole.
- There's an interwoven web of relationships between members.
- There's an ongoing exchange between members of commonly valued things.
- Relationships between members last through time, creating shared histories.

Where these attributes exist, they solidify loyalty to the group and, therefore, to the Web site that supports its activities. Members return regularly, and

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in doing so, affirm the feeling that they belong, and maintain the relationships identified with the site. They come back because they are rewarded for doing so with valued facts, feelings, advice, and opinions. As time passes, they help to construct a history that is shared with others, adding to the feeling that they are part of some greater entity. As you can see, these attributes feed and reinforce each other in such a way that the community requires only the attentive support and encouragement of the site's management to keep the self-sustaining processes going.

The Feeling and Sense of Belonging

Community is most powerful when membership brings with it a sense of belonging. Unless that feeling is there, no manager, advertiser, or promoter can claim the presence of community, no matter how much commonality exists in the users' interests and demographics. The feeling needn't be warm and fuzzy, for *community* is not synonymous with *social harmony*, but it's a feeling of being included by a group. It's important that enough of the participants share that feeling because it motivates them to contribute to the whole, and it inspires loyalty. As John Coate, former conferencing manager of the WELL, once put it, "If you feel like you're a part of a community, you probably are."

Probably? Well, you might be wrong. That is, an individual doesn't have to interact with the other presumed members to harbor that feeling, though interaction is the only way to confirm that the feelings are mutual. And it takes more than one person feeling it to make it a community. But it's the sense of being included in some greater, *mutually recognized* social entity that drives people to invest themselves through visiting, participating, and contributing, which is exactly what you want them to do. When people invest in this way, they feel a sense of shared ownership in the community and even in the organization that supports it. They become allies of the host, and that makes for good community chemistry.

Common Purposes, Relationships, and Rituals

Individuals usually come together to form communities in which they recognize common purposes, values, and visions. That commonality is enough—at least in the beginning—to provide an initial impression of agreement with their fellow

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members. Invariably, as time passes, that agreement proves less solid than first assumed, but diversity of viewpoint and opinion is also important to community longevity.

Most of my Tentative Twenty sites exist to serve populations sharing common interests. People who follow the Space program, fans of the Grateful Dead, diabetes sufferers, and Vietnamese Web surfers all, as groups, have something substantial to discuss with each other. But the extent to which each group member feels a sense of community depends on several factors besides common interest, situation, or history. The sense of belonging is also a function of the amount and quality of interaction between people, the individual's compatibility with the group, and the effectiveness of the site's hosting.

As time passes in a community, familiarity, rituals, and relationships, rather than perfectly matched tastes and beliefs, serve as the social glue. Eventually, local jargon and regular activities—the rituals of the community—add reinforcement to members' identification with the group. The gathering place and its personality, rather than its distinctive focus, become the real objects of loyalty and identification.

Affinity Groups: Potential Communities

There are plenty of people who have common interests but don't collectively demonstrate the attributes of communities. Such groups *could* be active communities, but they lack the channels for interaction that would spark interpersonal relationships. For an example, let's take the owners and drivers of vintage Volkswagen microbuses.

Microbus owners often acknowledge each other as they pass on the highway. They share the attachment to a vehicle whose character and quirkiness are endearing. They know that the passing driver has suffered the same frustrations and reveled in the same joys of ownership. They view the same simple instrument panels, camp in the same boxy interiors, and waggle the same spindly gearshift levers. They may have never met, but they feel as if they know a piece of each other's mind. Many of them surely feel like part of a diffuse mobile tribe even though they don't relate to each other beyond their friendly salutes across the median strip.

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Groups that share passionate interests but don't have the means for regular contact in the real world can be natural communities once they convene on the Web. There are many examples of such affinity groups that, while sharing significant interests, don't engage in ongoing relationships or exchanges. Eventually, many of them form organizations that provide mutual support and information sharing. Every day, more of these groups find their way online and begin communicating.

Among the Tentative Twenty, there are a few affinity groups that are seeking communityhood by creating meeting places on the Web. The Vietnamese, the health care workers, the diabetics, the chiropractors, and the women of Women's Web might all have understood the bonds of common experience they shared with others in their respective groups, but until they jacked into the Web, they may have never made the personal connections to complete the community loop. Once connected member-to-member through the Web, they can begin to build personal relationships—the exchanges that enhance their membership and shared histories.

Relationships: The Ties that Bind

Relationships differentiate a community from an affinity group and from another quasisocial entity of Webspace: the gathering of people around products and services that we call a *marketplace*. Establishing, nurturing, and maintaining relationships is what draws people back to communities repeatedly. In a marketplace, simple exchanges of information and acts of commerce between people define the interaction, and while buyers and sellers do have relationships, they are based more on their respective business roles than on affinity and shared perspective.

A Web community is a place where relationships can form and be maintained over time. The relationships must have value to the users, and they must have room to develop. The more restrictive the conditions, the less satisfying will be the relationships. There are many possible configurations of relationship on the Web. They can be between individual users, between users and content providers, between users and actual content. There should be some reciprocity in the relationship; some give-and-take interaction between the user and whoever

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or whatever he is relating with. But the feeling of community is much more likely to come out of relationships with peers than relationships with service providers.

I have a relationship with the stock trading site where I maintain my IRA. It tells me what my savings are worth and I tell it what I want to buy and sell. But I don't consider it part of my community. It's a business relationship. It doesn't give me any sense of belonging to anything.

Relationships are the core of community, and whatever your business plan, your technology choices, or your editorial policy, you must serve the relationship needs of your users if you want them to make your site their home.

From Affinity to Relationship

The Web is often used to tap the potential of affinity groups to be active communities. It doesn't take elaborate technology or expensive development to make this happen. The attraction that VW microbus owners have for each other because of their shared fanaticism predisposes them to form relationships if given the chance to connect. One of those owners, named Thom Fitzpatrick, serves his mobile tribe by providing a service for them on the Web called Vintage Bus (www.vintagebus.com).

The owners of older microbuses need to connect with each other to track down the increasingly rare parts and technical information required to keep their aging buggies in repair. Thom relates to them from that perspective. His site provides links for subscribing to the *Type II (air-cooled)* email list for owners, and to Web pages where owners can advertise buses and parts for sale. He has also uploaded hard-to-find factory wiring diagrams and specification sheets, and has written a FAQ (frequently asked questions) about vintage microbuses.

According to Thom's count, several thousand visitors return to his site repeatedly. He provides space for them to share pictures of their buses and to trade with each other. The actual conversation between members of the microbus owners' community takes place through the email list, and Thom's resources complement that interaction. His own relationships with site visitors are but a part of the many relationships that make up the Net-connected community. His role is to provide and maintain the resource center.

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Most visitors to Diabetes.com are either diabetes patients or their relatives. The site provides a basic electronic bulletin board where people can leave questions or requests for each other and respond to others' postings. What most people do, because of the board's limitations, is follow up postings with email messages. People in similar stages of the disease or taking the same medications form mutual support relationships through ongoing correspondence, facilitated by the Web site. Diabetes.com serves them not only as an information resource maintained by medical experts, but as a link to people who identify with them personally.

Identifying populations of compatible individuals who need only reliable and accessible communications facilities to blossom into actual communities is the shortest route to establishing networks of relationships. Most Web sites do target population segments with common interests, but many of them fail to understand how to service the relationships that want to form once people are put in electronic proximity to each other.

Conversation Brings Familiarity

As George Costanza of TV's *Seinfeld* once announced to his friends, as though it were an eye-opening discovery, "Just by conversing you can really learn a lot about people!" Well, duh! But George's self-evident statement illustrates a truth about building relationships on the Web: If you provide people with an opportunity for group conversation, it *really does* let them get to know each other. The greater the variety of conversations they participate in with the same people, the more familiarity they are apt to feel.

Café Utne (www.utne.com/cafe), the conferencing component of the Utne Reader's Web site, provides a diverse selection of subject-oriented discussion areas where people find others who share similar interests. In each specific conversation, Café members are likely to form relationships that are valued for a person's knowledge, style, or wit. Through meeting others in the context of the Café's *different* conversation topics, they are exposed to different facets of people's personalities and form more well-rounded impressions than they would in a single conversation venue centered around a single topic.

Where the regular participants in a community conduct their relationships in public forums, their ongoing patter creates a sense of place and stability for

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all. When newcomers visit, they discover something going on, and a general feeling of familiarity among the people there. The TV sitcom that this brings to mind is, of course, *Cheers*.

Interaction in chat rooms, in asynchronous forums, even in email lists, allows people to build familiarity that leads to trust and reciprocity—the casual exchange of greetings, acknowledgments, ideas, knowledge, and stories. The resulting relationships create a richer context for everything else experienced on the site.

The important relationships within a Web-based community are not limited to those between its users. The service provider should also be involved—while being careful not to interfere—in the activities of the community. The service provider is by far the most powerful agent affecting all aspects of a Web site, so it helps for the members of the community to know the provider and host as human and accessible rather than as a nameless, faceless, and invisible power pulling the strings behind the curtain of the Web interface. In Chapter 3, "Establishing and Maintaining Key Relationships," and Chapter 4, "Involving Your Staff," I'll expand on the critical relationship of the site and its staff with the community.

Exchange: Finding Value in Community Interaction

The trust that opens the door to relationship-building is the same trust that greases the wheels of exchange among the members of a community. What are these *things of value* that people must exchange to transform a mere assemblage into a community? Their nature varies with the people and with the focus that brings them together.

In communities based heavily on person-to-person communication, such as Diabetes.com, people value the benefits that they find in those communications: care, concern, humor, and advice. Regular visitors to the conferences in Café Utne and the chat rooms of LiveWorld's Talk City (www.talkcity.com) also value the amusement provided by members' stories and wisecracks, the knowledge shared from their expertise, and the recommendations drawn from their experience. For some, the value may be in the simple reliability of others' presence and attention. When they need a place to go and connect with someone, they know there will be somebody "home" in the online community.

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The Gift Economy of the WELL

The WELL always charged subscription fees to its members, but also provided free access to members who added value to the system. Some of these were experts in technology who helped us manage the system, some were journalists who occasionally wrote about the community, and some were just interesting people who enriched conversations. There was no need to negotiate a number of free hours for a set amount of services; people seemed willing to accept the loose arrangement because the WELL provided them with access to people and conversation that meant something to them.

People's needs determine the things they value at a given time. One day, a member would need help configuring a software program; another day, someone might need a circle of caring friends. The entire community would benefit when an expert member provided advice for recovering from a system crash, and everyone would feel included when the community was mentioned in a news story. The things of value that people found at the WELL had many descriptions for many individuals, but they were cumulative, reinforcing, and appreciated on a community-wide level. Giving for the good of the community became a valued thing in itself.

Exchange Means More than Just Receiving

Of course, more material things can also be exchanged. Those used VW parts are hard to come by anywhere else except at the Vintage Bus site. Thom is in touch with his community and knows not only what they need but what entertains them. He understands the importance of providing stuff that is valued by bus owners and of making it reliably available. He isn't paid for his work and neither are the people who help each other with repair tips, or those who upload pictures of cherried-out microbuses. Exchange isn't about dollars and cents; it's more about serving what the community's members recognize as their common and personal needs.

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People needn't be *recipients* in the exchange to be motivated to return to a site. As you've probably experienced many times, the Net tends to be a generous place. People enjoy giving, especially in socially interactive situations in which the appreciation of the group can be expressed to them. Exchange is not a one-way thing; it goes back and forth; it's reciprocal. Where relationships exist between people, there is something to be gained by contributing, and this is a key asset of community anywhere, online or off.

On a Web site, members produce content as a way of servicing their relationships. They tell each other not only what they know, but what they feel, what they've discovered, and what they can't put up with. They express themselves on public stages in ways that enrich, entertain, and sometimes frustrate each other. On the personal level, many find fulfillment through the respect and admiration they receive from the group in exchange for their contributions. And, tellingly, many find reward in getting attention, no matter what they have to do or who they have to offend to get it.

Setting the Example for Openness

As host, it's part of your job to nurture the kind of open expression and personal exchange that is essential to the sense of community. This may at times mean setting an example by granting certain rights and access to your users that go counter to your more paranoid business instincts. Some of your members may engage in public criticism of your system. Listen, respond, and learn from them; don't ignore them or try to make them go away. Your members may want to discuss the merits of sites that you consider your direct competitors, or review products that compete with those of your sponsors. Don't just let them, support them, even by providing the links on your site.

Hagel and Armstrong list this policy of open information exchange as one of their basic elements: *access to competing publishers and vendors*. Practically speaking, it's not worth your while to try to enforce restrictions against such access. This is the Web, after all. Restricting your community's access to any relevant information goes counter to the *information wants to be free* ethic of the Net, besides being technically impossible. Involving yourself in your community's search for relevant data can be an opportunity to find out more about your members' needs and wants so that you can better respond to them. Allowing such exchange to happen, even to the extent of facilitating it, may mean putting

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the interests and needs of the community ahead of your usual competitive priorities, but management concessions to the community will turn out to be one of those valued things that, for you, is worth exchanging for the community's trust and honest feedback.

History: The Community's Image of Itself

A community has a memory. The more of its members who are conscious of the passage of time and the accumulation of collective experiences, the stronger that memory. Some of the most robust and long-lived communities on the Net keep archives of significant content and their most interesting conversations. Their years of collective experiences may have given rise to traditions, jargon, and standards of behavior that are far more important and relevant to them than the rules and structure imposed by the service provider. History is where a community builds a sense of itself.

The Web tends to be an ephemeral medium where information is displayed and replaced frequently. Sites change their design, their focus, and their content so often that it's difficult to think in terms of months or years of stability, but communities need time to establish themselves and sink deep roots if terms like *loyalty* are going to have any meaning. The Web is very young and still going through the early stages of development, but I hope those providing sites where community can form are thinking in terms of years, rather than months, in their planning.

Assuming that your site will exist for an extended period of time, there are things you can do to help build a sense of history for your community. Notice that events create memories. Regularly scheduled events create traditions. Plan and organize events, and celebrate anniversaries with your community to help it to see itself as something living and changing through time. Archive the best of your interactions and content where members can access them. Just the existence of an archive signifies accumulated history.

Some communities come together for intentionally brief periods when the event actually defines the community. These *virtual events* happen on the Web just as they do in the real world where people assemble in stadiums and arenas to root for their teams, express their political opinions, and adore their favorite

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rock bands. People meet each other one-to-one in the midst of these crowds. They extend courtesy and generosity to each other, performing the exchanges that enrich their experience even though they may never see each other again. Events are special because they contrast with people's normal routines. They don't last long enough for their members to look back on history, but they create histories that people carry with them when the event is over.

In April of 1996, IBM sponsored the challenge match between their Deep Blue computer and world chess champion Garry Kasparov. The event lasted for 6 games over 12 days. I helped produce a conferencing component that accompanied the match, linked from IBM's Chess Challenge homepage. Millions of people followed the event through the Web, chess fanatics and chess newbies

The WELL's Archives and Traditions

The WELL keeps an Archives conference where discussions of historical significance to the community as a whole are kept in their original, unedited form. Some of these discussions, such as "Early Impressions of the WELL," give historical perspective, while others, like "The Birth of Gopod," document the origins of WELLian jargon. Like a dusty attic, Archives doesn't get much traffic, but when new people join the WELL and ask how its culture evolved to be the way it is, they're often directed to read a topic or two in Archives to get some historical perspective.

The collection also serves as a remembrance of people who are no longer around but were once influential in the community's development. History, even when it covers only 13 years, lends depth to a community and is valued by individuals with an appreciation for what it takes to keep a community together over time. Many WELLers now celebrate their membership anniversaries by announcing them online, and the community marks the passage of time by holding a monthly face-to-face party near its office location, a ritual that has been observed without interruption since 1986.

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alike. Tens of thousands registered for our conferencing site and over a hundred conversation topics were started. Chess grandmasters conversed with chess teachers and computer programmers, curious Web surfers learned that there was far more to the game of chess than they had ever imagined. Together we watched Kasparov go down in flames in Game 6 and wondered if Garry had just fallen apart or if Deep Blue was really that good. For the duration of our chess discussions, we were indeed a community, fitting all of the attributes and leaving the event with many memories. I give a more detailed account of the planning and execution of this event in Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion."

The Tentative Twenty Revisited

Having explored this definition of online community, how do my semi-randomly chosen candidates stack up against it? Does including the word *community* in one's site description or title mean that visitors will actually find community there? Not necessarily, even when the description refers to "serving the community of. . ." In Chapter 2, "Identifying Group Styles and Needs," I'll describe the different types of relationships that a group of users can have with a site and with each other. There's plenty of room for different *types* of community under this definition. However, having visited them, I can say with confidence that some of our Tentative Twenty just flat-out don't deserve our further attention as true communities on the Web.

Who's Who Online claims to serve the "worldwide Internet community." To the extent that its site is accessible to users of the Internet and that those users comprise a community of any sort, its description is accurate. But that community is hardly one that elicits feelings of belonging or of meaningful relationship. It's too broad a category to bring together. It has too little focus. And most importantly, even if people do consider themselves members of such a community, there are many more vital and intimate communities of which they are members that will certainly take precedence in their lives. For people to truly be involved in a community, it must have strong meaning for them.

Webstock '96 is, by now, merely a memorial to an event; a community once removed. As an event community, its time has long passed, so it sits on the Web as a kind of museum exhibit. While the event was in progress, it drew traffic

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and was considered a success by its organizers, focusing youth on making positive changes in their local communities. Now it's an example of Web content that may have been forgotten about by its server's administrator.

The Virtual Community of Associations is actually no more than a Web-based directory of associations with offices in the greater Washington, D.C., area. Given that most associations have headquarters there in order to lobby Congress, their directory is impressive. But as of this date, there's no facility on their site for interchange and discussion. A virtual community? No. A good contact list? Yes.

Neighborhoods Online is probably the most community focused of all my Tentative Twenty and yet, ironically, its site does not really host a community of its own. Instead, it serves as a resource center for people trying to revitalize their real-life neighborhoods. Given many of the common problems shared by people attempting to do that kind of work, I can see the potential for an interactive community of these people on the Web, but without any interaction between its visitors or between visitors and host, it doesn't qualify for our definition.

Nonprofit Online News is actually just that: a clipping service on the Web that serves nonprofit organizations. It invites people who work for or run NPOs to submit their own clippings, so in some sense it supports communication and interaction, but without facilities for discussion or a strong point of view from its host, I don't recognize it as a community on the Web.

The rest of the Twenty survived my scrutiny, though a few just barely. We'll be visiting most of them along with many other sites as we progress through the book. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, there are many types of community and degrees of *communityness*. This book's definition describes the attributes of an *ideal* online community, one that grows *organically*, according to the natural development of human relationships rather than the market forces of a competitive environment. Not all of you will be able to afford to grow ideal communities, but neither can you afford to ignore these attributes if you hope to realize the benefits of community on your site. Remember the benefits that community can bring, and try to balance your short-term business needs with the long-term goals of establishing your site as a regular meeting place with a participative and enthusiastic population. Commit yourself to building trust and loyalty among your users, and the community pieces will fall together. You

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can't rush human relationships, but you can always communicate your intentions. Start with the right ones and users will respond positively to them.

Summary

The term *community* is used today to describe a wide range of services on the Web. Not all of them emphasize or provide for conversation or interaction between their users. Not all invite users' contributions of any kind. Such services won't realize the benefits that can be gained through nurturing relationships between people and involving them in their site's content development. In this book, those relationships, contributions, and involvements are central to our working definition of *community* on the Web.

According to that definition, members of a community feel a part of it. They form relationships and bonds of trust with other members and with you, the community host. Those relationships lead to exchanges and interactions that bring value to members. It's that value that draws them back repeatedly to your site where, over time, they build shared histories of experiences and events. This reliable traffic and the members' contributions of information, ideas, and feedback are the major benefits you'll realize by fostering community on the Web.

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IDENTIFYING GROUP STYLES AND NEEDS

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With an idea in mind of what a community is, it's time to survey the many faces that *community* can assume on the Web. I'll be using the definition I formulated in Chapter 1, "Defining Community on the Ever-Changing Web," as a kind of filter for the remaining content of this book. Only sites in which the four attributes exist or stand a chance to will be featured from here on, but that hardly cuts down on the variety, for you'll see that many, on the surface, bear little resemblance to each other. In terms of interface design and content, what's appropriate for one group rarely is for another. Still, it's common to find focused populations being forced to adapt to formats and platforms that don't fit their styles and needs because the site provider chose expedient solutions.

Too often, people try to paint all online communities with the same broad brush, but that's just as wrong as lumping together all collective activities in the physical world. Some groups meet to talk, some to party, some to dance, some to learn, and some to backpack into the wilderness. And that simple breakdown doesn't even begin to touch the gaps between ballroom dancers, square dancers, and rave dancers; or between the students of retirement planning, snowboarding, and Zen Buddhism. The variety of group activity in cyberspace is like that. To provide the right space and facilities for a community, you have to understand its needs and its style of communication.

If you're familiar with the community you're preparing to host, you can anticipate those needs and styles. Often, though, the population develops its

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personality after its arrival. You may find yourself hosting groups you didn't expect. Or maybe you know exactly whom to expect, but you're not sure how to design the services that will fit them. This chapter addresses such situations by providing some simple principles and categories for recognizing the different ways in which people interact with others and with content.

A group's styles and needs are not static; they change as the community matures. The four attributes tell us only what should be true about groups that we consider to be communities. What they don't tell us is how the visiting population of a site *grows into* being a community. Unless it has been transplanted whole from an offline existence, an online community begins with no members, no relationships, and no history. It will take months, at least, before it can even claim a *history* at all. Between startup and its coming of age at communityhood, it will grow through awkward stages just like any teenager or any new Web site. You should keep it under observation as it morphs from one personality to the next, because you'll find yourself constantly adjusting your approach to its service.

The people you attract, the attraction itself, your management style, and the design of your site all influence the personality and behavior of the population that spends time with you. You design your site to fit what you believe to be the personality of your target audience, but you also design it to support and encourage certain behaviors, whether they be conversation, the construction of members' homepages, or reaction to your editorial content. Using the profiles of community types that I've put together here, you should be able to recognize the group characteristics that will help you effectively plan and manage its activities and interaction.

Formative Influences of Communities

The nature-nurture debate is one of the longest-running controversies in the behavioral sciences. Do we bring our personalities into the world with us as hand-me-downs from our parents and ancestors, or do our personalities form through the experiences we go through after we're born? A combination of the two is generally accepted to be the answer, and that's the way of online communities: Their personalities are partly determined by their focus and the people who join them to pursue that focus, and partly developed through the actual interaction of their members in the Web environment. So, just as with people, you can predict

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the odds that certain characteristics will be in a community when it first forms online, and beyond that, it will be under the influence of many unpredictable factors.

I'd love to give you a formula for transforming your visitors into a lasting productive community. That would be sure to make this book a hit. But there are no foolproof magical techniques for invoking the four attributes and their benefits. There is no incantation that will work for every occasion and every collection of people. There is no absolute right or wrong way to go about fostering community

Roots and Ruin

There are innumerable routes to community, and fate can play just as big a role as deliberate action in getting there. The WELL attracted its earliest members from the readership of *Whole Earth* publications—a population accustomed to active participation with the editors and writers of its books and magazines—and from the early adopter population of personal computer users. Its initial users were curious, technically confident, and eager to contribute and converse. But subsequent events internal and external to the online community were as much responsible for the style and personality of the community as its social derivations.

The WELL won the loyalty of many of its members during the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989. As its managers, we were humbled by the effect of that seismic event in demonstrating the value of a networked community. In the midst of widespread disruption of local communication and transportation, people stayed in touch and checked on each other through our conferencing system. In the aftermath, they shared harrowing stories and soothed each others' frayed nerves. They discovered deeper levels of relationship and new facets in the characters of their virtual neighbors. Nature inflicted a lot of damage in the Bay Area, but as a side effect she bonded many of the WELL's members and even gave a permanent boost to our business.

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because each one is a unique social entity. Nevertheless, some practices have proven to be effective, and some have shown themselves to be counterproductive. I expect my recommendations in this book will save you some time and headaches, but the style, flavor, and personality of your site and its community will be up to you and the people who join. As the host, the first move is yours. You decide on the population segment you initially want to attract, and you choose the reasons for bringing them to their future home on the Web. Once people have settled themselves on your electronic real estate, you'll never have such clear control over them again.

Expectations Shape Behaviors

Another way of looking at your influence on the community you host is through your expectations of it. The community itself will be made up of the individuals who spend time on your site. You think you know who will join the community and you design your site intentionally to attract and please them, but on the Web many different kinds of people may actually discover you and join for surprising reasons. But because you expected people described in a certain way, the site and its content are fitted to their anticipated needs. It's as though you were running a summer camp and you expected all of the kids to be a certain size, so your cabins, your beds, and your T-shirts were all made accordingly. Any kid who showed up who didn't fit your expectations would feel less comfortable, and that's largely how narrowly targeted sites can make visitors feel who don't fit the designer's profile.

A site created to build traffic and revenue as fast as possible is going to foster a different style of interaction and relationship from one designed to be an effective meeting place and resource center for a specific group. Success for one will be measured in page hits and advertising dollars, while success for the other will be a function of the number of people supported by the site's content and membership. The former may need to count its users in the hundreds of thousands; the latter may wait two years before word of mouth pushes its population past a few hundred. They are very different *profiles* of community, based on the means they use to reach their different goals.

Your reason for hosting a community on the Web could be to support your hobby, or to provide what today is considered a requisite component for a venture

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capital–funded online business. Your community may be born under pressure to pay for itself immediately, or it may be subsidized by your company as part of its customer service program. Your site may be created primarily for content delivery or to sell merchandise. Your reason for building a community will inevitably color its character.

Intuitively, and from seeing what has happened to traditional neighborhoods in our real lives, we know that the forced rapid growth of a population is a recipe for social instability. We understand that relationships can no more deepen and strengthen amid a torrent of passing strangers than a seedling can take root when the earth around it is continually being plowed. It's very difficult to provide personal support and attention to individuals and small groups when the goal is to increase their numbers from zero to half a million in the first year. A site not under pressure to grow may very well have other problems, but its users have a better chance of finding personal attention.

Your community will probably begin its existence in a form shaped by your vision of it, but it won't remain that way for long. It will grow and push itself into different forms. If you're flexible—as you should be—and if you allow people to freely interact with each other and with you, you and your community should continue to get along just fine.

Communities Vary As Humans Do

Some of us are extroverts and some are introverts. We display a range of emotions, moods, and degrees of consideration for others. We each have our quirks. (C'mon, admit it.) Yet we're all humans and, as humans, we each belong to many different social groups. Each of us who participates on the Web adds to its collective diversity and to the variety among its communities.

The personality of a conversational community is often defined by a small number of its most conspicuous, generous, and persuasive members. Charisma works on the Web, and whether you set the style or your most creative members do, your community will eventually develop a personality that will distinguish it from all others.

This is not to say that there aren't communities on the Web whose formats are essentially identical to each other. The teen chat room is one archetypal example; the personal finance forum is another. You can predict a high percentage

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of the conversation you'll find in either; they generally stay true to type. But even within their types, the distinguishing differences are likely to be the mix of individual personalities whose voices are heard in them. Communities vary because people do.

Many factors will affect the personality of your community. The most important will be the members whose participation gives it its heart and soul. They're the ones who will make it into a scene that other people recognize and identify with. They will draw in more people like them who value and emulate their styles. Attracting these charismatic trend-setters, recognizing them when they arrive, and winning their loyalty is an extremely important process for guiding your community in the direction you'd like it to go. It may be your best chance for determining what your scene will be like, for group whim can be a very unpredictable force. Communities happen where people make them, not necessarily where you intend for them to be.

Okay, I realize that within the past couple of pages I told you, first, that you'll have tremendous influence over the type of community that grows on your site, and then, that your community will largely define and lead itself regardless of what you want it to do, or where you want it to go. I contend that both of these are true. Community is a compromise between you and the people who inhabit your site. Neither of you will have your way all the time, but both of you should feel grateful for what the other brings to the partnership. The more enthusiasm the members of your community have for establishing an identity for themselves, the happier you should be. Recognize the needs of your community as being the needs of its individual members. This is the age of one-to-one marketing, and online community is where that principle must be applied in the most literal sense.

How Communities Differ

Differences in the style, size, focus, and nature of online communities can be considerable, affecting the design, technology, staffing, and content of the sites that support them. Seemingly small differences between groups can have major effects on the way their home sites are structured and hosted. It's expensive to rebuild a community once you've realized that the discussion platform, hosting techniques, and site design you followed were bad fits from

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the beginning. Hopefully, the following profiles of different community types and their particular needs will help you avoid such a scenario.

A Taxonomy of Community Profiles

Taxonomy is a term usually reserved for classification theories in the sciences. Let me assure you, the following is by no means a science lesson, and my intent is not to be academic but to give you some practical perspectives to help in planning and managing your communities. I borrow the term from science because it's the most appropriate one I can find to describe different but obviously related types of a thing, our *thing* being online communities. This taxonomy is used as a simple naming system for identifiable profiles of group interaction.

You can apply these profiles to already functioning sites and user populations as well as to those that still exist only in the conceptual stages. They're useful for comparing and contrasting a range of community configurations on the Web. Your community's profile impacts your planning and development, from the wording of advertising and press releases to your choice of discussion platform and the composition of your management team. Each of these traits of collective behavior requires a different approach from you as community host.

The profiles are derived from three relational aspects of groups—*interaction*, *focus,* and *cohesion*—all of which vary along separate but related continuums. Each of these continuums has what I call an *ideal extreme*, which is the end of the scale that represents its maximum reading: more interaction, more focus, and more cohesion (see Figure 2.1). These are conditions that most hosts would give their eye teeth to see happening between people on their sites. But being continuums, and extremes of any conditions being difficult to maintain, communities exhibiting pure states of any of these aspects do so only fleetingly. Of course, any group's description is a combination of its placement on all three scales, though most will tend to be stronger in one parameter than in the others; there are communities, for example, known more for their interactivity than for their focus.

A Web community may be highly interactive and focused, with little cohesion between its members (picture a rehash of the game on a Super Bowl chat site). Or it may support moderate interactivity with vague focus but still have a very cohesive membership (like a typical "Baby Boomer" chat room). And members

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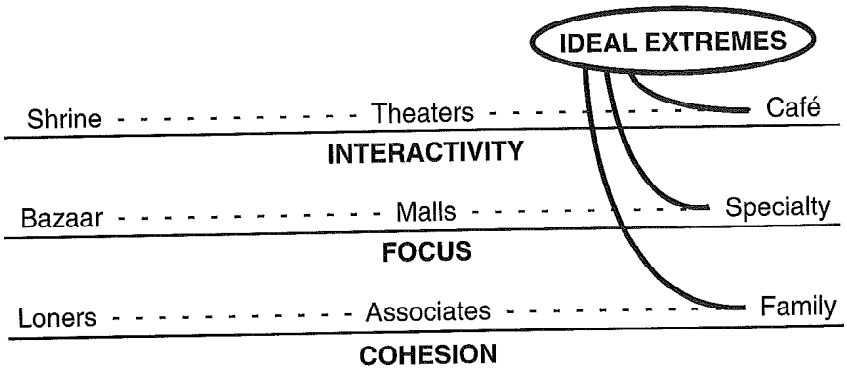
Figure 2.1 The three continuums of comparative group behavior and their associated community profiles. The ideal extremes are where the most community-supportive relationships can be found.



of an extremely focused group may never interact or get to know each other at all (as we'll see on a Web site dedicated to Elvis). And the fact that a group fits one profile at a given point in time doesn't mean it's frozen there forever. Certain interactive situations are prone to change and mutate in predictable directions. It's probably more accurate to consider these as tendencies rather than as permanent, pure, and all-encompassing conditions of communities.

The existing groups I describe in this chapter are gatherings of people in Web-based environments. In some cases, they exhibit all of the community attributes, but in a few I refer to groups that fall together almost by chance at the same URL, with no intention of forming lasting relationships. Many factors can transform these random social patterns into community, but the first essential element is a *place* in cyberspace where people's presence and attention come together. Once you've provided such a site, you have a platform on which these variations on the group behavior theme can be played out.

The Range of Interactivity: Cafés, Shrines, and Theaters

As I'm sure you've noticed, groups vary in how much their members interact with each other. On the Web, one end of the scale is characterized by sites with

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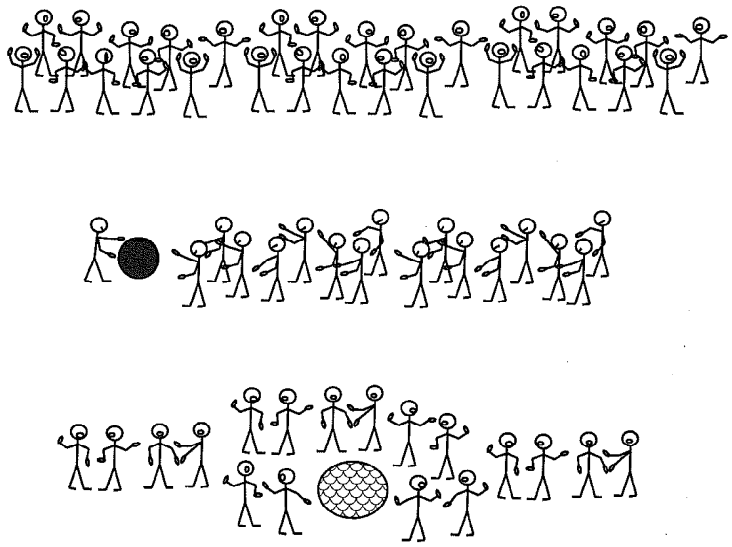
minimal communication between users but with content that is very relevant to them. On the other end, interaction between members is the only reason they even visit the site. Filling out the range between the two ends are groups with different proportions of their interest going to human interaction and to the content found on their sites. In Figure 2.2, you see these configurations characterized by my handy friends, the Stick People.

In a *café*, the community *is* the interaction and the constant give-and-take between individuals and the group as a whole. I call them *cafés* because they are places driven by the energy of conversation and exchange, where relationships are continuously forming, growing, and, occasionally, blowing up. Opinions fly and often clash. Humor mixes with serious talk. Friendships lead to business deals and conversations lead to romance. New contacts and information are there for the finding. The personal interchange draws people back day after day. For some, the interaction is almost addictive, and important relational histories are

Figure 2.2 Three degrees of interactivity. In cafés (top) the interaction is everything. Shrines (middle) have little interaction between members. Theaters (bottom) have an attraction that stimulates member interaction.



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built through the dependable attendance of a conspicuous core of the population: the *regulars*. Many people will join just to watch the action, not necessarily to take part in it. The café is the *productive extreme* of the interactivity continuum. A community profiled as a café is likely to bring maximum benefits to the site by way of user-created content and loyalty.

Where interaction is low on the group's priority list, but shared interests among the group's members are significant, we find *shrines*. People visit shrines for their content, not to converse with each other. The visitors to a shrine share interest in something that is important to them, whether it be a sports team, a sports car, a software program, or a dead rock star. The habitual visitors to a shrine are like fanatics. In some cases, they *are* fanatics, and on the Web they will visit a site with the sole purpose of staying up to date with all there is to know about the object of their fanaticism. Their bond with fellow fanatics is understood; there is no further need for discussion between them. Web shrines provide their visitors with facts, news, statistics, and icons—representations of the objects of devotion. In exchange, the visitors sometimes leave *offerings* in the form of mail messages to the host and content that can be posted for the group's benefit on the site.

Spanning the distance between cafés and shrines on our scale are *theaters*. People are drawn to real-life theaters by what's presented on stage or screen, whether it be a movie, a play, or a musical presentation. The audience members have common interests in the main attraction, even if it's only for the two-hour duration of the event. In most theaters, the audience is passive as they view the attraction, but may be very animated in their anticipation of it or their reaction to it. There are shrinelike elements in the audience's quiet attention to content and subjects of interest, but there is also enthusiastic conversation about those same elements that remind us of the interaction of a café. Real-life theaters are more episodic than ongoing in their members' relationships, and on the Web this is often the case as people stop by to see the current attraction and move on to other sites. A theater on the Web—where editorially created content is the main attraction—may seem exciting one day and dull the next, but people come back because they are often entertained and informed in the virtual presence of others to whom they can express themselves.

FB00021964

Cafés: Homes of Perpetual Interaction

Where conversation is the main draw, we expect to find an easily accessible and appropriately configured software platform for supporting that interaction. Members of a café are highly motivated to use the interactive tools because they've adopted the Web as an essential communications center for their social or professional lives. Such conversational realms harbor what I call *postocracies*, where all power to create and define the community is in the hands of the people who *post*. In a postocracy, the users who only read (the so-called *lurkers*) matter only to the site provider who counts their page views. Within the community, their silent presence is not acknowledged.

The WELL is a good example of a café in that it provides little more than access to a powerful online structure for meeting and carrying on conversation. Until the Web, the WELL did not produce content for its members, nor did it lead or moderate conversation between them. Its main attraction was, and still is, the presence of interesting people and the things they have to say. It features a recognizable core of regular participants, a strong culture of discussion hosts who manage a wide selection of interest-based communities, and a recorded history of its notable conversations and personalities. Today on its Web site the WELL provides a directory of members' homepages and some background reading about the community and its history, but it still qualifies as a system at the interactive extreme of the scale (see Figure 2.3).

Because member interaction so dominates the WELL's purpose, there has always been high value placed on improving the interface to make it more efficient and convenient for people who use it day after day over months or years. There has also been constant tinkering among its members with the local community standards that define its behavioral guidelines. Both the emphasis on tools and attention to social regulation are typical of conversation-intensive communities. The WELL depends on its creative users to provide its content, both in terms of new topics and interesting postings. It can't afford to stifle the creativity of these core users, even if the most creative of them are often the ones who push the community's limits of acceptable behavior. The WELL has survived for over 12 years largely because it has grown a strong and respected community tradition of member contribution.

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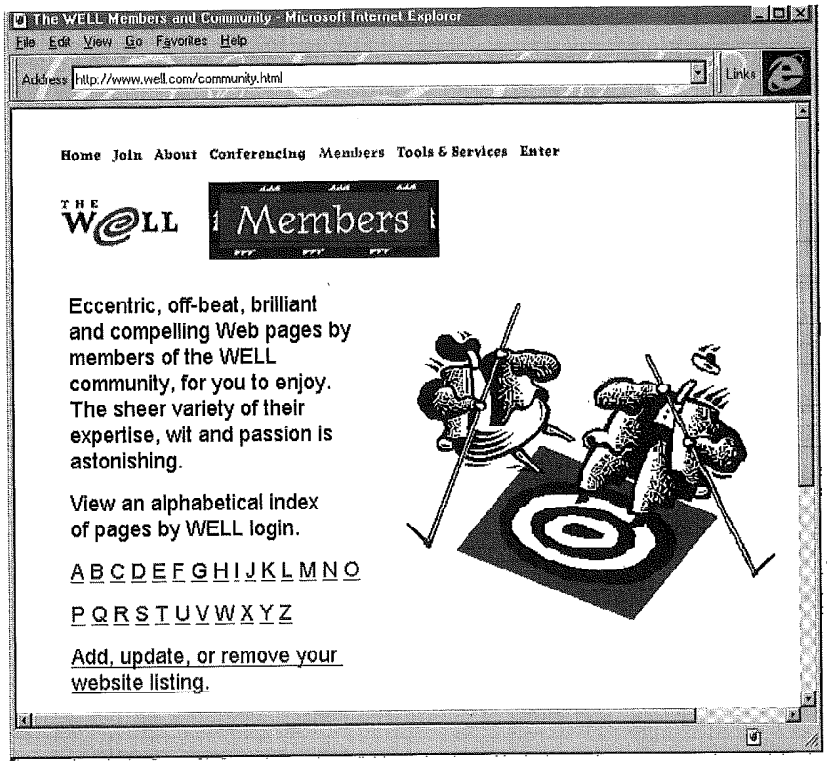
Figure 2.3 The WELL is a classic Web café, centered around the interaction and relationships of its members.



Hosts and Event Programming: Providing Content in a Café

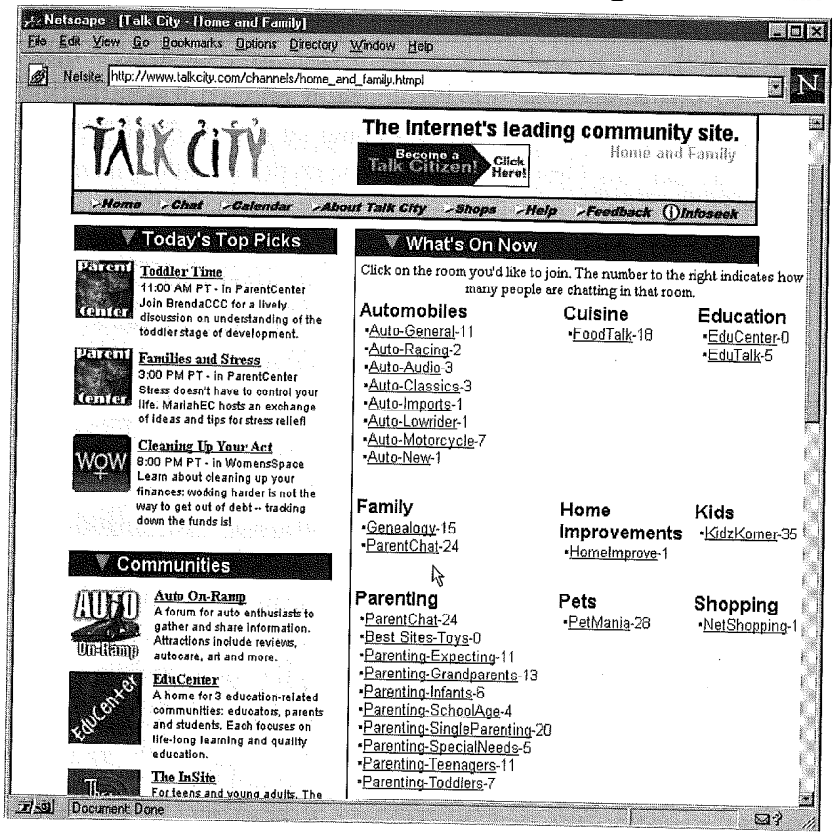
One of the Tentative Twenty, LiveWorld, produces a site named Talk City (www.talkcity.com), which it calls "the Internet's leading community site." Talk City provides a chat interface and message boards for the use of its members. It does quite a bit of *programming*, which, in the realm of online group interaction, means organizing and scheduling special discussions around topics or guests. But through its Chat @ Talk City arrangement, individuals and Web publishers can have chat rooms of their own located on Talk City's site. Some of the listings shown in Figure 2.4 are Talk City productions, and some are hosted by Talk Citizens and external sites. Web users come to Talk City

FB00021966

because it provides them with both content that is programmed and hosted by their professional staff, and access to the tools for programming and hosting discussions of their own, according to the styles and schedules that fit their particular needs.

Hosts—the individuals who work on behalf of the site provider to lead, facilitate, and stimulate conversation in a group-interactive environment—are

Figure 2.4 Talk City produces and manages chat activity, but allows members and other Web publishers to use the Talk City platform to run their own events and communities. This listing includes a mix of both.



Talk City is a property of LiveWorld Productions, Inc.

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an added feature that helps cafélike gatherings coalesce into communities of shared interests. The WELL is known for the quality and strength of its hosting culture and, as I'll cover more completely in Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion," the techniques of discussion hosting vary widely, from the controlling presence of an event moderator to the hands-off invisibility of a discussion platform custodian. For cafés, the less control imposed by the site provider, the better. Café populations thrive when they have freedom to follow wherever their relationships and discussions lead them.

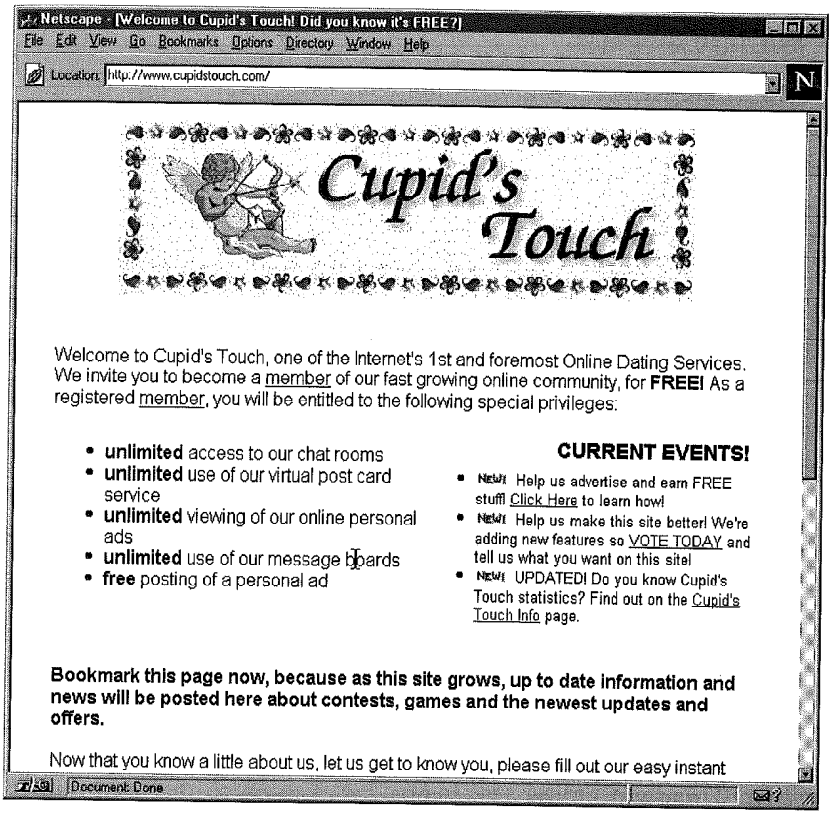
Adding Structure to Café Communities

Being hands-off doesn't mean that the site provider is uninvolved in helping cafés to form and grow as communities. Providers add value by improving infrastructure through the setup and assignment of discussion areas by subject and interest. Without this subdivision into recognizable and natural gathering places, people are likely to become frustrated searching for compatible conversation mates. The WELL and Talk City both manage the creation and organization of specific discussion areas, the distribution of responsibilities to discussion leaders, and the establishment and enforcement of participation guidelines for their members. In some cases, the topic divisions are initiated by community managers, while in others, management accommodates the demonstrated needs and requests of the members. Structure and guidance are important to maintain some order where groups are granted freedom to initiate and steer their own conversations.

Cupid's Touch takes a very strong mutual interest—that of finding a mate—and provides the means for its members to interact toward that goal (see Figure 2.5). As of this writing, it is a young site just beginning to form its community. It provides little guidance for those who register to participate, but given its purpose of sparking romance, the unrestrained and bawdy postings that appear in its message boards and chat rooms aren't too surprising. The "mating mission" is so far being taken quite literally, and there's little else but mating talk going on in public. That style of interaction is typical of open and unregulated conversation on the Net. But an excess of that tone can be poison to the trusting atmosphere required by a community, and some structure for segregating it from the more sensitive interaction that's more likely to attract

FB00021968

Figure 2.5 Cupid's Touch is devoted to the very goal-oriented interactivity and shared purposes of the dating game. As it grows and matures, more structure may be required to satisfy the conversational motivations of its members.



Cupid would help sincere date-seekers find compatible partners. Cupid's Touch provides a cafélike environment that demonstrates the important role that management can and should play in guiding an interactive population toward community.

Cafés require constant attention and careful involvement with the population that is their prime attraction. Their member-generated content accumulates

FB00021969

and diversifies constantly, so some organization and structure must be provided. The larger and older the community, the more content management is likely to be needed. This also has implications for the features of the discussion platform being used and for the duties of community management staff.

Shrines: Fans and Their Offerings

Elvis worshippers who visit the Original Unofficial Elvis Home Page (sunsite .unc.edu/elvis/elvishom.html) are happy to find detailed trivia and legends about their hero while not expressing any particular need to communicate with each other. There are features on the site that qualify the group as a community rather than an affinity group (see Figure 2.6). There are email links for sending questions about Graceland or Elvis himself to the host, and a photo collection of personal Elvis altars provided by one of the site's regulars. There's also an archive of Elvis sightings that have been sent in by true believers over the site's three-year existence. But, representing the opposite extreme from cafés on the interactivity continuum, the essence of relationship going on here is clearly between the spirit of Elvis and his fans.

The Grateful Dead Community Page (www.frognet.net/~scott/dead.html) serves fans of the band with access to information about Dead music, tapes, lyric archives, products, and links to other GD Web sites. Scott, the host and provider of the page, doesn't interact directly with his visitors; he's a resource provider only, as you can see in Figure 2.7.

Obviously, the role of hosting a shrine is to know the topic of attraction inside and out; to be the *keeper* of the shrine, the fanatic among fanatics. Success comes from understanding the needs and values of the community through being a member of it. The community doesn't live through its interactions on the site as a café does, but it exists through whatever its members' common experience is or has been with the attraction. Members of such a community share with each other by contributing things through the shrine's host that they value in common.

Of course, not all shrines are dedicated to rock-and-roll icons. Any site that serves the interests of a highly motivated population without supporting interaction between individuals fulfills this profile. For many individual site builders,

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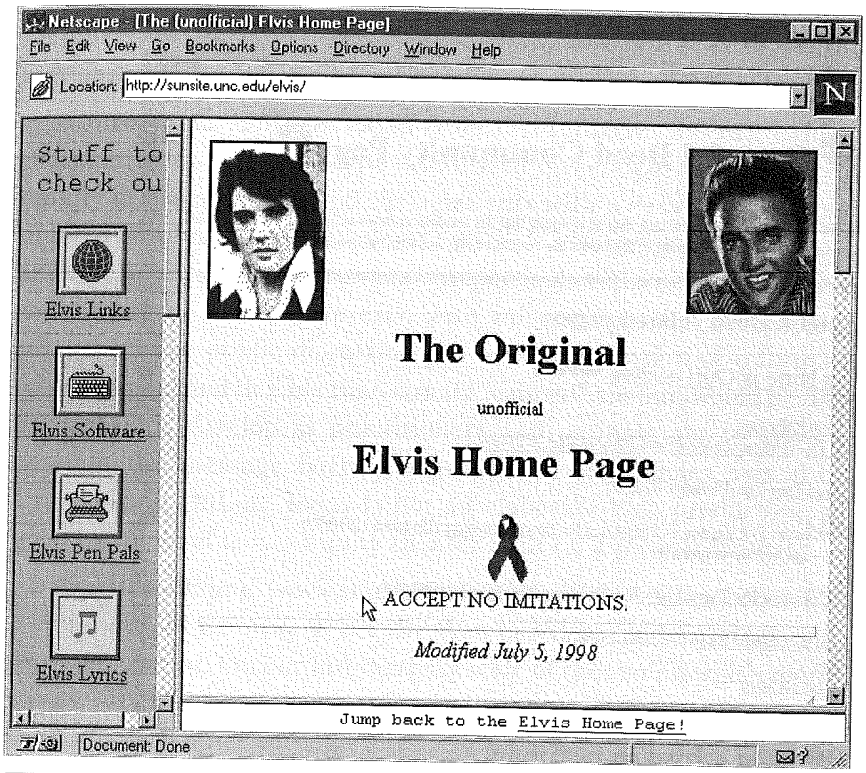
Figure 2.6 All Hail the King! An online shrine and fanzine open to the contributions and offerings of Elvis's loyal but noninteractive worshippers.

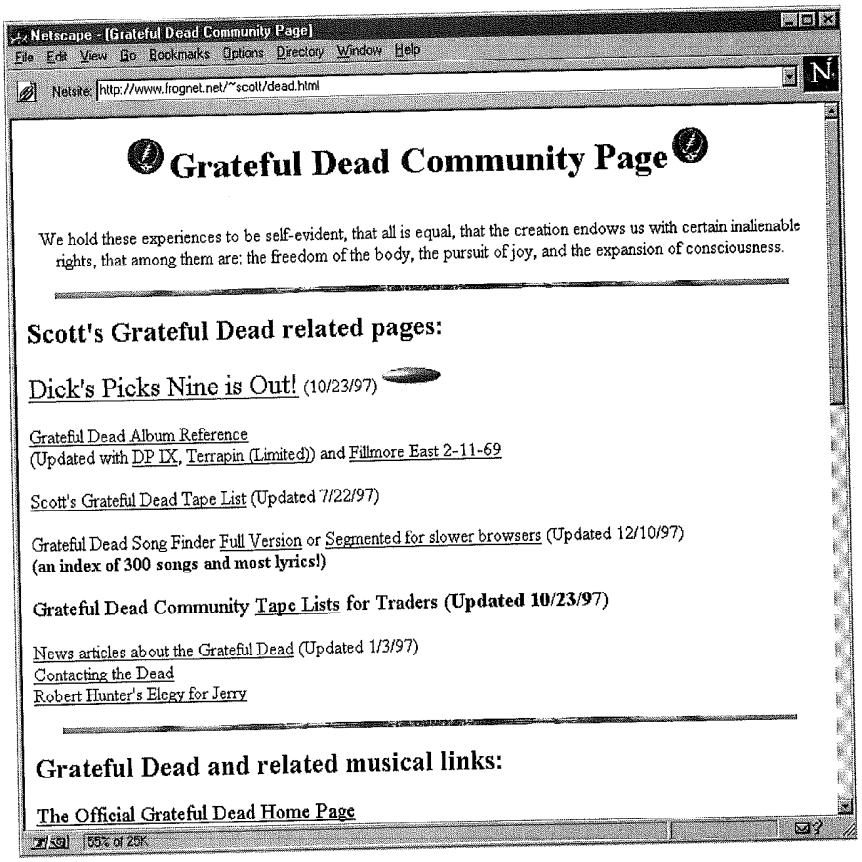


Credit: Andrea Helen Berman.

the resources needed to install and manage a chat or forum platform are beyond their means. A shrine allows them to pursue their own passions while attracting the attention of people who share those passions. The subject may be a hobby, a specific software tool or technique, or a profession. The essential ingredient to make it a community is the involvement of visitors to the site in creating its content. If content is supplied solely by the site provider, even if it serves focused interests, it loses its claim to community.

FB00021971

Figure 2.7 A loyal Deadhead keeps fellow followers informed. This is not the place to go for fans wanting to connect with each other.



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Theaters: Conversation Stimulated by Content

The majority of communities on the Web resemble theaters more than shrines or cafés. They include mostly one-way information presented to viewers who have access to platforms through which they can interact. The editorially provided information addresses a specific interest, and there are opportunities for visitors to contribute and share information and opinions of their own. The interaction, through chat or asynchronous discussion, is initiated and stimulated by

FB00021972

the content of the site. The goal of the theater approach is to attract viewers to the content, then keep them coming back and contributing by allowing them to form *exchange relationships* with both the site and their fellow visitors. Members of a theater-type community appreciate the mix of delivered information, member input, and personal relationship.

Chiropractic OnLine Today, from my Tentative Twenty, exhibits the key characteristics of theater-type interactivity (see Figure 2.8). It serves the community of chiropractors and their patients with a database listing local practitioners, and links to other relevant sites. It also supports discussion about the practice in general and treatments in particular. The site has a very identifiable community of shared interests, with information that is narrowly targeted toward it. The public discussion provides a dimension of information that is more detailed and flexible than strictly "canned" content would be. Interpersonal relationships develop as practitioners and patients get to know each other through the message board conversations and articles posted on the site. Chiropractic OnLine Today is not an elaborate Web production, serving as a good example of a community theater built on a modest budget.

Outside Online (www.starwave.com/outside), on the other hand, is very well funded by its owners. It's the Web-based but independent counterpart to *Outside Magazine*. On our interactivity scale of theater sites, it's more of a shrine than a café because it provides limited opportunity for visitors to express themselves to each other through its Fireside Chat area. There, the site defines the single topic of conversation and invites people to post their views. What Outside Online does for the most part is provide access to the feature articles contained in the current issue of the magazine, covering outdoor sports, adventure, and travel. It also responds selectively to visitors' emailed questions in two forums called Gear Guy and The Lodge. Gear Guy answers inquiries about outdoor clothing and equipment, which seem to be the main attractions of visitors to the site and the primary drivers of its advertising revenue. In The Lodge, guest authors reply to questions sent to them by readers.

Because theater-type communities vary so much in their mix of delivered content and user interaction, the duties of the host range from those of the shrine keeper to those of the café proprietor. Integrating content with conversation involves coordinating articles and information posted on the site with

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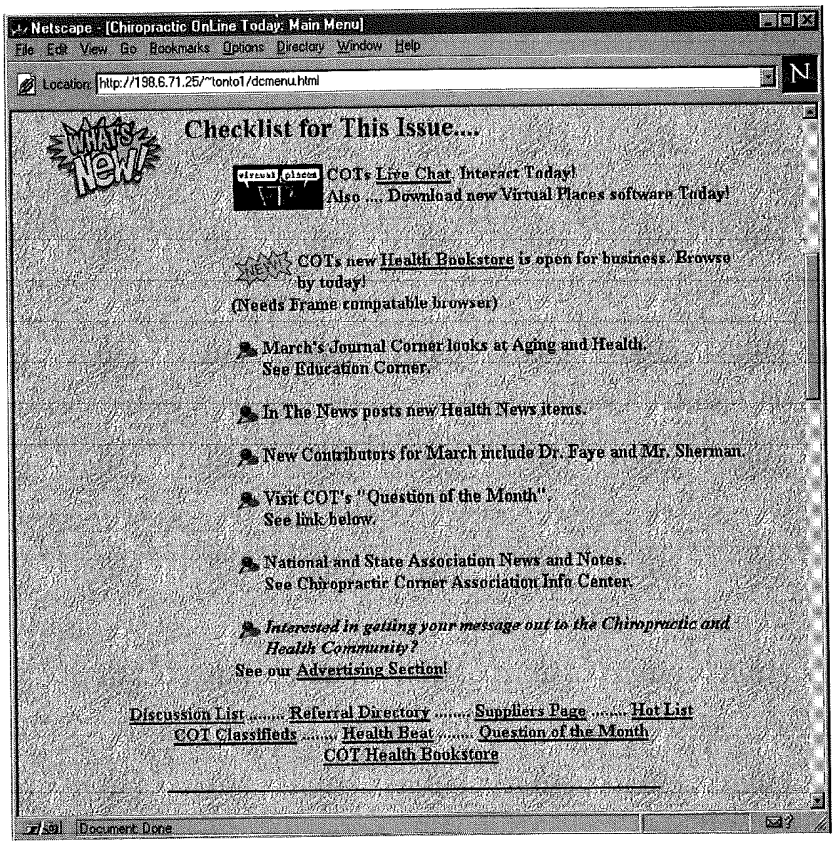
Figure 2.8 Visitors to Chiropractic OnLine Today gather around its updated reading material, then talk about it in chat rooms and a discussion list.



All material © Internet AdCom Services.

timely discussion about it. Content should drive conversation; however, creative site managers will also find ways for conversation to drive content. As we'll describe more in Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," samples of interesting conversation displayed on pages where visitors are browsing for content can draw additional traffic and participation to the community discussion area. The theater experience should be an as seamless as possible mix of content and related conversation to deliver maximum value to its visitors.

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Interactivity Levels and Site Planning

The amount of interaction you expect to support between users affects several critical aspects of your site's design. If you're sure that your members are not going to interact directly with each other, as in a shrine, there's no need to choose, purchase, install, and configure chat or conferencing software. There's no need to hire and train discussion hosts or to deal with the prospects of public misbehavior. And, if there's no content being posted directly by visitors, there's no need to compose and enforce a policy statement regulating their behavior. If you're just going to provide content—defining your user interactivity strictly in terms of email links and submissions of offerings—you'll spare yourself considerable expense, but you'll also sacrifice the benefits of the participative user base.

On shrine-type sites, there may be no community left once members feel they've seen all there is to see, even if the content is kept fresh. Loyal visitors often desire paths to deeper involvement with the content and with the other people who share their interest in it. They may continue to return for updates or, in the case of a more market-oriented site, to purchase products or services, but at that point we begin stretching our definition of community to its limits since personal relationships lose relevance at the low end of the interactivity scale. If the members of your audience have such strong common interests, it's likely they will want to connect with each other. This describes the dilemma of today's strictly content-based site on the Web. The increasing availability of group interaction pushes audiences toward expecting it wherever they find populations attracted by shared interests.

In cafés, where members define the community solely by their interactions around common interests, your role as a host may begin with minimal organization and involvement; setting up some general interest conversation areas, and allowing visitors to chat or conference at will until—as happened in the early years of the WELL—they begin to organize themselves into subcommunities based on affinities they discover on their own. If there's enough quality interaction to keep users coming back, regulars will eventually become familiar with each other, and microcommunities will consolidate out of the initial random interaction. Your role will change from hands-off facilitator to active infrastructure developer, helping to accommodate the population's natural organization while

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helping direct new arrivals to the microcommunities that fit their interests. A core of involved users—grassroots hosts—will likely emerge as your partners in developing the structure and standards of the community and its diverse elements.

Where the interactivity itself is highly valued, the platform used is important not only to you—having to choose and configure it—but to the users who will want powerful tools for customizing the ways they use it. Convenience becomes more important for habitual users of an interface, and extended communications capabilities become valuable to people who have formed meaningful relationships with others through the Net. Either a message board or chat rooms may not even be enough. Highly interactive communities may require a combination of both asynchronous discussion and real-time chat. You can expect that the most social of your members will also want to stay in touch with each other through email and real-time Web-wide messaging tools in addition to using the platforms that you provide.

Degrees of Focus: Shops, Bazaars, and Malls

Our second variable is the degree to which the community is focused. This encompasses the extent to which the success of the site depends on its visitors' interest in its subject or central theme. How important is it that you, as site provider, be an expert in the subject? How much range exists in the level of interest between members?

Knowing the degree of focus is important because it defines the quality of information demanded by the community, and the extent to which discussion will drift into unrelated areas of interest. The tighter the focus, the less you will expect discussion on a site devoted to prostate cancer, for example, to branch off into a forum on professional football. The looser the focus, well, you just never know what people will want to talk about, so you should be prepared for anything.

Our scale in this case extends from the extremely focused populations of *shops* to the casual browsers of *bazaars*. Filling the middle is a range of what I call *malls* because their members prefer to distribute their focus among a selection of communities rather than dedicate their time to just one.

Shops serve specialty needs. They are the boutiques of online interest, and people who join such communities know exactly what subjects they want to

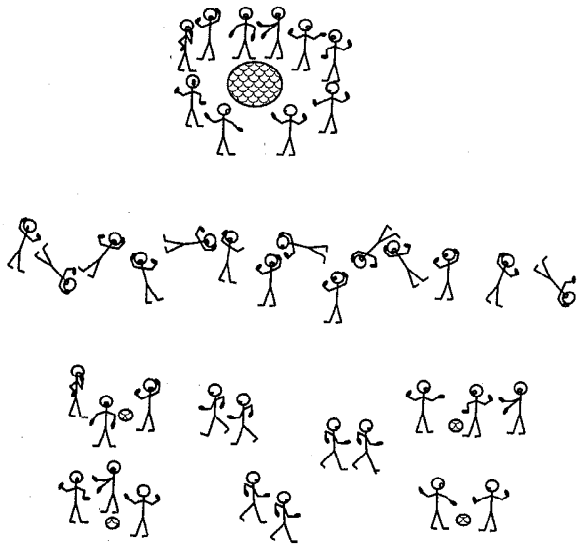
FB00021976

learn about and talk about. In real-life malls, each shopper has certain favorite stores, but the total choice of stores is limited. Bazaars, on the other hand, offer an almost unlimited range of choices and thus attract people who are less interested in finding anything specific than they are in exploring uncategorized possibilities. *Mall* communities are represented by most Web sites on which a diversity of interests are served, even when there is a general focus like sports, entertainment, or computers. In Figure 2.9, the Stick People act out the three levels of focus and being *into* a subject.

The Instability of Focus Extremes

Be prepared for changes in the nature of communities that begin on the extremes of the focus continuum. It's difficult for groups to maintain states of pure focus or of zero focus. Shop communities will tend to diversify their narrow interests as

Figure 2.9 Three levels of group focus. In Shops (top), members share a strong common interest in a subject. In Bazaars (middle), they float about with little in common beyond the interactive platform they share. Mall visitors (bottom) circulate from one interest group to another on the same site.



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relationships develop between members and conversations broaden in scope. Bazaar communities will tend to organize and form cells of interaction based around shared interests as regular visitors get to know each other better.

It's hard to imagine the people in a bazaar profile holding themselves together for long when there is no common interest. They're *cyberspaced out*, as it were. There are situations in which people with little in common come together online only because they are test-driving a new interactive interface, but at least the test-driving is a shared activity. Bazaar configurations can be danger signs. If your site provides a platform for group interaction with no leadership or structure in place to provide initial points of focus, then you're either understaffed for what you're trying to do or you're being negligent. Hellooo!!! It just takes a little active hosting and structure to save a potential community from turning into an instant ghost town on the Web. But you have to be paying attention.

Shops: Zeroing In on Common Interests

Who could be more focused than the sufferers of a life-threatening disease and the people who treat them? There's probably a Web site for every such disease known to medicine, and the good ones, like Diabetes.com, not only serve the medical information needs of their target populations, but allow their users to discuss the specifics of their conditions with each other (see Figure 2.10).

Shops are not necessarily populated by experts, but like experts, their members are deeply interested in the central theme or subject of the site. A shrine, as we've just described, could fit the description of a shop community if the quality, quantity, and relevance of the information found there was high enough, but most shops are far more interactive than shrines. Most well-hosted ones are quite busy, in fact; filled with both information and participation, driven to satisfy their members' common hunger for deeper and more current knowledge.

People join communities with shop profiles deliberately, and those who host their sites on the Web tend to understand intuitively what is needed. Expert communities handle the facilitation chores in their discussion areas by themselves rather than depending on a site provider. Experts in a shop feel a

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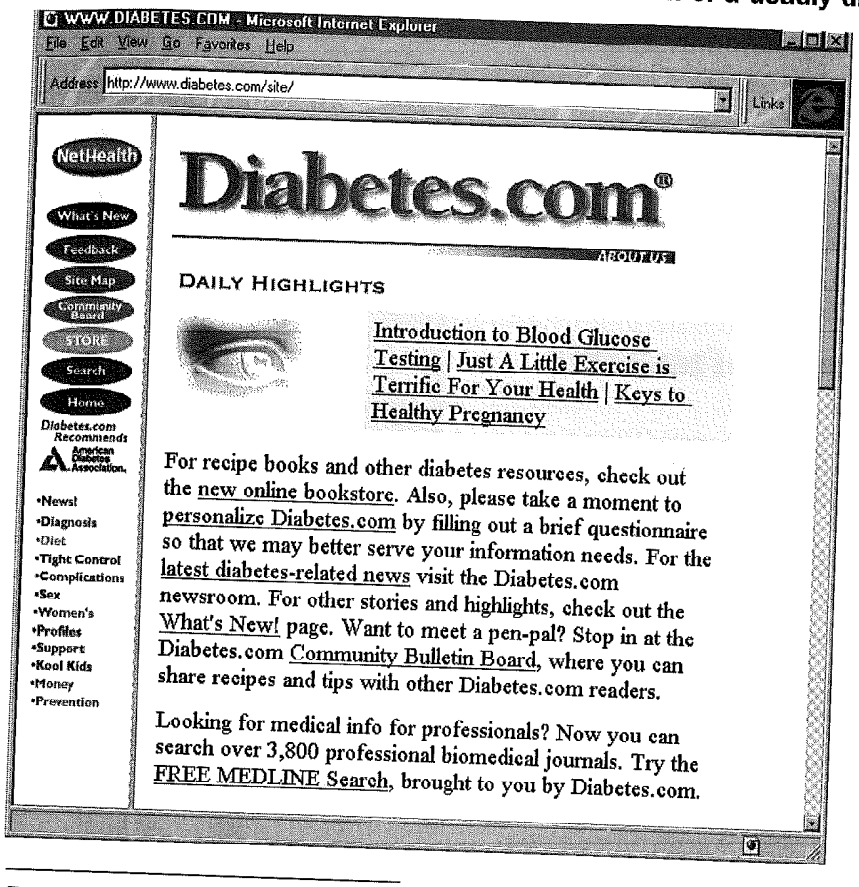
Figure 2.10 As you would expect, Diabetes.com is a highly focused community centered around treatment and discussion of a deadly disease.



From Diabetes.com. Copyright NetHealth, a division of Epicenter Communications, Inc.

sense of commonality with each other even if they hold conflicting views about the object of their focus. The focus itself is a bond between members.

Focused communities like Diabetes.com can be operating independently on the Web, but many exist within larger, more department store–like sites such as Thrive (www.thriveonline.com), where a variety of illnesses have their own discussion and information areas (see Figure 2.11). But where sites shelter a

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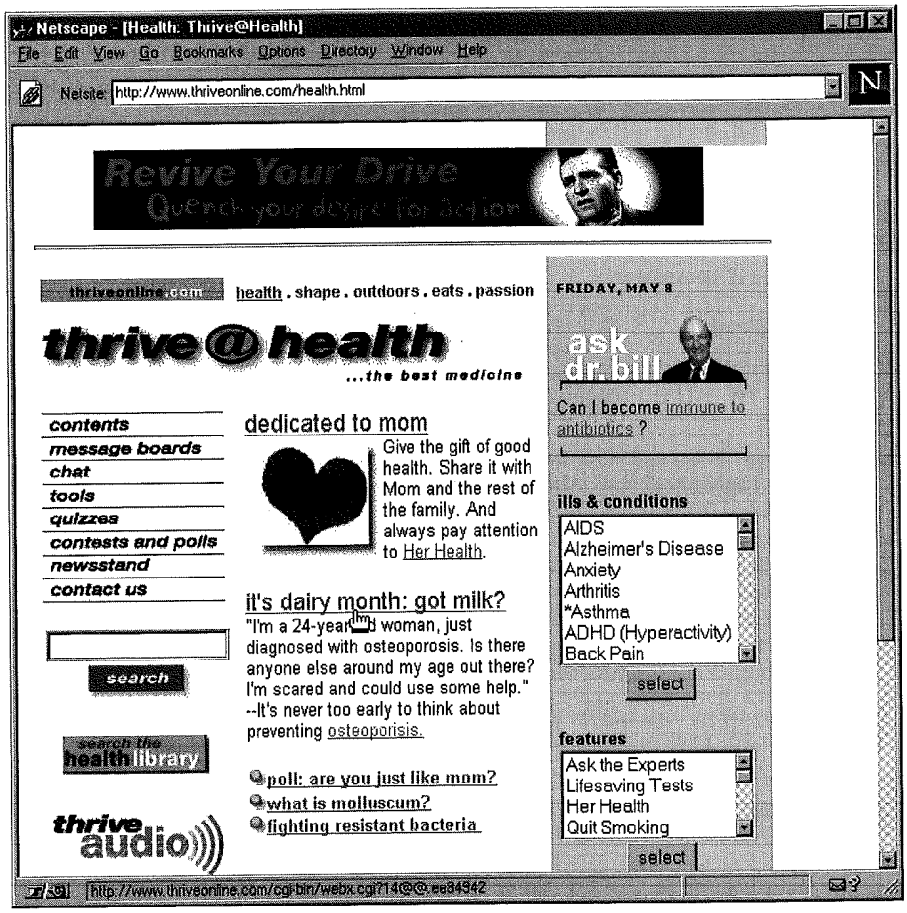
Figure 2.11 Thrive's health site includes areas of concentrated focus on a wide variety of diseases and medical concerns.



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variety of communities, the many attractions may divide attention and allegiance, creating a greater likelihood that people will behave like *mall* shoppers, dipping into a selection of groups catering to their different interests rather than focusing only on one. The truly focused communities, with their specialized and extensive collections of information, still exist more commonly as independent sites on the Web.

FB00021980

Bazaars: Stopping Places for the Unfocused

Spend enough time visiting Web sites and clicking on "chat" links and you're sure to find those spooky and neglected URLs where the provider has made an interactive platform available but has not planned adequately for hosting it. As one of my consulting jobs, I evaluated the Web site of a major metropolitan television station. Linked to its local entertainment section were message boards and chat rooms that had evidently not been visited for months by anyone connected with their operation. Like the people who once inhabited abandoned buildings in London and the South Bronx, a group of individuals had *squatted* in my client's discussion venues. The squatters were not there without permission, but they were using the facilities without supervision. The collection of postings left in the message boards reminded me of lame highway underpass graffiti, showing no evidence of active community. Little did my client know, at the time, what was being published under its URL.

There are sites that *intentionally* attract people to play in an unstructured way on their interactive Web platforms. These include most of what are called *virtual worlds*, environments in which users, representing themselves as graphical *avatars*, move in simulated three-dimensional spaces on the computer screen. The Contact Consortium site (www.ccon.org) serves as a referral resource for many such sites (see Figure 2.12). Most of these systems permit users to chat with each other through normal text windows, but what draws the majority to hang out in their graphical environments is the look and feel of what is on their screens rather than the conversation they find there. Mastering the navigation and expression of a virtual body is like the challenge of playing with Microsoft's Flight Simulator. Some worlds permit you to customize your avatar and some provide tools for actually building structures on their make-believe landscapes. There is so much to play with in graphical environments that playing often supplants socializing as the main activity. And play, rather than relationship building or focused conversation, is what goes on in a bazaar.

Still, any collection of people interacting with each other on the Net must be regarded as a potential community. The less focused they are, the more likely the individuals are there looking for something they haven't yet found. In many cases, all that is needed are some pointers, some links, and some input

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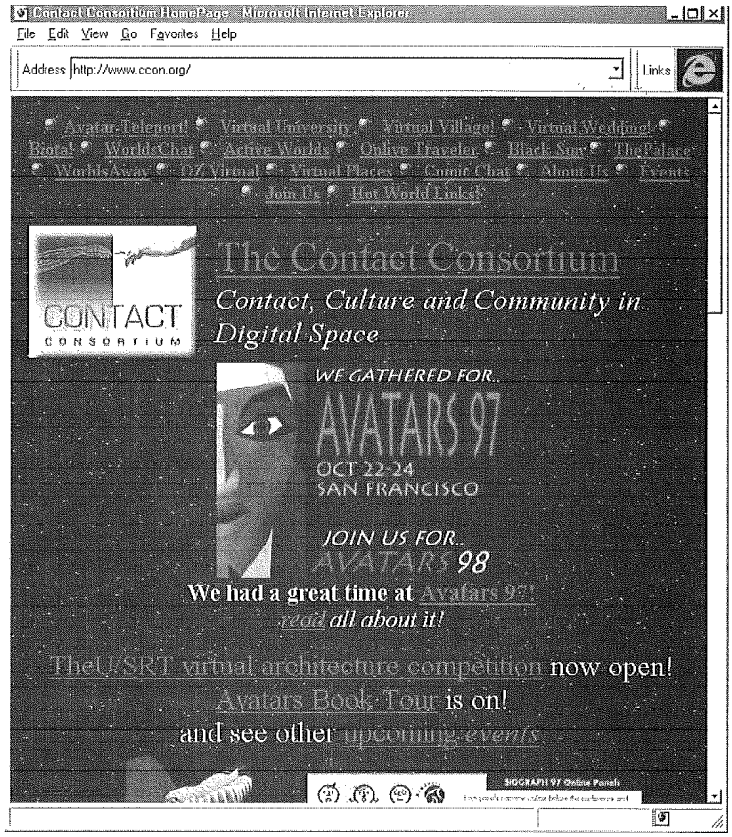
Figure 2.12 The Contact Consortium serves as an educational site and index to interactive graphical environments, called *virtual worlds,* in which the attraction is often the platform itself rather than the people and relationships found there.



© *Contact Consortium 1998.*

from the host to channel their interaction into more fulfilling and community-like experiences.

Malls: Common Locales and Divided Interests

Most sites serving special interests such as music, business, health, automobiles, or news are subdivided—or, as Hagel and Armstrong described it, *fractalized*—

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into areas of finer and finer focus. An adventure sports site attracts people who like outdoors recreation in general, but it may serve different communities formed around many specific sports, skills, and locations. Its members may surf in the summer and snowboard in the winter. They ride their bikes on the local trails and they look for ideas for staying in shape and treating their injuries.

When I visit a general outdoors site on the Web, I visit and sample pages devoted to a variety of my interests. The same would be true if I were visiting a site devoted to general business or health. Mall shoppers tend to visit *index sites* like Adventure Sports Online where general interests are served (see Figure 2.13). There is so much variety on the Web, and it's so easy to click out of one place and into another, that most Web users spend their time browsing through their interests rather than focusing on any one in particular. Their attention may be divided, but they still spend more time at certain favorite index sites than at others.

Malls fit the Web's most prevalent behavior model because they exhibit the mixed interests of most people who choose to move about between information sources. Mall-goers are likely to spend time in sites where the diversity of information makes it convenient for them, the same reason shoppers in real life go to malls. They frequent sites that are flexible enough to allow pockets of expert focus to develop within their greater, more general communities.

The WELL attracts people who like to spend time in online conversation, but it's more than one community. It's, in fact, a myriad of communities and, within the description of its being a highly interactive café, is made up of thousands of shoppers who circulate among its hundreds of Conferences (see Figure 2.14). A visit by an active WELLer might include a stop in the News Conference followed by catching up in Current Events, then a visit to Outdoors, and some time spent in Media. Another user might have a regular itinerary of Sports, Gardening, Parenting, and Spirituality. With so many choices and so little time, it's rare that a WELL member focuses on more than a few conversational communities, but it's common that each member will have a conference or two that gets more attention than the rest.

This distribution of focus illustrates some of the difficulty of describing communities. For while some people visit the Media Conference on the WELL

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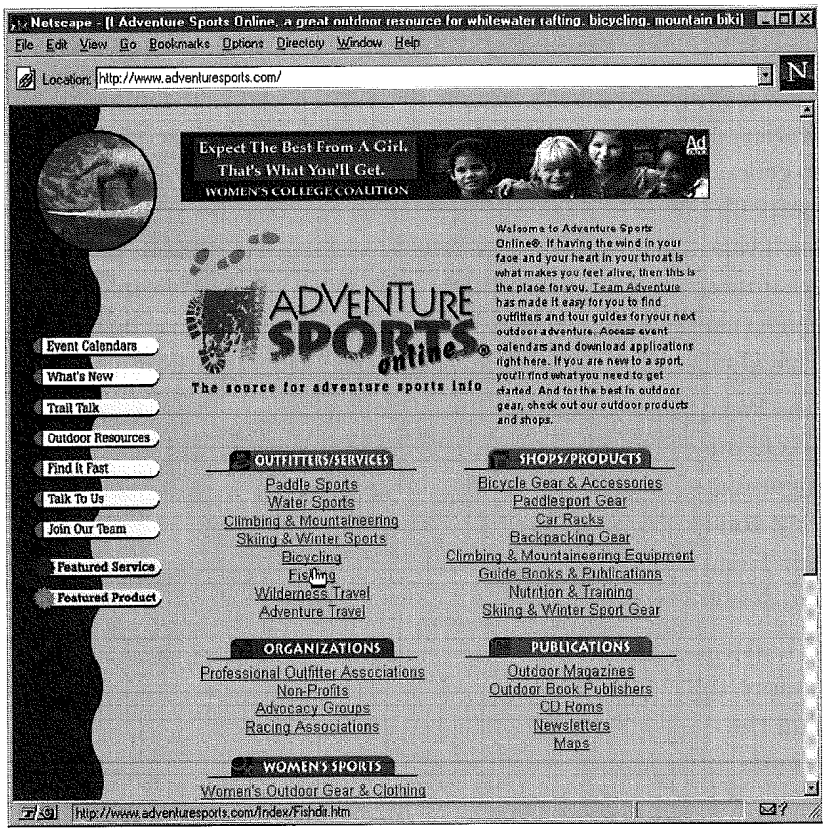
Figure 2.13 Adventure Sports Online is a mall for community shoppers in the outdoors sports world. It serves a range of focused interests rather than concentrating on one.



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because its discussions are relevant to their professions, others visiting the same conference do so for the gossip element, or because they enjoy conversing with people who actually work in the media. Even where a group exhibits the features of community, each person's reasons for participating are likely to be different, as is each person's degree of focus. This is why diversity must be an essential element in a community's definition.

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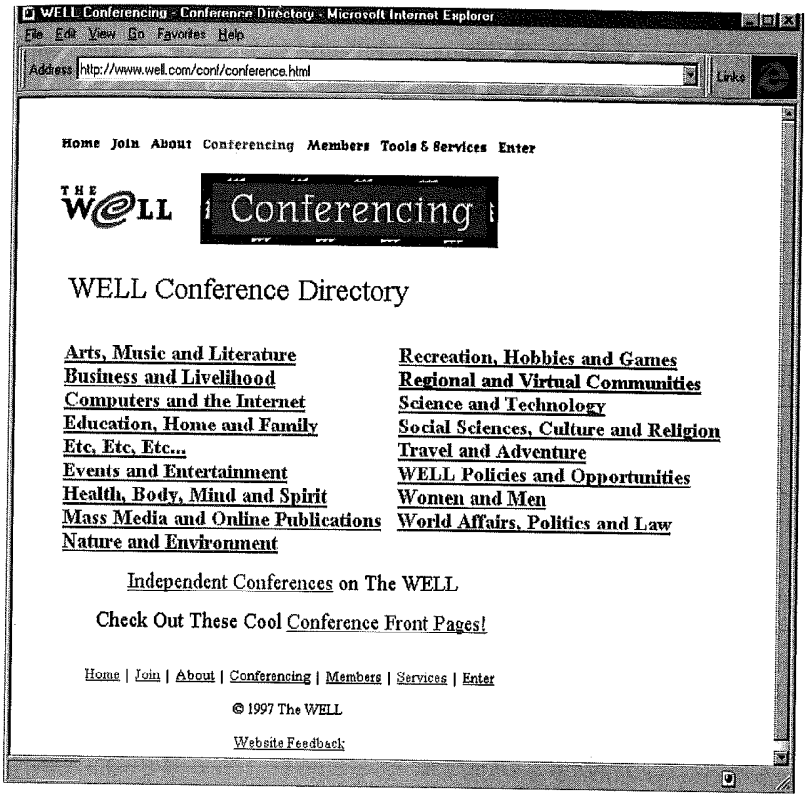
Figure 2.14 The WELL: A community of communities. These are only the subcategories for its hundreds of focused discussion areas called *Conferences*.



How Focus Influences Site Design

Common focus in a population is, after all, what every media marketer attempts to identify. Identify the focus of a group and you can reach all of its members with one message. It's efficient and it works just as well online as it has since marketing and advertising were invented. Identifying and serving a common focus is also the most natural approach to aggregating communities.

Focused sites are easier to describe and to market because they address the needs of natural communities. People can find sites based on a specific subject

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much more easily than they can by the amount of interactivity or cohesiveness. Highly focused Web communities often have knowledgeable leadership in discussion, extensive resources for research, access to relevant products, and the presence of acknowledged authorities in public discussion or interviews. Such communities have little need for facilitation by outsiders; in many cases, they build and maintain themselves.

It's the less-focused communities that offer the most design challenges. Malls may host several or many shops, each expecting the provider to give it special treatment. Each community of focus may require its own editorial staff. Keeping the quality high for every group is more difficult than maintaining quality for just one.

Salon (www.salonmagazine.com) is an online magazine that speaks to followers of diverse interests, from television to books to travel. Each section has its own editor and, in its Table Talk discussion area, each section has its own collection of conversations. There is crossover of participants between its different interest communities, but each must be served separately rather than being lumped into one mixed community soup. A site hosting only one community of focus may therefore find it easier to satisfy just that one if its resources are limited, because it does not have to divide its services.

Most sites today, because of the realities of advertising, need to attract more traffic than they can get through serving a narrow focus. They choose a general interest area like music, and serve communities based on the many categories of music. That way, they can develop a common interface or template for serving music lovers, and change only the content delivered to the various music sections.

Focus is a necessity for enduring community. You may build your site around a focus as a way of attracting a specific audience, or you may build your site around interaction and follow the lead of your users as they discover for themselves what focus-based communities exist between them.

Bonding and Cohesion: Families, Loners, and Associates

Finally, we examine the variable of group and interpersonal bonding. This continuum describes social relationships rather than the environments that support them. How strong are the ties between the members of the community?

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How important is it that those members connect with each other often and repeatedly over time? To what extent are the people themselves the main attraction and the objects of loyalty for each other?

At our extremes on the cohesion scale are *families*, with strong ties between their members, and *loners*, who don't connect with others or put much value into forming personal relationships online. Between them are *associates* who connect with each other and form relationships that range from the deep to the casual. The Stick People posing in Figure 2.15 portray these three states graphically.

Highly cohesive online families are often those with histories developed before coming to the Web. Their members are more attracted to each other than to any accompanying information or services. They have established bonds between individuals and to groups within their overall community. They have processes in place for which the Web is simply a more efficient communications tool rather than the breakthrough application that made their relationships possible. Cohesive offline communities, like people who are attracted to highly focused sites, are great target markets because they are already defined and, in some sense, *prepackaged*. If you can fit your Web site to their needs and win their trust, they can bring community benefits to your site almost instantly.

Where loners hang out, there is little emphasis on relationship building. This may be a result of a lack of tools supporting interaction or a lack of active hosting. It may be that your site is a shrine rather than a café or theater. It may also be a result of the sheer size and rate of growth of your site's population. Relationships, like spawning fish, don't do very well in the midst of raging currents. They can establish themselves better in the eddies and calmer pools of the stream, out of the main channels of traffic. Large sites often feel impersonal and do a poor job of providing the locations, atmosphere, and support for people to connect and get to know each other, even when the focus of the site is compelling.

Most sites that attempt to support group interaction in addition to providing rich streams of information end up with populations that associate with each other on a casual basis. Associates may have a circle of friends with whom they relate regularly, but most of their fellow users remain strangers. The fact that

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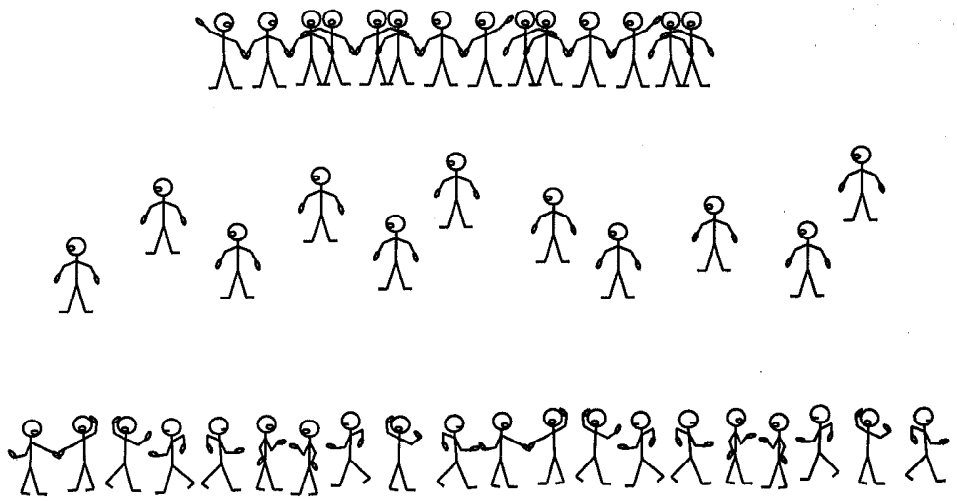
Figure 2.15 Three levels of group cohesion. Families (top) stick together and attract each other. Loners (middle) don't connect with each other. Associates (bottom) meet and interact, but don't necessarily form binding relationships.



most sites don't require visitors to identify themselves contributes to this lack of familiarity, but people are cautious about getting too close to too many people too fast. They drop into chat rooms and zip through discussions without spending enough time to make friends or carry on one-to-one conversations. Some make a point to do so, and thus become core members of more cohesive pockets of community amid the associates.

Cohesion is a quality that snowballs. It begins with one-to-one connections that attach themselves to a meeting place. The more people who pass through and notice, the more they are inclined to join in the relationship, stick around, and become part of the growing snowball. It's up to the host to recognize the expanding core of new community, and to nurture it as it grows.

Families: Sticking Together

A classic example of the effect of a cohesive community was the arrival of the Grateful Dead population on the WELL. At a time when we had no marketing

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budget and an urgent need for boosting membership, three committed Deadheads asked to start a conference on the WELL to serve the fans of the band that had become a cultural centerpiece for a dispersed global community. The fact that it *already was* a community of relationships, customs, traditions, and shared values meant that it didn't require any time at all to establish itself as one in cyberspace.

The Deadhead community had its own means of spreading the word about its new online home, and its members flocked to join the WELL to stay in touch with buddies, get the latest tour and ticket information, see the previous night's set lists, and trade tapes with each other. They were a transplanted community that required little maintenance or facilitation on the parts of the WELL's system managers. In the age of the Web, even after the band retired the name Grateful Dead, the organization that grew up around the band now provides its own site, dead.net, to inform the Deadheads of the ongoing activities of the band members, and to provide them with a place for discussion and chat (see Figure 2.16).

Family communities often have a lot in common with shops and cafés. They tend to be focused and highly interactive. They have a lot of information to exchange, which is often the basis for their members' relationships. Expectant parents share their experiences in Parent Soup's *Expecting Community* (www.parentsoup.com/community/expecting.html) discussion group. Making it through the nine months, especially for first-timers, invites a lot of support, and one could imagine that mothers and fathers finding that support in a discussion group would come back and contribute their own advice to the conversation once the baby had arrived (see Figure 2.17). Family communities value history and continuity.

Loners: The Unaffiliated Denizens of the Web

A gathering of people on the Web who have no relationships between them is sure not to stay that way. Those people will either form relationships by interacting or simply leave. Being a loner on the Web is a temporary state that a host can help resolve.

How well loners connect with each other depends in part on the facilities and leadership provided on the site. As host, you can recognize sparks of

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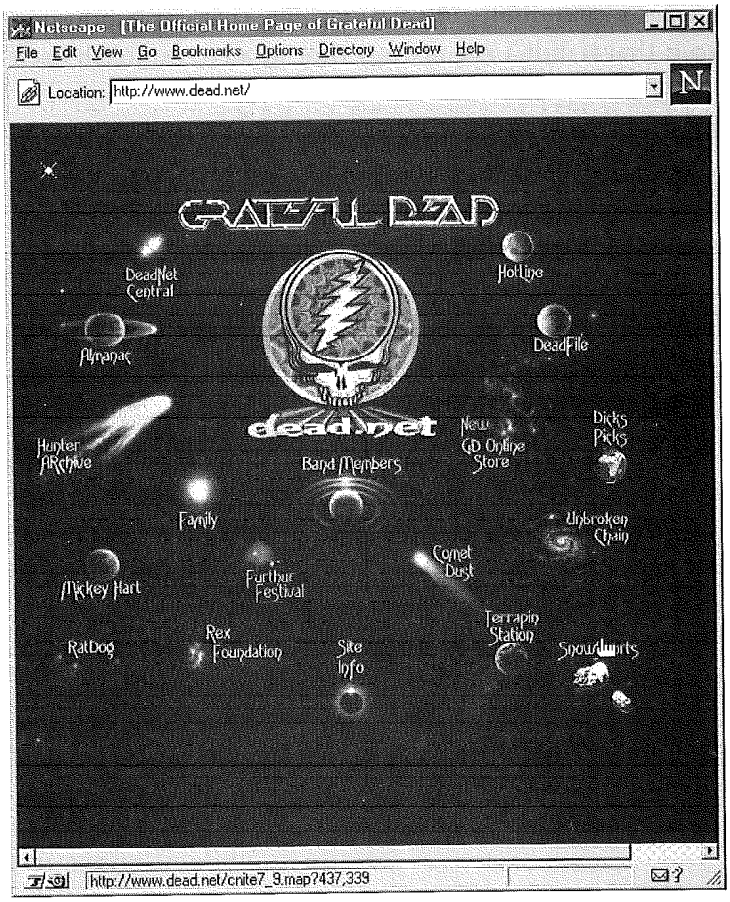
Figure 2.16 The long strange trip continues as dead.net® serves the Grateful Dead community even after the band's decision to retire its name. This is one of the ultimate examples of group cohesion.



spontaneous organization that happens within groups of people, and fan them into a flame that will continue to burn on its own. It's a contradiction in terms to refer to a *loner population*, so there's not much sense in pointing you to an example on the Web. And loners, by definition, do not draw much attention. Their existence can be evidence of a shortage of community leadership or

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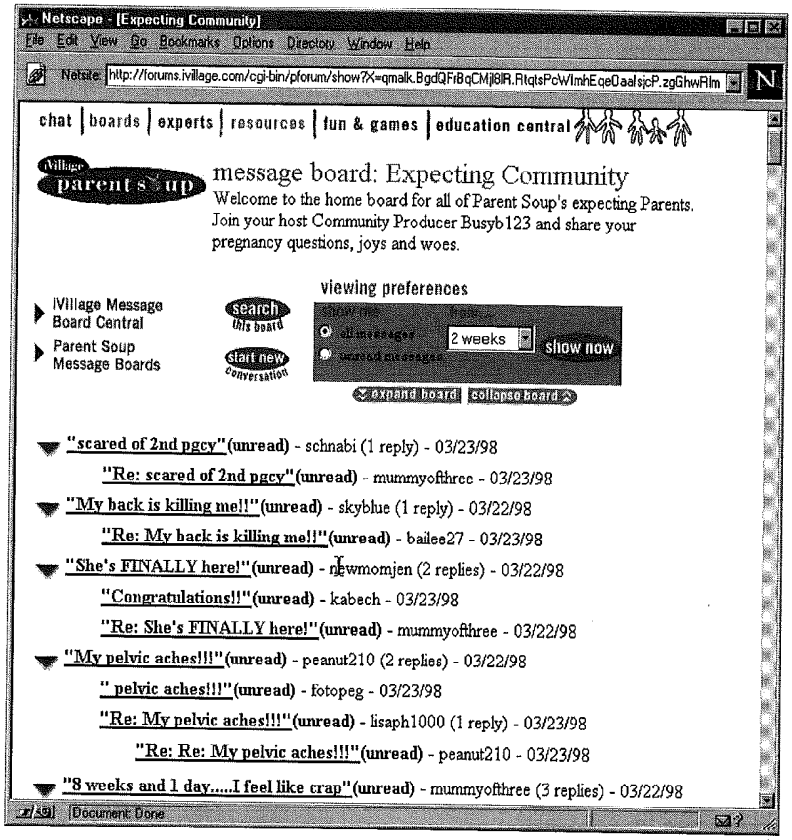
facilitation that would help users relate to each other. Creating a focus, providing an interactive platform, inviting participation, reaching out through email newsletters—all or any of these can be effective treatments for the loner syndrome.

Associates: Arrays of Casual Connections

Between families and loners on the extremes are people *associating* with each other. What you find in most community sites is, in fact, a mixture of small

Figure 2.17 Parent Soup hosts this mutual support community for expectant parents where common experience and situation draw members together.



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cohesive groups and unconnected individuals just passing through. Not everyone connects at the same depth, and matters of style and interest also come into play as people test the community waters. But usually you'll find a cohesive core of users providing the stability in an otherwise mixed bag of more casual relationships.

Most online social centers, I'm convinced, are like this, and I see a direct relationship between people's personal ties in a virtual community and the amount of time they spend logged in to it. It takes time to build and maintain relationships, online or off. Most people whose visits to an interactive space are regular enough to qualify them as active community members don't keep strong ties to many others. They're more likely to have a few close acquaintances while most of their fellow members remain unknown and unfamiliar to them.

The Practical Implications of Cohesion

Cohesive populations require full-featured interactive platforms that allow them to maintain and continually renew their relationships. Conversational systems, rather than chat, serve these needs better because the record of interaction remains available. Members who join in conversations irregularly can catch up on what they missed. New joiners can get a sense of where current discussions originated. Such communities value history and appreciate the archived conversations and celebrated anniversaries that add to that history. Though many of the most cohesive online communities came together initially off the Web, there are many opportunities for new ones to form on the Web through identifying strong affinity groups or hosting games and role-playing activities.

Cohesion is worth striving for because it builds loyalty to the site through loyalty to the relationships found there. Good hosts who understand the interests and needs of the community can facilitate interaction in ways that help people feel safe enough to trust the relationships they build online. Cohesive communities focus more on those relationships than on the information you provide them, but for many associate groups, the *information* is the attraction that brings them together in the first place.

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Profiling Your Community

In the preceding explanation, I mentioned some of the needs that the different group profiles impose on the supporting structure and hosting techniques of a Web site. Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," and Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion," will address those needs and their solutions in much greater detail. Chapter 3, "Establishing and Maintaining Key Relationships," is about another strong influence on the personality of the community: your relationship, as the site provider, to the body of the community itself. Just as communities differ in nature, so does the involvement of site management.

As I pointed out, there is overlap among communities profiled as *cafés*, *shops*, and *families*. Groups having tendencies toward any of these are likely to show loyalty to their community sites. All three of these configurations sit at the extremes of their respective continuums and contribute to strong community because of the solid relationships that are built through heavy interaction, shared focus, and close bonding.

But as strong as those profiles may seem for long-term community loyalty, they do have their social pitfalls. Like small towns, café, shop, and family communities can become insular, elitist, cultish, and xenophobic. They can build such strong community identities that they pull up their social drawbridges and isolate themselves from the penetration of fresh ideas and new members. If continued growth is a crucial part of your plan, be aware of this possibility and balance your emphasis on high interaction, focus, and cohesion with active marketing, new member introduction, and content diversification.

Putting Your Community's Description into Words

Ultimately, you have to describe both your community and your ambitions for it to the public. Of course, you won't use terms like *shops*, *loners*, and *shrines* for this, but you should try to convey as much about your intentions for its interactivity, focus, and cohesion as possible. As examples, here are some public statements pulled off the Web near the end of 1997. Some describe communities just coming into being, while some describe communities already quite established in their ways.

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The first is by the financial software company Quicken, regarding its recently launched site. It is clear how much user-created content is valued.

> *Who and What the Quicken.com Community is: Quicken.com is designed to be a money and investment information community. The majority of what you see posted on our bulletin boards comes from the members of our community; that is, people like you wanting to talk with one another about money and finance.*

The WELL begins its self-description with the following paragraphs that impart the literary and cosmopolitan nature of its population.

> *The WELL is a cluster of electronic villages that live on the Internet, with denizens from all over the globe. A discussion on the great eateries of Paris might include playful banter from people typing to one another from San Jose, Tokyo, Boston, Seattle...and the Left Bank. More than just another "site" or "homepage," The WELL has a sense of place that is palpable.*
>
> *Civility balanced by a high degree of expressive freedom has resulted in sometimes startling contrasts in atmosphere from Conference to Conference. Each Conference has a distinctly different sense of place and style, and a loyal group of participants. The Books Conference might be a particularly cool coffee house, the Generation X Conference something between a trendy club and a pie fight, and the Legal Conference a scholarly but contentious seminar.*

Neighborhoods Online—which would qualify as a shrine, by the way—lays out its purpose and membership as a "community about community" with these words:

> *Neighborhoods Online was created in 1995 by the Institute for the Study of Civic Values and Philadelphia's LibertyNet as an online resource center for people working to build strong communities throughout the United States.*
>
> *Our aim is to provide fast access to information and ideas covering all aspects of neighborhood revitalization, as well as to create a national network of activists working on problems that affect us where we live.*

And Innovate Online, a site intended to build loyalty to the products of the company that sponsors it, welcomes users with this invitation to collaborate:

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Take a guided tour or explore this Web site designed to enable the exchange of information of value to content developers. Open since October 1, 1996, Silicon Graphics provides inside tips on how the company uses its technology for its own multimedia development. It also provides the space for this community to collaborate.

We invite you as third-party developers, service providers, and individuals to contribute your ideas, creations, and experience, and to gain from the insights and participation of your expert peers.

Words are like magic, and by describing yourself in a certain way to users as they enter your site, you can often win their trust and persuade them to take part in the activities you plan for them. But there are a few other factors that will strongly influence the shape of the social scene on your site. The most important of these is your revenue model.

Revenue Models and Community Profiles

On the radio, my bank often airs commercials referring to me and my fellow customers as a members of its *banking community*. I wish that were actually the case, and though I can't argue with the sentiment, the fact is that our relationship is one of exchange of money and services. I know it and they know it, but the C-word sounds so much more friendly and partnerlike. And on the Web, amid the ever-present animated banner advertisements, we all know that commercial sites must make money from the presence of users to survive. So where does that put the real values of community in the arrangement?

I'll save most of my discussion of the financial support of Web sites for Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," but it's appropriate that the business aspects of a site be acknowledged here as a key determinant of its community's profile. This is also the place to point out how specific community profiles lend themselves best to certain revenue models. I mentioned earlier how size and growth rate impact the formation of cohesive groups. If your site *must* grow rapidly, you must provide the tools, the hosts, and the spaces for small groups to find themselves and gain footholds. A large and impersonal site is not going to support much in the way of community unless there's room for the small and personal to exist.

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Whatever your revenue model, identifying communities of common focus is important. Your advertising and merchandise sales are only as effective as you are successful in reaching the right audiences. Even in a mall, where typical browsing types congregate, there are specialty shops to attract users with specific needs and tastes. And where a sponsor foots the bill for the site's creation and operation, it must serve a specific audience and serve it well to justify the costs. Bringing focused communities together makes it easier to sell appropriate advertising on the site. But advertising, too, fits some communities better than others.

A site supported by advertising is better matched to a population that prefers browsing than one that's committed to conversation. People who are looking and reading, rather than thinking and posting, have more of their attention available for noticing ads and clicking on them. People who have their attention plugged in to conversation would rather not be distracted. Advertising to them, if it's going to be effective, must be *especially* relevant. Café Utne and Talk City are both café communities supported for the most part by advertising. With the extreme focus their members have on interpersonal jamming, the ads had better address their other interests or they will go unnoticed. (Whether or not ads are noticed by users anywhere on the Web is an issue I'll save for Chapter 11.)

Likewise, if subscriptions are going to work, the focus of the site must have special relevance to the paying members. There must be a sense of cohesion between the site provider and the people if they're going to buck the free access expectations of the Web. One of these maverick sites is the *Wall Street Journal* (www.wallstjournal.com), which relies on its reputation for being "the paper of record" in the financial world to convince subscribers that it's worth paying extra for. The WELL has its own traditions and history to justify its monthly fees for access. *Slate* (www.slate.com), Microsoft's Web-based magazine, doesn't have the history of the WSJ or the WELL, and the future of its subscription-based business is much more in doubt. Microsoft, huge as it is, has yet to demonstrate its appeal as a cultural attraction.

In the end, though, the success of the communities themselves is measured more by their members' satisfaction and continuing involvement than by the dollars generated through their Web sites. If a marketplace, where each person is regarded as a potential or actual revenue source, is what you're most

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interested in building, the lessons in this book will be useful, but be aware that you'll be constantly balancing business efficiency and community services. They are prone to conflict with each other.

The Patronage Support Model

The conflict of business and community is not so much a problem if the sponsor acts in the role of a *patron*, supporting the community either because by doing so it makes the sponsor look good, or because the sponsor believes that the community fills a worthwhile purpose. Diabetes.com operates under a patronage arrangement as does Neighborhoods Online because they serve worthy causes. But there are also good business reasons for supporting online communities, as exemplified by Molson Breweries (see Figure 2.18). Call it public relations, customer support, or just clever marketing, but a well-developed and well-supported community on the Web can be an asset without being a direct revenue source or presenting a heavy-handed sales pitch.

Patron means *supporter*, but it also means *regular customer*, and though the paid subscription model is out of vogue these days, I believe that it makes a lot of sense for some communities. The patrons of a bar or coffeehouse accept spending $2.00 for a latté or a draft beer not only to change their consciousness a bit, but to help defray the upkeep of the place where they hang out with others in similarly altered states of mind. To me it seems reasonable that people would be willing to spend a small part of that daily tab to support the place where they spend an hour a day typing back and forth with remote friends and acquaintances, or where they find other sources of especially valued information. At Healthlinks, a FAQ addresses this idea directly with an explanation that gets right to the point:

> ***Q.*** *Why is there a fee to use Healthlinks.net?*
>
> ***A.*** *Being member supported means that Healthlinks.net has only one loyalty: to our members. It means that Web sites are added to our directory only when they are approved by our advisory board and that our descriptions of Web sites are truly unbiased.*
>
> *It makes our newsletter possible, allows us to maintain Healthlinks.net at the highest standards, and allows us to remain responsive to your needs*

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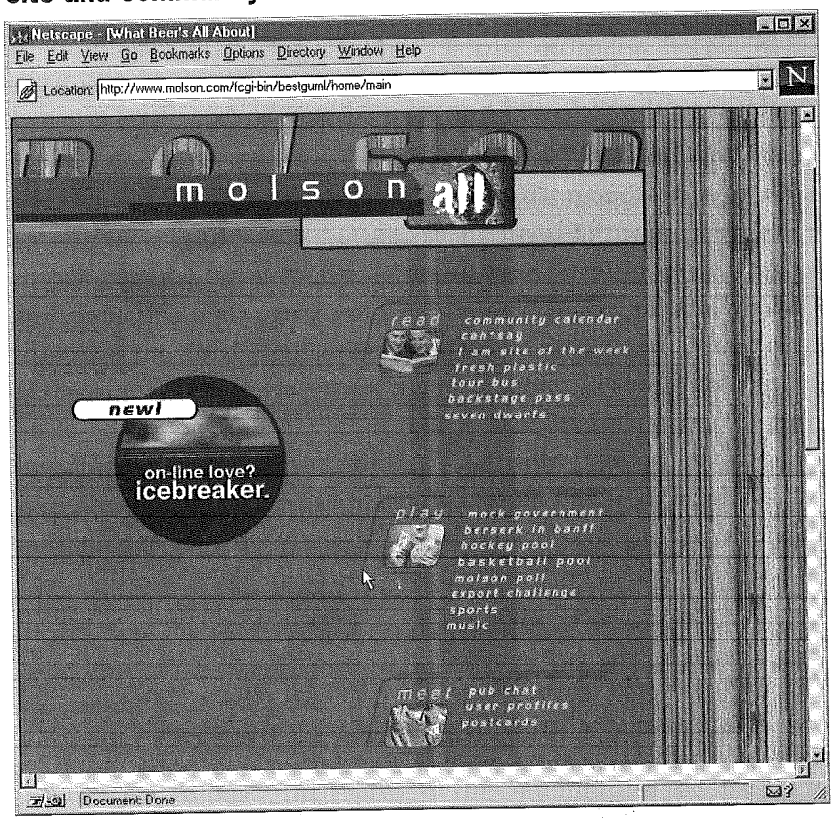
and suggestions. Making Healthlinks.net a business rather than a hobby or a marketing gimmick, both allows and mandates that we run it as a full-time professional service fully capable of responding to the needs of healthcare professionals.

As with every other factor I've mentioned that influences the life of an online community, the key words here are *appropriate* and *balance*. Choose a

Figure 2.18 Who says the community has to make money? Molson Breweries entertains its customers and potential customers with a fun site and community tools.



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revenue model that is appropriate for the profile of the community, and balance your needs for revenue with the community's needs for care, service, and autonomy.

How Communities Evolve

Whatever you think your community is or will be, it's very likely to not be that way for long. Being composed of people in what has historically been a fast-changing technical environment, communities are living entities, subject to influences from the rest of their world. As I explained, highly focused communities will naturally tend to broaden their focus; unfocused communities will tend to narrow theirs. Groups will change in dimensions that Hagel and Armstrong called *fractal depth* and *fractal breadth*. A community founded around the sport of baseball will divide into subcommunities based on individual teams, expanding its fractal *breadth*. It will further subdivide into communities of interest that pursue detailed statistics and the minutiae of the sport, drilling down into greater fractal *depth*.

Extremely cohesive communities tend to become provincial and isolated, falling into a syndrome that I call *systemism* that glorifies the local system culture in comparison to all others. Such a tight group mentality may erect hurdles and barriers for new joiners who find themselves being asked to prove their mettle to be fully accepted as members. Needless to say, this makes expansion and growth an awkward proposition regardless of one's marketing efforts. But systemism is a possible pitfall of oversolidified groups. You do want that sense of identity and boundaries to be there, just not to extremes.

There are forces that threaten the optimum level of cohesion, too. There is the risk of cultural *dilution*, where not enough care is taken of the existing culture and relationship base to protect its survival. Again, we see countless examples in the real world, and it's much easier for cultures to be *invaded* on the Net. An online community is a sensitive social ecology that can only integrate new members at up to a certain rate without getting swamped. The pace of growth in an online community must be handled attentively if a healthy balance of acculturated members and new joiners is to be maintained.

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Summary

Communities differ in many ways that affect how you design and plan for hosting them on the Web. Three dimensions of variation are *interactivity*, *focus*, and *cohesiveness*. Viewing all three as continuums, they describe different profiles of communities with distinct characteristics.

Cafés center around the interaction between members, while *shrines* feature an attraction of common interest to their members. Communities between those two extremes are characterized by interaction around an attraction, and are referred to here as *theaters*. Cafés require powerful interactive platforms to serve their members' needs for contact and conversation. Shrines are content intensive and their hosts must be service oriented. Theaters work best where content on the site is kept relevant to conversations, and vice versa. The level of interactivity within a community has direct implications for your software, hosting, and behavioral policies.

Where focus is the variable, the profiles at the extremes are the highly focused *shops* and the unfocused *bazaars*. Shops require more depth than variety in their content areas. Visitors to bazaars wander away unless the host provides them with some specific focus and structure—or the tools for them to create their own focused communities—to draw their interest. Most populations distribute their attention among a variety of interests and hang out in *mall*-like social environments. The amount of focus that characterizes a community determines the specificity of the information it needs, and the activities it engages in. While shops may provide most of their own hosting and conversation facilitation, bazaars and malls require more organization and leadership from the site provider to help members form meaningful relationship groups.

Cohesion is a measure of the strength of the bonds between community members. In highly cohesive *families*, the relationships themselves bring people back to the site. *Loners*, on the other hand, have formed no relationships, often because the site doesn't support interaction, or is so populous and busy that interaction can't efficiently support people's getting to know one another. In most cases, visitors to a Web site become *associates* with various people they meet, forming superficial relationships and moving from one group of associates to another across the site. The more cohesion in a community, the more it requires

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a powerful discussion system that can support the recording and archiving of a history for the group. The core participants in a family or association help hold its relationships together and provide the stability in the community.

Most social groups have upper limits in terms of size and, even for online communities where physical facilities don't set the limits, bigger is not always better. Relationships don't establish themselves as well in bustling crowds, and fast-growing populations change faster than most communities can tolerate. Similarly, revenue models that regard the population of a site as a marketplace rather than a collection of growing relationships are not conducive to lasting community. Growth and revenue models should be carefully matched to the type of community one intends to foster. Communities are living social entities that react to and are directly affected by the conditions under which they live, and change constantly according to the conditions they are living through.

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ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING KEY RELATIONSHIPS

3

Community on the Web is a function of relationships: those between a site's users and its content, between its users and its management, and between the users themselves. Individual users decide with whom, with what, and how deeply they will relate, but it's up to you, the site manager and host, to set the table for those relationships and raise the odds that visitors will adopt your site as one of their online hangouts. This chapter explores the many facets of your relationship with visitors and members, and theirs with you.

Like the Great and Powerful Oz, you rule a domain, granting wishes and holding ultimate say-so over content and access. But the Wizard of Oz thought it necessary to hide the fact of his humanity behind a curtain and present himself instead as an imposing supernatural being, full of smoke, noise, and special effects. There's no need for you to hide behind the curtain of your Web interface to gain and hold the respect of a population of subjects. Your visitors aren't subjects at all; they come to your site voluntarily. Unlike the Munchkins and Flying Monkeys of Oz, they're not a captive audience. There are plenty of other Oz alternatives available to them at the click of a mouse. To persuade them to remain with you, your power would best be exercised in an engaging rather than an imposing way. You need to demonstrate to them that you're one of them, not some mythical force.

So pull the curtain aside and relate to your visitors as a fellow human providing them with a helpful service. That's the best way to engender a sense of community through the Web. Put yourself in the place of your visitors and

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experience your service as they might. Appearance and design are important—and we'll get to those elements in Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface"—but for now, let's consider the more subjective perceptions of users and how your intentions are read by your visitors.

As a visitor to your own site, would you feel welcomed and served by it? Would you feel a connection with the people hosting it and with their purpose in providing it? Would you feel inspired to click deeper, to get involved with discussion, to correspond with the site's management and support their efforts? Would you feel comfortable enough there to build lasting associations and friendships with people you meet? Would you give them your loyalty based on the sense of community you feel? If you can't answer Yes to all of these questions about your own creation, recognize that your visitors are less likely to give you the benefit of the doubt than you are.

The Host's Role in the Community

Because there's so much to choose from on the Web, with new attractions and distractions appearing by the minute, getting the attention of people and keeping it for a significant amount of time is a site builder's main challenge. First impressions count for a lot when every new visitor views your homepage with finger poised over mouse button, ready to move on if not persuaded to stay within the first 20 seconds. Differentiating your site from others with similar target audiences, especially when the element of community is added, requires insightful execution of marketing, design, and content that combine to project a distinctive personality. With human relationships at the center of our community definition, personality is a key element in your site's description. You project personality through the presentation of your site, elements that should impress people on their first viewing. However, where your personality comes across most strongly is through your contact and communications with visitors as community manager and discussion host.

Reach out to new visitors through your homepage and impress them with your friendliness, helpfulness, openness, and accessibility. Hosting is providing personal service to a population of people, and there are many techniques and styles you can employ to that end. Your level of involvement with the community is critical. Depending on the profile of your community, your role might be

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described in a number of ways: as an efficient, behind-the-scenes administrator like a small-town mayor or store manager; as a participative facilitator like an innkeeper; as a master of ceremonies; or as a local magistrate. You can be invisible to your members, represented by a team of discussion leaders who manage the actual relating with users, or you can circulate conspicuously through their discussions, relating and schmoozing with them.

Whatever you do and however directly you relate to them, it will have a noticeable effect on the local culture. Hosting is the sum total of everything you do in relation to your members and visitors. I would describe it as "proactive and interactive customer service," but not all communities are composed of *customers*. Hosting is not limited to your direct interaction with users in conversation space; it extends from the top to the bottom of your organization as its service philosophy. Breakdowns anywhere in the service chain undermine your efforts because the ultimate goal of providing consistent service is to engender loyalty and trust.

The Importance of Establishing Trust

Cyberspace doesn't support relationships with the same sensual bandwidth found in the physical world. We all learn that fact eventually, in spite of our initial wonder that we can relate at all as groups through the passing of electrons through wires and chips. Who people seem to be on the Web is not necessarily who they really are, just as the words they say to each other on computer screens aren't necessarily the gospel truth.

One of the strengths of building community is that people get to know each other over time and in varied discussion situations. Through accumulated history comes trust, but on the way to achieving it, users and hosts may occasionally feel betrayed and ripped off by charlatans who take advantage of the medium's bandwidth limitations. As Howard Rheingold said in *The Virtual Community*:

> *Although the technology of CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] provides the instrument of deception, the special importance we place on gender roles and the prevalence of swindlers in a population are both rooted in social questions that extend far beyond the technology that brings them into focus. The opportunity for deception, however, is designed into the medium. Cyberspace explorers ignore that fact at their peril.*

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The most effective way to foster trust is to set an example. Shaking hands may have originated as a way for potential adversaries to demonstrate to each other that neither of them were holding weapons. You can be more subtle with your visitors than that, of course, but there are ways that you can demonstrate that your intentions are generous and collaborative rather than predatory and exploitative. You're inviting people into your virtual home on the Web and *mi casa es su casa* is the tone of greeting that will make them feel most comfortable and safe. Introduce yourself and your staff, and tell your visitors openly what you're trying to do on the Web. Invite them to help you do a better job of it. Assure them that their interests are also yours.

Acknowledging the Privacy Issue

One of the central interests of most Web users these days is privacy. They have become wise in the ways of electronically distributed data and they have concerns about their personal information being disseminated around the networked universe without their knowledge and approval. They want to know that privacy is respected, from their email files to the information they enter into sites' registration questionnaires, to the credit card purchases they make through the Web. They are wary of logging into sites that will study them, and then sell whatever they find out. Suspicion is not a frame of mind conducive to joining a community.

Third Age is a media company whose Web site serves the age 50+ community. On its homepage, an *About Us* link describes the company, its Web community, and its staff (see Figure 3.1). Reading through those pages, if you still don't feel at home, it's certainly not due to any lack of friendliness. Third Age's *privacy statement*, like those of any community-based site where members are expected to enter personal information and public postings, is an extremely important communication. The beginning of ThirdAge.com's Privacy Statement is shown in Figure 3.2. Through it, Third Age not only assures its members that it won't share or release any information about individual identities without the member's permission, but also provides information and resources to users about general privacy issues in cyberspace. ThirdAge.com makes it clear that privacy is a core value of the company as a whole, and by doing so it scores big trust points with its community.

ThirdAge.com does demographic community very well. It's a for-profit company founded to address the same population served in previous years by

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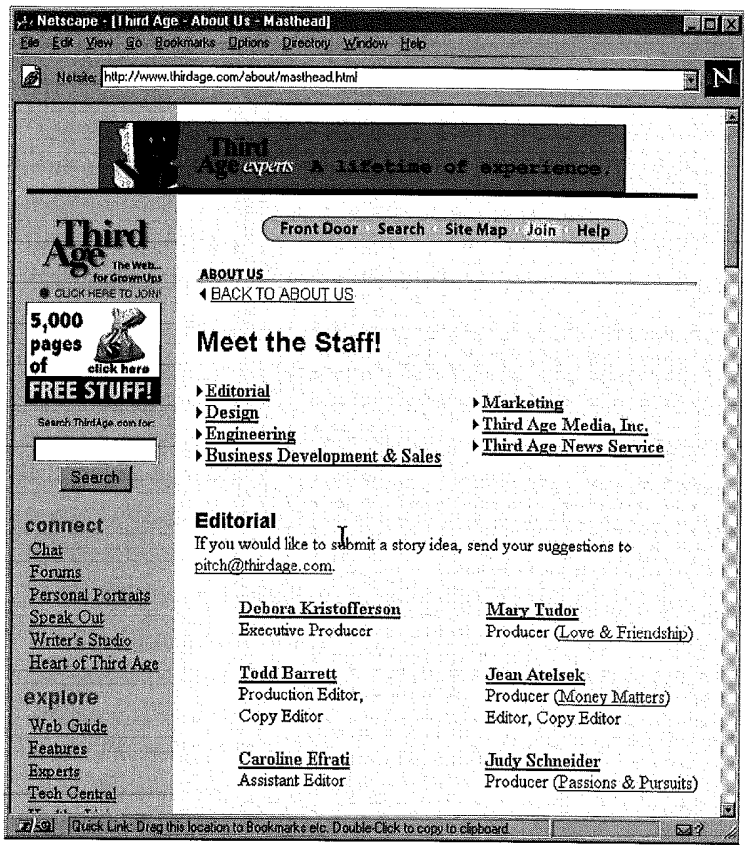
Figure 3.1 Yes, there are identifiable humans behind those Web pages! ThirdAge.com introduces itself to the community.



its nonprofit predecessor, SeniorNet. The founder of both companies, Mary Furlong, knows her market intimately and understands the services and style of hosting it responds to. With ThirdAge.com, her challenge is now to convince that market that the same level of trust she built in the cause-motivated community of SeniorNet can be realized in a commercially motivated community. She's counting on ThirdAge.com's membership to respond to targeted advertising and create value by purchasing products through her site. She must now regard her system's users as *customers* as well as members, but her emphasis on trust as the bond between the users and the service has not changed.

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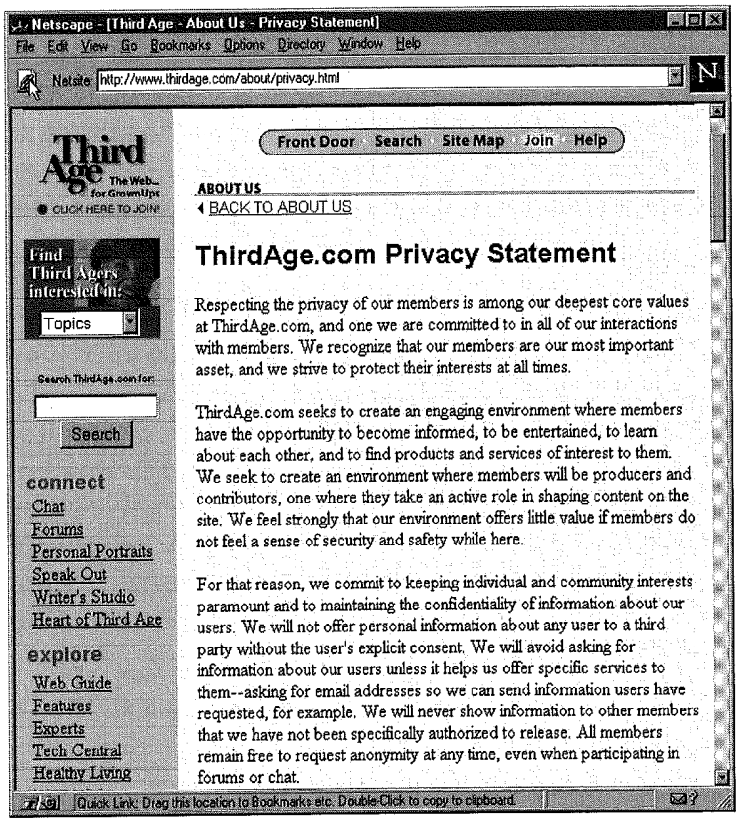
Figure 3.2 Core values and commitment to them are emphasized in this policy statement that helps define ThirdAge.com's relationship to its members.



Reliability as a Key to Trust

Successful businesses understand the value of good customer service. They know that every customer expects to be treated as if he or she is special and, though businesses often lose sight of that fact as they grow larger, they know in their hearts and in their wallets that customers are much more likely to remain loyal to them if they stay true to the service mission. The key to good customer service is knowing the customer's expectations and living up to them. Not every Web community is a business, relating to its members as *customers*, but all community-

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hosting sites provide services. Their members have expectations of those services that must be met if the relationship between provider and member is to last.

As Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* comic strip has illustrated over the years, when Lucy pulls the football away just as Charlie Brown is rearing back to kick the heck out of it, she's not meeting Charlie's expectations. Lying on his back seeing stars, he is sorely disappointed. Even so, Charlie Brown has given Lucy many more chances to earn his trust than you're likely to get in the crowded marketplace of the Web. For online communities, specifically, trust is essential because it's the glue that holds together not only your relationship with your members, but the members' relationships with each other.

Trust is at the core of any community and any lasting customer relationship. Trust is not granted outright; it must be earned. Working in the Web world, Lucy would have to be much more professional, giving advance notice to her client, Charlie, before changing his expected plans. She'd have to hold the ball still consistently and reliably. We'd see, then, whether Charlie could even kick it—the point being that, as with Lucy, the ball is in your hands as your customers learn to trust you. It's you, the site provider, who creates the pages, owns the content, and controls access to the discussion space.

The guests of your site are in an environment in which sites change their designs and business plans (and even drop out of sight) constantly. Without a doubt, you will do at least one of these, too, but you prove your reliability on a more day-to-day level. It's up to you to put your users at ease and not betray them by changing direction in midstream. If you ask them to believe you, you must prove believable over time. If you say there will be new articles on the homepage every morning, there should be. If you say you'll serve the interests of a specific population, you can't suddenly take a different tack without damaging user expectations. If you post a list of rules for behavior in your chat rooms, they should be enforced consistent with your promises. If you ask for customer feedback about your site and get it, it should be acknowledged and put to use. And if you must make changes in what users have come to expect from you, don't pull the ball away without issuing timely warnings.

Conveying Trust from the Inside Out

Your values as the site's founder are communicable. If trust and reliability characterize the attitudes within your organization, they can spread across the Web

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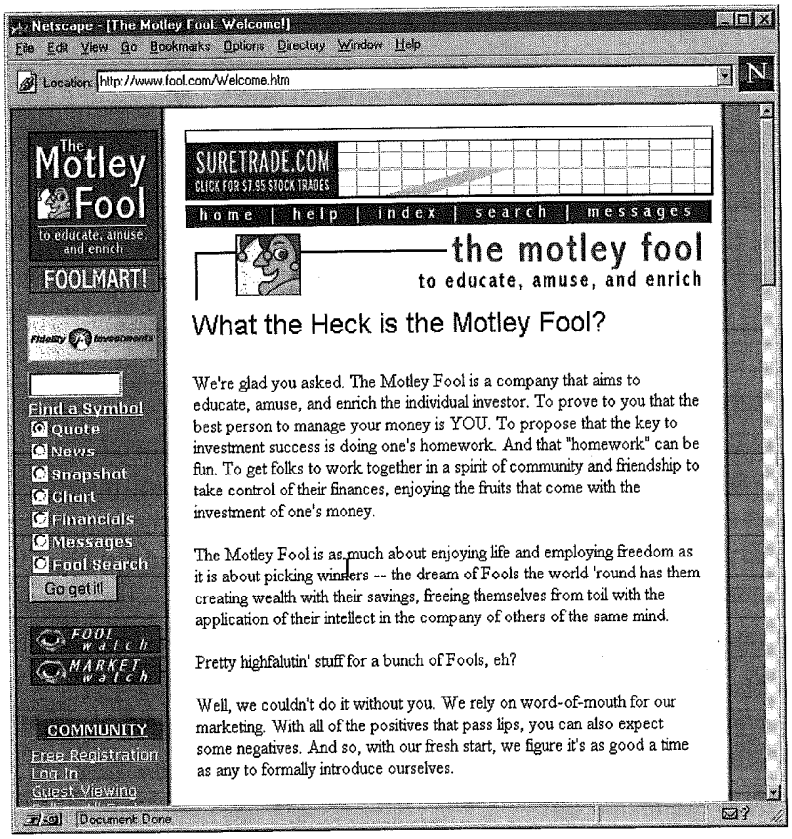
interface to your users and their interrelationships. One of the best examples of this effect that I know of is the Motley Fool, which began as a content area on America Online in 1995 and has since moved onto the Web (see Figure 3.3).

The Gardner brothers, Tom and David, founded Motley Fool to serve two purposes: First, it was a soapbox from which they could proclaim their message that amateurs could be trusted to make their own investment decisions in the stock market. Second, MF was created to be an ever-expanding conversation among

Figure 3.3 The Motley Fool tells it like it is, even acknowledging to its new visitors that some of that valuable word-of-mouth marketing can also have a negative spin.



© Copyright 1996–1998, The Motley Fool, www.fool.com.

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those amateurs about investing and personal finance. The Gardners trusted their own vision and communicated it to the members of their community, whose members have gone on to build their own networks of trusted sources on the site.

It's all about creating a tone of interaction that users will pick up on and emulate. Trust works in both directions: You depend on your users' trust in you, and you must also extend your trust to them. In the ideal community, the site manager is an active member of the community with special powers and access, working in concert with the community as a whole to fulfill its diverse needs. Communities differ greatly though, and the provider's level of openness varies with the type of community being hosted.

For some business situations, the extension of trust into the community creates too high a perceived risk of public relations snafus. A large auto manufacturer won't want customer complaints showing up in a bulletin board on its site. A large entertainment company won't want adult language being displayed in a chat room meant for families and kids. For the host in those situations, in order to reduce the risk to tolerable levels, the membrane of the Web interface separating provider from user must be made less permeable. You can't assume that your users will grant you slack if something on your site offends them, even if the offense comes from a fellow user rather than from your editors and content producers. This caveat applies especially to companies that are powerful, and have both public images and deep pockets to protect.

Trust and Public Relations

You can't afford to let just any employee handle your community relations, no matter how small and unassuming your organization. This is an area in which the entire staff must be aligned behind the same philosophy of service. Fortune 500 corporations tend to have little or no direct public interaction with the visitors of their Web sites. For them, assigning an employee—even an expert PR wizard—to engage in dialog with the public raises the awful possibility that the messages so carefully crafted by the company's public relations department will be garbled or contradicted in the midst of conversation. Any candid statement or reaction by an employee not screened through the PR hierarchy could be interpreted and spread erroneously throughout the Web as "official company policy" rather than the casual remark of an employee trying to be a pal to the community. The result: bye-bye employee and bye-bye credibility.

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Don't expect to see employees participating in online conversations, answering direct questions, or introducing themselves as hosts on the sites of Ford, Chrysler, or GM. Trust, for most business behemoths, has long been superseded by the esteem of highly protected *brand names* that symbolize the historical trust built between the corporations and their customers over the years. But branding, as a substitute for trust between host and user, doesn't offer the level of intimacy that most people seek through community on the Web. The pages labeled *community* on both the Ford Motors and Chrysler sites are used to deliver public relations messages about each company's charitable civic projects. Theirs are not what you'd call relationship-based online communities (if you can consider them communities at all). So, the more your company resembles a Ford Motors or a Chrysler or any huge corporation, the less likely you'll be supporting one-to-one customer relations and public interaction on your site.

The higher the trust level between provider and users, the lower the risk that misunderstandings between them will be amplified. The most intimate communities are found on sites hosted by small companies whose names have come to stand for intentional group conversation (such as Café Utne, WBS—the Web Broadcasting System, and the WELL), or on relatively small sites that serve focused or cohesive populations. On such sites, the service provider's image is often identified with its involvement in the public discussion, involvement that helps resolve the occasional misunderstandings between the company and its users. Every company striving to establish a community on the Web must determine its appropriate level of involvement with users. Ford can't pretend to be what it is not (and it has plenty of lawyers to make sure it doesn't), and every site must, above all, be true to what its ownership stands for if it's going to establish any credibility with its visitors.

So how do you, Mr. or Ms. site provider and host, present yourself to your user community? How well are you willing to let your members get to know you? Are you a person first, or a corporation? If you must present yourself as a corporation or company, do you send human ambassadors to communicate with your guests, or do you speak to them only through carefully edited announcements, articles, and PR releases? Do members consider you a part of the community you oversee, or are you perceived as simply the overseer? And as a

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result of whatever your stance is in relation to your community, how and what are you gaining from it?

High Profile or Low: Your Presence Online

You can limit your public exposure to the minimum and be an invisible unknown quantity to your users, or you can be exposed to the extent that you openly engage in public discussion about your policy decisions and their enforcement. That pretty much defines the two extremes of hostly presence, and yours will most likely fall somewhere between them. Much as I'd like to recommend that all site providers follow the open engagement model, it's just not practical for many individuals and organizations and calls for a certain amount of caution for all. As the Web becomes more mainstream and more big business, more care must be taken when you step into your own public forum as a participant.

The Age of Legal Innocence Has Passed

Web sites today operate under far stricter legal scrutiny than existed in the pioneer days of the Net. This can be seen most clearly in the wording of *terms of service* statements placed where users register to use a site's discussion facilities. The statements are getting longer all the time, and attempt to describe more specifically prohibited behaviors. As more Web ventures grow into serious business concerns with investors to protect and answer to, fewer site managers are willing to take the legal and employment risks that come with making off-the-cuff public remarks.

The resultant squeezing of permissible user expression combined with the chilling of host participation is an unfortunate trend for two reasons: First, it inhibits the growth of an important bond between the hosting organization and its community. Where that bond is established, you often see synergistic improvement of the site and its operations as hosts and members get to know, understand, and identify with each other's goals and needs. (We'll delve more deeply into this process in Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion.") Second, the chilling of provider-user interaction reduces the opportunities for the user community to continually reaffirm its loyalty and trust by connecting directly and candidly with the staff that manages their online home.

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Yes, the trend is unfortunate, but there's no *right* or *wrong* here, only *appropriate*. The *appropriate* level of management presence in a Web-based community is a function of four factors:

- The levels of interactivity, focus, and cohesion of the community
- The purpose of the business or organization that provides the site
- The budget available to pay community services staff
- The management's personality and willingness to participate

Host Participation and a Community's Evolution

When the WELL was started, its founding director, Matthew McClure, was also its lead host, spending much of every day logged in and conversing with its small early population of users. Through his involvement with the community, he quickly learned what its members needed in the way of interface improvements and expanded discussion areas. He was able to identify likely candidates for volunteer hosting positions. He got to know which of the WELL's members were willing and able to help the young and struggling business troubleshoot its technology. His participation as a member of the community set the standard for WELL staff presence from then on, and though the ownership structure has changed, WELL management continues to be conspicuously involved in what has become a community of communities.

Today, every active WELL member knows who manages its conferencing operations because they see Gail Williams posting in topics and dealing with users' questions all the time (see Figure 3.4). Gail's level of involvement is appropriate because the WELL is a café . You have to be that involved to see how best to implement the additions and changes that a café's intensive interaction generate. As we pointed out in Chapter 2, "Identifying Group Styles and Needs," new discussion leaders with new ideas emerge from cafés all the time, requiring the site provider to create discussion

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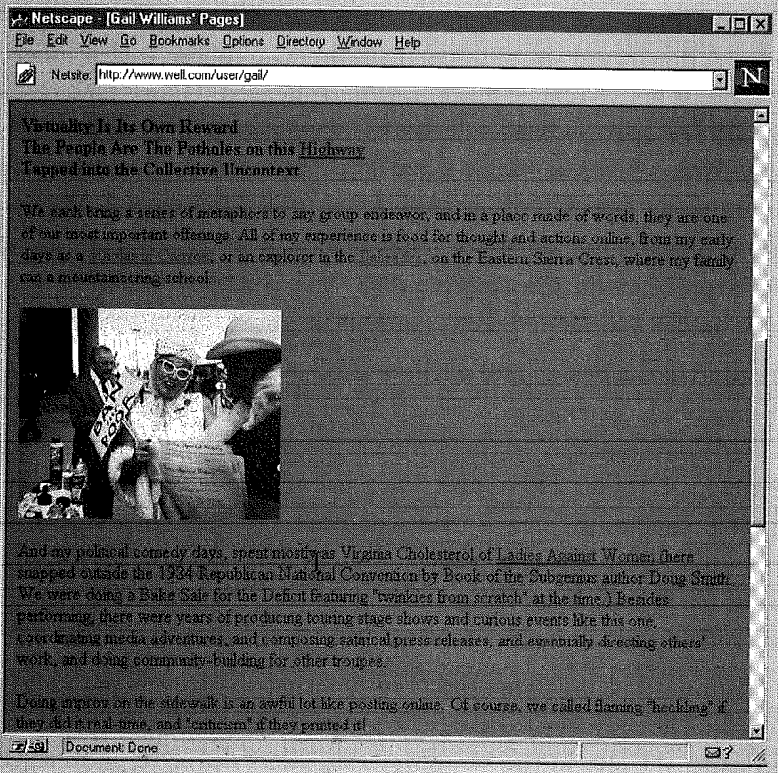
spaces to accommodate them. They need help, too, in dealing with the social friction that inevitably arises in highly interactive groups. Such communities demonstrate most clearly a statement that is true for all online communities: The activity level dictates the amount of management presence required to fill the community's needs.

Figure 3.4 Up close and personal, the WELL's conferencing manager, Gail Williams, describes her history and her role to the world.



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Monitoring the Pulse of Interaction

The highly interactive community needs management to keep a finger on its pulse as a way of metering and adjusting to *pace* and *flow*, two concepts we'll visit in more detail in Chapters 5 and 9, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," and "The Practice of Hosting Discussion," respectively.

Pace is a measure of the generation of new content and new topics in a discussion area. It determines the need for infrastructure expansion and diversification. If a community's pace is fast, it will fill up the existing discussion space with more users and postings than can comfortably be accommodated by the users. The cure is to gradually add more chat rooms or more discussion topics. But too rapid a proliferation of topics for a given pace can result in an oversupply of discussion spaces compared to the number of people available to populate them. A downward spiral in participation can follow, with an increase in *ghost topics* where active conversation has disappeared. Ghost topics, where new postings are few and far between, can scare off potential participants who may interpret them as evidence that the site is dull and uninteresting. Traffic logs and statistics can indicate where adjustments to pace are warranted, but you have to know how to recognize the clues before the damaging trends begin working, and a presence in the community is the best way to anticipate the effects of pace before overloaded conversations or ghost topics result.

Flow is related to the design and configuration of your site and its discussion platform. It describes the ease with which users are able to navigate between the content and conversations of their choice. Habitual users of a site need it to be convenient for them. They want their use of the site to flow from one regular stopping place to the next without detours, excessive mousing around, and redundant searches through information they've already seen. Only by participating as users do can you understand the inconveniences they experience as a result of your design and site architecture.

In busy communities, the dynamics of interaction change the pace and flow needs frequently. The only way to recognize these changes is for you to be either immersed in using the site in the same way that users do, or to be in constant communication with those who are immersed. In either case, your presence is required. There is no replacement for really understanding your user's experience when trying to satisfy them.

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High involvement and identification within the community are also appropriate if you're hosting a community that matches the shrine or family profile. Recall the examples I pointed to of the Grateful Dead Community and the *Expecting Parents* section of Parent Soup. In both cases, the site provider serves self-described members as the keeper of a trust. On the GD site, the host collects and distributes music from and to the Deadhead visitors, handling information that's of great value to the community. In *Expecting Parents*, the provider, represented by a community producer nicknamed BusyB123, is responsible for helping people through a very vulnerable yet exciting stage of their lives. BusyB123 is present in the discussion areas, helping people to feel at ease in sharing their condition with others. Parent Soup, like Third Age, connects with its subscribers proactively through a regular emailed newsletter, and sends an informative welcome message to everyone who registers on the site.

A conspicuous presence may not be so crucial where the content carried on the site is of greater importance than the interaction and interpersonal relationships, and where the content, rather than the users, drives the interaction. In such situations—found in communities that match the *theater* and *mall* models—the provider can direct more energy to building the content that serves members' interests than to participating and interacting with them.

Being Present in Your Site's Content

Not every community's members generate all of its content as those in a café do. More prevalent are the much more passive visitors to shrines whose hosts provide the content that draws them together around shared interests. The host as content provider plays a very different role from the host as conversation facilitator. If you're one of these, your responsiveness to the content demands and preferences of your members is what defines the level of your presence in the community.

Content is what attracts your visitors. Some of them return for it repeatedly, and you don't want to lose their interest. To sustain any sense of community without use of a discussion platform, you must find other ways to listen and respond to them. Simple email links from your pages leading to your mailbox are the standard means for listening to your audience. But unless they receive responses to their messages in the form of return messages and changes to the

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site's content or interface, most users will stop initiating contact with you, and the relationship aspect of your community will whither away. In a configuration lacking group interaction, the host must serve as the relationship hub.

Regular seekers of your content may tell you that your site is the best thing since sliced bread, or they may warn you that it's getting stale. They may offer their own content for you to include or link to, as is the case at the Original Unofficial Elvis Home Page. They will certainly volunteer ideas you hadn't thought of yourself, and may even help you anticipate changes in your audience's focus. Content that doesn't change with the times and the sophistication of the audience will soon be ignored. But content that is updated and improved to meet the changing needs and increasing knowledge of the audience will remain a compelling attraction.

Fitting the Content to the Conversation

A *theater* on the Web is a content site that provides facilities for conversation among its visitors. The relative importance given the content side versus the conversation side is where theaters differentiate themselves from each other. Usually, the site emphasizes one over the other, and in most cases today, the dominant side is the content. It would be a mistake, though, to miss out on the potential benefits that a strong conversational component can bring to a strong content site. Two companies that attempt to realize those benefits by actively looking for relevant links between their published information and ongoing discussion are *Salon* and CNN-Interactive.

Salon is a Web-based magazine featuring articles and reviews by accomplished writers. The site's editorial content is divided into sections such as News, Travel, Books, and Entertainment. Most of its sections include updated links to specific conversations in its Table Talk area where asynchronous discussion—both related and unrelated to *Salon*'s editorial content—takes place (see Figure 3.5). The discussions are usually initiated by Table Talk subscribers, sometimes in reaction to or in anticipation of a specific article or review.

The aim of linking from the editorial to the conversational is to entice readers to become talkers, and to blend the populations of readers and talkers as much as possible, bringing a sense of involvement to all of *Salon*'s visitors. Readers and talkers at *Salon* are somewhat different communities, there being many Table Talkers who spend little time reading the contents of the magazine

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Figure 3.5 ***Salon*** **uses teasers to entice readers of its specific content areas to visit ongoing discussions in related topics of its Table Talk conversational community. By introducing them to the possibilities of interaction around their interests,** ***Salon*** **increases the chances that they will participate.**

This artwork first appeared in SALON, *an online magazine, at http:/www.salonmagazine.com. Reprinted with permision.*

and even more who come to *Salon* to read but never dip into Table Talk. The community-building staff uses the *teasers* (described more in Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface,") to capture readers' attention in a specific content area and direct it to ongoing conversation within a relevant community of interest.

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But the blending efforts work in the opposite direction also. *Salon*'s staff seeds conversations in Table Talk to direct attention to the writers, themes, and articles currently featured in the magazine. In essence, *Salon* is a combination of shrine (the editorial content of the magazine), café (the Table Talk conversations), and theater (the content-inspired discussions). By supporting all three profiles on one site, you can serve the broadest possible spectrum of users. To succeed at this, you must be a very involved host, since each profile brings with it a different description of your role in relation to the user.

CNN, the international news organization, runs chat rooms and discussion boards similar to *Salon*'s. Being a news-reporting organization, it uses its headline stories to stimulate conversation, sometimes as scheduled chats and sometimes as ongoing public conversations. CNN links directly from the news stories to their respective discussions, and creates special conversation topics and chats in its Community area that follow selected stories. It also links directly from its message board conversations and chats to the stories they're about.

Being such a large corporation, you might expect CNN to minimize its direct involvement with its audience due to the public relations concerns we described earlier. CNN's purpose is the delivery of news and current information. Its business is speaking to the public, and it uses its content to do so rather than its participation in public dialog.

CNN Interactive has no staff participating directly in its public discussion boards, but it does define its role and expresses itself through a well-composed Community Standards statement that reads, in part, as follows:

> *Our message boards and chat rooms exist to provide you with a place to voice your own thoughts and opinions, and also hear what your neighbors around the world have to say.*
>
> *The CNN Web Community has the unique opportunity to integrate your perspective with our on-air programming. Messages posted here are reviewed for use on the CNN Networks; therefore, we reserve the right to remove any content not adhering to our strict code of conduct.*
>
> *You may find our standards more stringent than other Web-based Communities. We are confident you will come to appreciate the friendly atmosphere and sharply focused discussions we strive to maintain.*

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As an international news organization, we do have an affinity to free speech. However, messages or comments that violate our standards are routinely removed without further comment. In addition, users who violate our standards while in our chat rooms may be kicked from the chat server.

Community standards and policies in general will be discussed later in this chapter, but their wording and manner of enforcement should advise members of the provider's role in the community. In the case of CNN Interactive, they describe the context of the chat and message boards as related to CNN's on-air programming. They also justify CNN's policies regarding free speech and control over what appears in their interactive forums. There may be no CNN hosts or online personalities greeting users and facilitating discussion, but there is an occasional official communication such as this warning that appeared in the midst of a message board conversation:

From CNN Community Staff:

According to the rules and guidelines, messages must be posted under your real name. Therefore, effective immediately, we are requesting that you post under your name. To change your name: click "Preferences," change name, scroll to bottom of the form, click "Preference." We will delete messages posted under an obvious pseudonym.

Policy Making and Enforcement

If your site provides no place or opportunity for users to create content on pages under your responsibility, then you have no need to state a usage policy or to enforce it. In such a case, you're only responsible for the information you create and place on your site. But then you're not benefiting from having users who produce content and draw others to share it. That dynamic happens mostly in public chat rooms and discussion boards, and their existence make it necessary that you publicly state the conditions under which people can post information on your site.

The WELL began with a single notice to its users: *You own your own words.* Its purpose was to assign responsibility to the subscribers for the words they posted on the system, thus (we hoped) protecting us from certain legal liabilities.

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We lived with "YOYOW," as we called it, as the sole stipulation for user behavior for the WELL's first four years until a second tersely worded rule was added prohibiting personal harassment. It took us that long to feel that we understood how harassment worked in the online environment. We tried to avoid burdening the WELL's budding culture with a rule structure that would inhibit experimentation and creative interaction. We chose to allow people to test the limits of free speech in order to see how the young medium would bear it, and to see if appropriate software tools could be invented to replace top-down rules and regulations as a means of protecting users from each other.

Through the years, the WELL's users learned what worked and what did not in the way of etiquette in their community in particular, and in the online environment in general. Much of what they learned became ingrained in the system's culture and is still passed on to new members as they join. But in the late 1980s, when the WELL was experimenting on the edges, there were few lawyers familiar with the possibilities of online behavior and culture. Now that online life has reached the mainstream, legally actionable behaviors have been identified, and the need for extensive public policy statements to protect system providers and users has been firmly established.

Basic Policies and Community-Specific Rules

Few communities on the Web today have the luxury of time that the WELL had to allow its culture to evolve and mature in a relatively lawless atmosphere. Especially on sites created primarily to generate revenue, user populations are expected to appear overnight, and rules must be in place at launch time. The policies that help to define a community are drawn up by lawyers—or with their advice—before the community has even convened. Some, but not all, of these policies regulate the behavior of users in public interaction. Rules for online behavior almost invariably include the following cautions and prohibitions:

- The words posted in chat rooms and in discussion boards are the responsibility of the poster.
- The posting of illegally obtained information (such as stolen credit card numbers) is not allowed.
- The posting of information for which the user does not have copyrights or permission is not allowed.

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- The posting of material deemed to be obscene or unlawful if viewed by underage persons is not allowed.
- Harassment of other users and disruption of their use of the system are not allowed.

The wording of these statements varies between sites, from the style you'd expect to read in a courtroom document to more user-friendly versions that match the tone of the rest of the site's content. But even where the wording has a friendlier pitch, it's common to see a *fine print* link to a more legalese version containing paragraphs with titles such as "Disclaimer of Warranties" and "Limitation of Liabilities."

Policy is a combination of legal protection and community preservation. I'm no lawyer, but I recommend highly that you get advice from one who is knowledgeable and up to date with Internet-specific rulings that indicate which disclaimers and policy statements are necessary and sufficient to protect you from liability related to user-created content on your system. Explain the nature of your community—its focus, its size, its level of interactivity—and the amount you and your staff will be participating and posting. With the right legal warranties and limitations in place, you should have little to worry about. Beyond that, your concerns should rest with what works socially (as opposed to legally) for standards of conduct and behavior among your members.

Recognizing the De Facto Standards

It's more likely that the problems you encounter in managing an interactive community will be of the social rather than legal nature. Given the opportunity to meet with others and converse in groups through Web-based interfaces, people exhibit a range of behaviors broader, in some respects, than they do in the physical world. They pretend to be other people or to be grander versions of their in-person selves. They may ramble on longer and make more daring claims than they'd dare to in a face-to-face meeting. They express stronger opinions, they curse more openly, they explore taboo topics, and they insult each other to degrees that would invite physical mayhem in a nose-to-nose confrontation.

A certain amount of friction and outrageousness can be a good thing for a community in that it livens things up. Conflict is good in a story or a movie, and

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it likewise adds drama to group interaction; but too much, combined with too little consideration of how envelope-pushing behaviors affect everyone else's experiences of your site, can erode the overall enjoyment and drive people away. Because you don't want bullies and power-trippers to dominate your scene from the start, you should initially set behavioral boundaries that you believe will be appropriate for your particular community. You can always check those limits against the reality of the situation as your population grows and the personality of your community begins to reveal itself. Groups learn to regulate themselves as they mature and adopt empirically proven standards. These de facto rules for engagement may, in some cases, be more conservative than the ones you impose from the position of site manager. Remember, though: It's easier to relax old rules that have proven themselves unnecessary than it is to impose new ones in an established social scene once you've discovered that they're needed. As I'll explain more in Chapter 9, entrenched social practices can be hard for a host to displace.

Stating Your Guidelines

Community standards are different from rules in that they're not enforced by means of penalties. In fact, it's preferable if adherence to them is voluntary and dealt with more by peer pressure than top-down enforcement. Most communities naturally adhere to standards that come from good common sense and etiquette, so a sincere appeal to new users as they join your community can often be persuasive enough to gain their compliance. A core of members who model good behavior to others as they come on board is usually most effective.

The WELL's community evolved a set of what it now calls *Guidelines* through years of collective experience and observation of what worked and what didn't in its little world. There has always been conflict to various degrees between various members on the WELL, yet it has maintained a certain tense equilibrium between its outspoken and libertarian population, its management, and its ownership. It introduces new members to the realities of life in its virtual small town with advice like this:

> *The WELL, as a community, functions on mutual respect and cooperation.*
>
> *Computer conferencing is quite different from face-to-face communication. Only your words travel over the network—the facial expressions, tone of*

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voice, and other live conversational nuances are completely absent from discussions on The WELL. Please pay careful attention to how you wield those words. Teasing and sarcasm, for example, often don't travel well—that's why people sometimes type symbols such as :-) (look at it sideways) when they want others to know a statement is meant to be humorous.

Remember that words you enter in a burst of inspired passion or indignant anger will be there for you (and everyone) to read long after your intense feelings are gone. This isn't meant to discourage spontaneity and the expression of feelings on The WELL, but merely to remind you of the long-term existence and effects of what you write.

You may, from time to time, find yourself in disagreement with someone on The WELL. At times like this, keep in mind that it's safer, more polite, and more persuasive to take issue with that person's comments, rather than attacking them personally.

People on The WELL generally avoid "obscene" language (no, we aren't going to try to define that here), except in Conferences where such language is acceptable. There are no rigid rules about this. Just remember that we are a diverse community of individuals with varying standards, and there may be minors present.

But such guidelines and community standards are not an effective defense against users who refuse to respect them and, instead, behave in ways that send others fleeing to their browser bookmarks. At some point you need to set limits and enforce them. Having attracted people to your site, you have some obligation to protect your guests from personal abuse and exploitation. You can't afford to have the majority of your potential members run off by a minority who insist on exercising what they view as their freedom to behave antisocially.

Most group interactive sites define prohibited behaviors in fairly general terms because it's nearly impossible to describe every possible variation of harassment or offensiveness. *You* get to interpret the meaning of your own guidelines. *You* are ultimately the one who must decide the seriousness of an infraction. Though it may not have been in the job description, you are the judge in your community, with the power to mete out sanctions. Of course it's best if you can develop your guidelines with counsel from responsible members

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of your community, but you'll waste many precious hours debating the details with obstinate users about your choice of terms and language. And you are sure to be called a fascist by at least some of your more defiant users for even the slightest exercise of power.

Most communities on today's fast-paced Web should be launched with a well-thought-out set of behavioral guidelines in place rather than develop them piecemeal once the population has begun to arrive. Unlike the Net in the mid-1980s, the Web is a much bigger and populous online world where an interesting community isn't likely to have the luxury of years over which to carefully cobble together the guidelines that will work for it.

Enforcing Your Rules and Guidelines

A common phrase found in *terms of service* and *community standards* statements is "grounds for termination of access," the capital punishment equivalent of the Internet justice system. You'd be given the heave-ho if you stood up in a restaurant and slung handfuls of linguini across the room, and you'll likely get the boot from a Web's discussion space if you post strings of obscenities in an online conversation, or insist on hounding another user mercilessly about her religious beliefs or choice of operating system. At least that's the idea of the termination sanction. In reality, things are not that simple. Far from it, in fact.

The User Authentication Quandary

As we'll describe in detail in Chapter 5, part of your interface design revolves around the determination of who should have access to your discussion space. Does it matter to you who participates? Does it matter at all how they behave? Do you need control over who is posting words and graphics on your site? All of these questions are relevant to the issue of user authentication.

Absolutely positive identification of a person registering to participate in Web community is not a high priority. There are some online communities in which revealing one's true identity is an integral and valuable part of the social contract, but authentication on the level required for getting a U.S. passport isn't necessary. The main reason for authentication for our purposes is to give the site provider control over access to the community.

The quickest and most efficient means of authentication is matching each user with a distinct email address. When the user registers, he enters that

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address in an online form. The server immediately sends a message to the address containing a special URL or code. Upon receipt, the user points his browser to that URL or pastes the code into an emailed reply and the server confirms his registration. The entire process, from registration to confirmation, generally takes under 10 minutes. Here is a member authentication message I received (and slightly modified for security reasons) from the Builder.com site, a part of C/Net:

> *Return-Path: buzzreg@central.cnet.com*
> *From: buzzreg@central.cnet.com*
> *Date: Thu, 4 Dec 1997 15:59:14*
> *To: fig@well.com*
> *Subject: Welcome to Builder buzz!*
>
> *Welcome, figster.*
>
> *You have registered as a provisional user for Builder buzz. To become a full member, please email the following member code line back to us, so we can confirm your email address. With most email programs, you can simply reply to this message. (If your email program doesn't include the previous message in its replies, you may need to cut and paste the member code line into the reply message.)*
>
> *MEMBER CODE: 2w 8b9b BI9 xk4*
>
> *Thank you for joining us, and we look forward to having you visit often and participate completely in the Builder buzz conversations!*
>
> *Regards,*
> *Dan Shafer*
> *master builder and Builder buzz host*

If an authenticated user gives the community "grounds for termination of access" by violating its statutes, the provider tells the server to deny further logins by the account and to refuse any further attempts to register accounts from that user's email address. Entering a phony address won't work because the authentication email message won't reach the user; of course, there are ways around such authentication. The user might have more than one email

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address or might give his friend's address and get the special URL from her. One complicating factor is the increasing availability of free email services and addresses through sites that allow users to create them at will. This is resulting in some community sites refusing authorization for accounts showing email addresses not tied directly to an ISP. Unfortunately, the largest source of email addresses in the world, America Online, allows its users to create and change user names at will, and refusing anyuser@aol.com takes a big bite out of the potential pool of registrants. But subverting authentication is not a slam dunk; it takes at least a little work to get in.

By forgoing the security of authenticated accounts—an approach chosen by most Web community sites these days—a violator of the local standards may be denied further access based on the email address given, but a bogus email address entered on a subsequent registration will be approved. Some sites don't even ask for an email address. They simply invite users to assign themselves a nickname and start chatting. Obviously, we are talking about some divergent ideas of community here. We're also talking about widely differing options for enforcement, for without the leverage of authentication, attempts to ban a persistent problem user will fail.

Dealing with Problem Users

The extent to which this will cause you problems depends on the nature of your scene and the people who frequent it. If the quality of interaction in your community is highly valued by its members, there are going to be occasions when the ability to effectively expel a user will be necessary. You don't want to be in perpetual pursuit of a single troublemaker who keeps returning under a series of aliases. And you don't want your community complaining to you about your inability to put an end to the disruption that one obnoxious user is causing. But if the discussion space on your site is treated as a more casual venue, not regarded as a major social investment, you may find lack of user authentication to be less of a problem. The community won't notice or care about violations as much, and the troublemakers won't find it worth their time returning for they, like all users who perform socially on the Web, fuel their behaviors from a common source: human attention.

Attention is energy. This little fact was brought home to me by a teacher of mine in the 1970s when my first son was a baby. As he pointed out, when you

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watch an infant, you see clearly how much we humans respond to attention from our own kind. Babies thrive on the attention of their parents. They condition their parents to react to them, and their parents, in return, teach their young child which behaviors work to bring more attention. Not everything we learn as babies is helpful to us as adults; we pick up some questionable *energy habits*. We don't necessarily grow out of them as we mature; we just find other ways to get attention beyond cooing and crying.

Getting attention on the stage of an online community is like shooting fish in a barrel. And online groups in which lasting relationships between individuals are valued pay more attention to the behaviors of their members than those in which relationships are assumed to be short-lived and transient. In cohesive groups, dysfunctional users engage in *button pushing*, probing for reactions from whomever they choose to be their perceived adversaries. We used to call it *sport hassling* at the WELL because it was played like a game, but one that most people were decidedly not into playing. Sport hasslers make themselves noticed and are eventually chastised for their actions by the group, but the negative attention often feeds their behaviors even further, escalating it to more outrageous levels until management is forced to intervene.

In groups with less bonding and less social involvement between members, the general attitude may be that relationship and quality of conversation are not important enough to justify engaging with rude users. The purpose of the chat room or message board might be purely recreational, so disruptive individuals aren't taken seriously. People would rather move to another chat room or log out than take the bait and get involved in an argument. Just as attention provides the energy to fuel bad behavior, withdrawal of attention is the best way to extinguish it.

An aberrant user in a community is most effectively dealt with by a community that doesn't care because the complement of users are content to *isolate* the troublemaker and thus cut off his supply of attention. On the WELL, where relationships and behaviors are taken very seriously, I once had to suspend a prominent member's account for a time to give the community and the member in question a cooling-off period. As is the case in many families, people who care about each other can get themselves into some complex and frustrating personality loops. Such self-sustaining animosities within the confines

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of a virtual community can spoil a good time for a lot of bystanders. That alone is a good reason to have the means available to deny access to a user or two to extract them from the action and attention of the community. I'll describe a variety of tools that can be used at the administrative and host levels for dealing with problem users in the chapters on discussion platforms and hosting, but the most effective tools for dealing with the interpersonal problems of Web communities are really those controlled by the users themselves.

Empowering Virtual Self-Defense

In a perfect society, there would be no need for authorities, and each individual would be able to control the quality of her own experience. No rules and no enforcement would be necessary. (I know. . . Get real, Cliff!) But the online world holds some advantages over the real world. For one thing, no one can punch you in the nose through the Web. For another, you can *switch off* certain people, selecting your least favorite personalities from among the rest of the participants in your community and making them invisible to you.

What we called a *bozo filter* on the WELL is known as the *ignore* feature on other discussion platforms on the Web, and with it users can customize their views of the community by eliminating their exposure to certain, shall we say, *unsavory* elements. Of course, these elements won't be the same for everyone, and in some cases two users will be made mutually invisible to each other, sparing the rest of the community from witnessing their silly or often disturbing skirmishes. The bozo filter has eliminated untold hours of acrimony on the WELL between members who simply couldn't stand each other. The advantages to you of providing such user options are that you're called on less frequently to act as the authority (or the *parent*) in the community, and users feel more empowered to deal with interpersonal problems as *they* see fit rather than as *you* see fit.

Practicing Diplomacy

Face it, you're the 800-pound gorilla. You hold the switch that can banish a member instantly. None of your members have anywhere near the power you do. You are the authority figure, and Net culture is known for its lack of respect for authority, especially when there's evidence or suspicion of abuse. As we

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emphasized earlier, trust is a fragile but essential ingredient for establishing community, and the more you participate, the more you open the possibility that you may commit an act that at least *some* of your members will interpret as a violation of their trust. How do you avoid such situations, and what do you do once they've happened? There will be more about this subject in Chapter 9 because it's usually hosts who are on the front lines, but as the community manager, the buck really stops at your terminal.

Interacting regularly with your community, either through your hosts or through having a community manager who is a regular and familiar participant, enhances the image that your company identifies with its guests and their needs. But it also exposes you to what can be embarrassing confrontations when things go wrong. If you are known as a participant in the community, don't withdraw when things get tough. If you've earned trust leading up to the problem, you may have some chips you can cash in.

Damage Control 101

It's going to happen. At some point you will be called on the carpet by some of your users through the very platform that you provide for them. A very impassioned microcommunity may form (good!) around interest in a very stupid thing that you did or said (bad!), and you'll be asked (or ordered) to explain yourself. All manner of suspicions about the arrogance of authority will be voiced publicly, and you may be challenged to come clean and answer the charges. You don't believe it could happen? Ask Steve Case at America Online or Andy Grove at Intel. Remember the overloaded modems when AOL went to flat pricing and the math error in the Pentium chip. Those monumental snafus will dwarf anything that can happen to you, but it's still likely to feel like a big deal.

Having been in such positions myself (although on a much tinier scale than those of Case or Grove), I can sympathize with all public figures who must stand before banks of microphones, and walls of cameras to confess human error. It's not a comfortable position to be in, but the discomfort doesn't have to last long. Depending on how you respond and how promptly and permanently you fix the problem, the damage may barely linger in the community's memory. The Net is fast and the Net moves things along.

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Of course there is a wide range of things that can go wrong when you're hosting a community with all of its attached expectations. There are interpersonal blunders such as terminating the account of a member by accident or without what his associates believe was sufficient cause. There are technical blunders such as access to the discussion platform going down in the midst of a special interview or an important stream of conversation. There are public relations blunders, for example, when your company gets its name in the news for a questionable business practice or judgment. (Uh, *what* Pentium math error?) And there may be community relations stumbles when you're accused of not responding promptly or honestly to problem reports by members. *Community* relationships assume a higher level of accountability than mere *public* ones.

Here are some tips for dealing with situations in which, yeah, you blew it, but you sincerely intend to fix things so it doesn't happen again:

- Respond promptly. Bad news travels fast and far while users wait to hear from you.
- Respond directly to offended individuals first, by email or even phone if appropriate and possible.
- Respond publicly with a candid explanation and remedies you're putting in place.
- Don't compromise system or business security in anything you say.
- Weigh the real costs of damage control against possible costs of not acting. There are occasions when things will heal themselves faster if you don't try to fix them.

Another good source for ideas in this area is Jim Sterne's book *Customer Service on the Internet* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.,1996). His strong recommendations for openness with customers when caught in embarrassing circumstances are summed up in the following vivid paragraphs:

> *A ripping tirade on your company's poor practices or a diatribe outlining your latest atrocities will make you look bad in the eyes of the public. Your customers may be incensed. They may send copies to your competitors. They may even decide to feed it directly to the press. But if you hide it, it will grow, Pentium-like in the dark, until it bursts into the public eye on the cover of the* New York Times.

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And don't underestimate the power of your clients' combined intellect. If you hide, you will be found out. If you skirt the issue, you will be made a laughingstock. If you dissemble, you will be upbraided. If you lie, you will be turned into blackened toast by a furnace of flames.

Not pretty, but I can attest that it's true and I cannot emphasize enough the huge intangible role that trust plays in a community. If you can maintain a high level of trust with your users and/or customers, it's like having money saved for a rainy day. If a time comes when you must admit to some error or boondoggle, you'll be thankful to have a good record and solid relationships to fall back on.

How Involved Can Your Staff Be?

For those of you who can afford to assign staff to deal specifically and directly with the community, there are practicalities involved in how that staff is deployed. Anyone who has found a place they treat as a *home on the Web* will affirm that, for all its wonderfulness, community can be a gigantic *time suck*. This is just as true for you and your staff members charged with patrolling conversations in your interactive space. Those conversations can be extensive and constantly expanding. They can also be interesting and engaging. Hours fly by as you move from a critique of the latest overbudget Hollywood blockbuster, to a Get Well topic for a member who just had major surgery, to a discussion of the latest changes in the interface, to a raging argument over another member's controversial politics. And on and on. If your community is vibrant and happening, it's also likely to be fun to play with and somewhat addictive. Your staff is not immune to that attraction, but other work has to get done, too. Strict time budgeting and priority-setting are necessities here.

Personal involvement by staff in the community's conversations can be both a blessing and a curse. It can foster trust of your company within the community, and it can also create liability problems if the wrong things are promised or revealed by staffers. You must remember your position as service provider and keep that as your priority, however chummy you'd like to be with your clients, customers, and community members. You must balance your openness with smart business practice and use the time your staff spends in the community primarily to learn what it can do better in the way of service.

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I believe it's a good idea to introduce key members of staff to the community through a page dedicated to that purpose. I also believe it helps to have the president or CEO of the company address the community regularly through a public letter or column just as Steve Case does monthly on America Online and Mary Furlong does on Third Age. As for interacting directly in the discussion space, one good idea is to establish a special conversation area where suggestions can be posted and responded to. Such a place allows you to be the initiator while giving you a regular location where members can expect to find a representative of the service provider. You can name your terms for participation because it's *your* discussion area. This shouldn't limit your staff to reading only these Suggestions and Support topics. They should continue to stay in touch with what's going on throughout the community, but much of that can be done through enlisting volunteer hosts to report in from their specialty areas.

Involving Your Users

Now that we've established *your* place in the community, we can put that position into perspective by describing the role of the members. You're doing more than simply providing facilities for users to converse with each other. You have expectations—given our definition of community—of certain benefits that their participation will bring to you. But you have to do more than give them the technical tools and toys. You must be active in relation to them in order to gain those benefits.

This active provider role goes largely underserved in most Web communities. Communication between provider and users is perfunctory, limited to the most basic of support information. Little is done in the way of talent development, promotion of user creativity, and involvement of users in the site's improvement.

One outstanding example of users being put at the center of community creation and growth is GeoCities. The featured content shown in Figure 3.6 points to Web pages created by GeoCities members. In fact, their entire concept revolves around providing *neighborhoods* of common interest in which members can build and locate their homepages. In a relatively ancient press release of July 11, 1995, they (as BHI—Beverly Hills Internet) described their service in this way:

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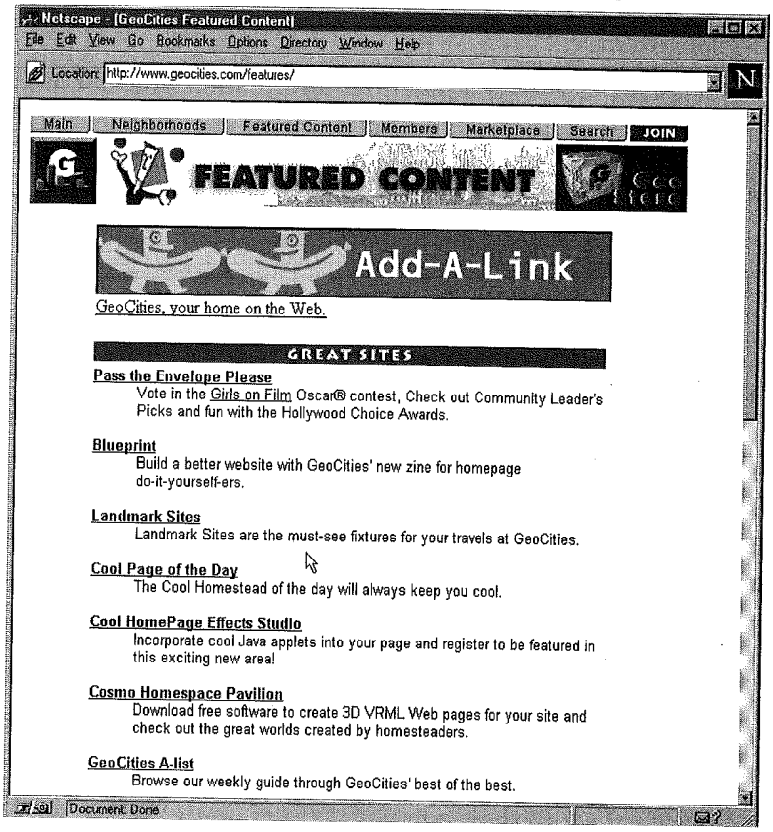
BHI is in the business of building online GeoCities—cyberspace communities of Netters who have their own homepages, create their own cottage content, reside on cyberstreets named after landmark thoroughfares from around the world, and consume the goods and services of advertisers and sponsors that are, as in real life, an integral part of the community.

The services GeoCities provides are not centered on content but on structure, convenience, and connectivity as frameworks for member-created content.

Figure 3.6 GeoCities features the homepage creations of its members as the centerpiece of its content. Members locate their homepages in "neighborhoods" that define their affinity groups.



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By aggregating member presence according to their interests, they also please advertisers and bolster their revenue potential. In Chapter 10, "Web Worlds," GeoCities will be featured as one of the Web worlds that, by providing tools and space for free, are creating homes for many user-initiated communities.

The User As Contributor and Cocreator of the Service

Really, what GeoCities has done is not very complicated, though it has managed to do it well and on a much larger scale than anyone else. Most Web sites are created by companies and individuals whose first cause is to put their own content online. Most companies see themselves as information providers rather than as communication facilitators. And of those whose purpose is facilitating communication, most see people as tool users rather than as reciprocal and mutual information providers.

The fact is, everyone on the Web is a potential information provider, not only through the construction of homepages, but through the contributions they make in group discussions. Many have proven themselves to be magnificent artists, creators, and entertainers. There is star quality to be found in discussion forums, but you have to be paying attention to discover it.

Talent Scouting

If you're hosting conversation, and if the quality of that conversation matters to you, you will pay attention to it. In doing so, you'll notice that some people participate far more than others, and some contribute far higher quality than others. Some appear to have such mastery of the platform, the language, and the skills of involving and bringing out the contributions of others that they stand out as true assets to your community. You want such people to stick around and to contribute more.

When we'd recognize such talent in the early days of the WELL, we'd invite the person to become a conference host. We had no money to pay him or her, but we could offer complimentary access to the system which, at the time, cost $10.00 a month and $2.00 an hour to use. For a truly addicted WELLer, that could mean a savings of hundreds of dollars a month. And with host status came a certain amount of cachet in the community. Hosts on the WELL were treated as an inner circle of outspoken advisors to management.

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Communities on the Web today, being mostly free to access, don't have monetary savings to offer as an enticement for more participation by talented members. Compensation for services (to be covered in Chapter 9) is often less important to a discussion host than the esteem that comes with serving the community, but any rewards the provider can muster are important as expressions of appreciation even if they don't amount to a fair hourly wage. The rewarding of responsibility and public recognition are regarded in many communities as fair trade for services that are, in essence, purely voluntary. Figure 3.7 shows how GeoCities members recognize the leaders of their community areas for the work they do.

The Member As Design Consultant

The best evaluators of software and interface design are the users. No matter how you try as the programmer or designer, you won't have their detached and pragmatic viewpoint. This is why products are given to beta-test and focus groups before being released. Whole divisions of companies are devoted to gathering feedback from consumers about their products. So why should it be any different on a Web site?

The *feedback* link is a ubiquitous feature on the Web. All site providers are curious to know what guests think of their creations. On Web sites that foster community, you expect the feedback to flow freely and elicit response from the provider. You also expect members to develop opinions about the ease of use of the site and its interactive features. Community members don't simply view sites, they *use* them and note where they are difficult, clumsy, unintuitive, and of poor quality. Those opinions have tremendous value to you, so you should learn how to draw them out.

Harvesting Helpful Feedback

The ideal arrangement for learning from your users is to host an ongoing public conversation about the design and operation of your site. Using an asynchronous message board or conferencing platform, conversations remain available for reading and posting to allow users to drop in and report findings when they are inspired, frustrated, or just wanting to be helpful. As your part in the conversation, you express thanks for the suggestions, explain why certain of them might not work, and describe which ideas have been tried and subsequently

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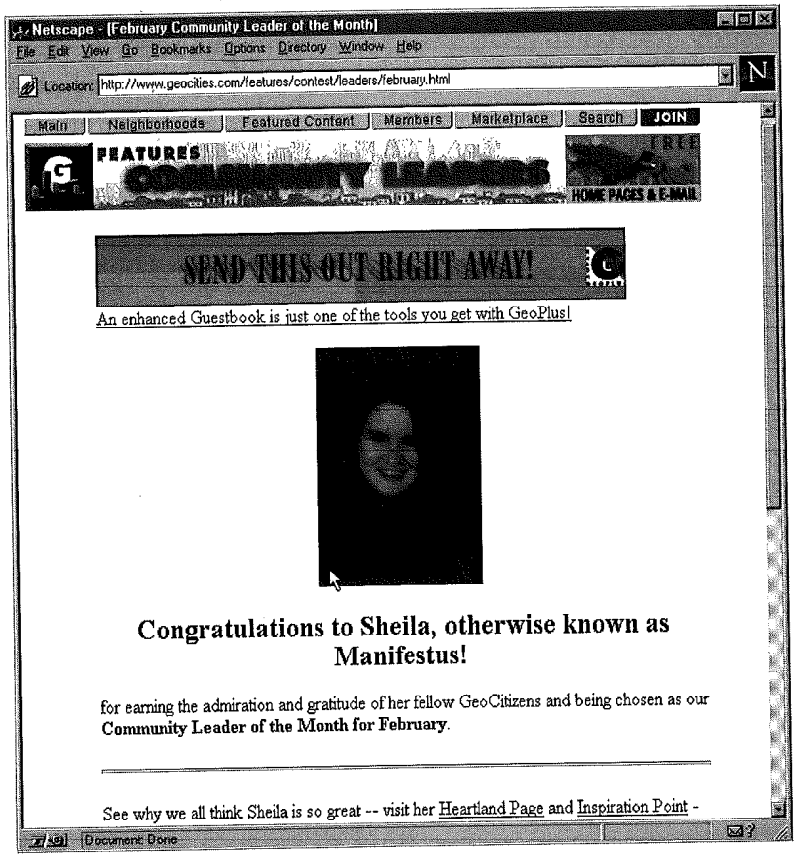
Figure 3.7 GeoCities encourages its members to recognize the talent and service of grassroots community leaders.



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abandoned. As happened on the WELL, users can be responsible for extensive improvements on everything from platform configuration to content additions and user support documentation.

For sites with only a chat platform, these conversations can be hosted on a regular schedule. Transcripts of chats can be saved, edited down to their most important points, and made available for those unable to attend. Messages to the community from your design staff can be posted in an adjacent area on

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your site. The idea, regardless of the platform, is to open channels for dialog and encourage user involvement.

A note of caution: When participating in such give-and-take with your users or customers, don't make rash promises about what you can and will do for them. Don't promise that you will respond to all questions. You must be able to make decisions based on your business needs even when they don't please the community. What you bring to the conversation is your business perspective. Also be careful to budget carefully the staff time allotted to taking part in these conversations, and be frank with the community about time you can afford to devote to responding to them. It's always best not to promise more than you can deliver, though you will certainly be tempted to do so in the name of community service.

Supporting Grassroots Community-Building

We finish this chapter with a section about the relationship between site provider and users as a collaboration in community-building. Helpful feedback about site design is one example of this, but the fostering of community has more subtle elements than the exchange of interface ideas and the recognition of talent among the users. Community-building requires that the site provider empowers users to *initiate* new directions, to follow their relationships in directions that feel productive and helpful *to them*. This usually entails providing users with the tools and permission to add their own discussion spaces such as chat rooms and message threads or conferences.

For such permission to actually foster grassroots community-building, users must be allowed a sense of self-determination and the freedom to develop their own local community standards. You must get to know the founders of these new microcommunities and where they are headed with their ideas. That familiarity can help bolster your faith that their efforts will be worth supporting, for you don't want microcommunity standards in place that will violate those of your site as a whole. Of course you'll have concerns, but balance them against the benefits you're likely to realize by having your users build original traffic magnets for your site without your involvement.

Communities, like plants, grow from seeds. And providers, like gardeners, prepare the ground, plant the seeds, and care for them. Your relationship with

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your users begins, in most cases, when the first users arrive on your site. If you anticipate a working relationship with your community, a search should be undertaken before the site is opened for *seed users*.

Seed Users: Social Icebreakers and Role Models

As Stewart Brand said about the WELL, "it sold its users to each other." That's the essence of attraction in any highly interactive online community. The attraction is as much in the quality of the people who can be found there as it is in the services that are provided. The longer your community exists and its conversations expand, the more well known will be its membership and their conversations.

A potential community is like a potential party. All the decorations are hung, the chairs are arranged, the catering service is contracted, and the band is tuning up, but until the partygoers arrive, you don't know what you've got. You can have your pages built, your content composed, and your links in place, but all you've got when you launch is a framework around which you hope a lasting matrix of social relationships will form. It really helps if there is some life and activity when the guests arrive. And it helps even more if the early guests are the kinds of party animals who will warm things up for the bigger crowds who arrive after them.

Few people like being the first to arrive at a social affair. The phrase *fashionably late* is all about arriving after the party's in full swing and having your entrance noticed. For those who arrive early, the room is vacant, there are few people to talk to, and your words seem to echo in the empty hall. Of course, your staff will be the first ones with access to your chat rooms and message boards, but you don't want to set the precedent of starting and steering all of the conversations; you want the members of the community to take over that function. Somehow, though, you do want the ice to be broken and the conversation rolling before opening your doors.

Seeding conversations requires people who understand your ideas and the importance of getting your community off on the right foot. You want seed users to model the kinds of behavior and conversation you'd like to characterize your community in the future. You may know the most likely places on and off the Web to find the people to populate your site, but before you invite them,

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find a few individuals—some may already be on your staff—who understand your community vision well and are willing to participate in a prelaunch housewarming, helping give your site a "lived-in" feel. In a forum or message board system, they will initiate conversations for your community to join in and follow. In a chat situation, they will be the first chat room hosts, welcoming your first visitors. Together, several seed hosts can begin conversations that will set the tone and model the conversational style for everything that comes after.

Extending the Original Culture

Every new person who arrives to participate in your chat or message boards will find some indications in the ongoing interaction of whatever culture has formed on your site. You and your seed users have the first opportunity to set the first examples, but once the gates are opened to new users, it's fairly easy to dilute whatever your small pioneering cadres have been able to establish. You must think in terms of extending what you've started into the second wave of new users.

To do this, you should be deliberate in your early marketing, going after users who are strongly matched to the focus of your community or communities. These early adopters should be your next priority recruitments after your seed users, for not only do you want to hand-pick some of your founding settlers, you want to be selective in attracting your first wave of users. You want to maximize your chances for success by bringing in people who are likely to adopt your community as their own and add to its value early in its lifetime. You want to recruit with the aim of building a core of loyal and generous members who will not only contribute valuable postings and leadership, but will help build enthusiasm and participation among the users who follow them into your system.

Having an active scene makes the community aspect of your site much easier to promote and sell, and is more likely to be talked about by those who have been there. Spending the time to track down your initial seed users and to recruit what could be a solid core of first-wave users will make a lot of difference in the future of your community. It will also make your hosting life easier almost immediately.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, we must consider how you will choose and assign staff for administering and maintaining your community on the

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Web. It's through your staff that all of these relationships with the members of your community will be established and serviced.

Summary

Communities are defined by their relationships and, as creator and provider of a home on the Web, you have the most important role in establishing and maintaining those relationships. Of course, the users of your site have an important role, too, but you hold the position of power and authority. From that position, you must create an atmosphere of trust between you and your users that will spread to their relationships with each other. You must balance that openness with the realities of running your business.

Whether you assume a high- or low-profile presence has an effect on the development and evolution of the community itself and its environment. Your direct participation can encourage users to work with you on improving the Web site for your and their mutual benefit. By interacting directly with the community, you can learn more about its needs and talents. But not all companies can afford to be so involved. If that's your situation, attentive content development can replace your presence, to some extent, but you should still respond reliably to user input.

If users contribute content through posting in discussion boards or having their Web pages linked to your site, policies, standards, and guidelines are needed to define limits to behavior and content. Some of these will be needed to protect your company from liability, but many of them will serve to define and preserve the character of your community. Get advice from a knowledgeable lawyer, state initial guidelines that are appropriate for your goals, then engage with your community to learn what matters to them and how homegrown community standards can be put in place.

When problems arise between you and your community, nothing can replace frank and open communication, but don't jeopardize your business concerns unnecessarily. A history of trust and good relations with your users is invaluable in such situations.

The people who populate your community can become your site's greatest asset and you should be active in developing the talent that can be found

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among them. Your users can serve as conversation hosts, expert commentators, and entertainers if you recognize them and give them incentives to stay with you. Users are also your most valuable consultants on the quality of your site. Give them channels for input and respond to them in ways that assure them that they are valued. Help them develop their own original ideas as builders of microcommunities on your site.

You begin your relationship with your users when you recruit your first *seed users* to begin the initial collection of conversations on your site. You don't want to open your doors when there's nothing going on in the discussion areas, but someone must break the ice. It's also a good idea to recruit your first wave of users from places on the Web where people most compatible with your site's focus can be found. Getting your site off on the right foot depends on inviting the right people as your first guests.

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INVOLVING YOUR STAFF

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The preceding chapter gave a general description of the relationship between the site and its users. This one is more about the specific roles of your staff and how they relate to the community. Think of your site as having a human voice that comes from the people who build, maintain, and manage it. That's the way users perceive it, so it makes quite a difference to them how those people respond to their needs. It matters, too, how you structure and assign their responsibilities. Community service is delivered in more ways than just through your direct interaction with users. It comes across in the consideration you put into your operation's design, functionality, and content. And though most of the essential job descriptions on your staff are industry standard—webmasters, programmers, graphic artists, editors, marketers, and salespeople—the people filling those roles work in a special context when there's a community to care for and answer to.

Hosting on a Staff-Wide Basis

Every Web site that aims to attract a long-term loyal audience hopes its visitors will adopt it as an online home. It's the job of the entire staff to make that home comfortable. The creators of a site can hardly sense the comfort level of their guests without mixing with them, either personally or through proxies, in the community environment. The virtual membrane that separates the people who *build* the site from those who *experience* it should be as sheer as possible,

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depending, of course, on your site's description. You need to be sensitive to your audience while keeping enough distance that its members don't get the idea that they're making your decisions for you.

Hello. Here's the Staff

By letting your members know who does what on your staff you present more of a human face to your site while giving due credit to the people who work to provide it. But identifying staff is not the same as inviting users to advise you on running operations. You've got to protect your boundaries while personalizing your service. What truly matters is that there's *a person*, not just a mail link, responding to your members' questions, suggestions, comments, and complaints. Your site may have many of these personal ambassadors, in fact. It's their contact with your members that makes the biggest impression and provides valuable information that can be reported back to the rest of the staff. Label them what you will—hosts, moderators, guides, customer service representatives, ambassadors—they serve as the antennae of your organization in its community space.

Feedback Gatherers

Your users will communicate with you through whatever channels you provide them. Mail links are standard features on Web sites, and are by far the most prevalent means for delivering audience feedback to the staff. At *Salon*, email from readers of its editorial content is distributed to any staff member who opts to see it. The senders don't expect responses, submitting their messages more as letters to the editor than as correspondence. But sites that provide more *services* than content may be more obliged to respond to mail commenting on their design or function or quality of service. Legitimate complaints and helpful suggestions deserve at least acknowledgment if you want to keep your guests happy.

The dynamics can be very different when the community is based on group discussion. In a café group, such as *Salon Magazine*'s Table Talk area, there are much greater expectations that staff will have some participation in the interaction. This is usually the case in cafés since discussion hosts are provided to help facilitate and maintain their multitudes of conversations. There are other configurations where the chat room or message board serves more as a place

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Watching Your Boundaries

There's such a thing as being too close to your users. Participating in group discussion in the online environment, you see clearly how it flattens hierarchies. Everyone *looks* about the same and, in a medium dependent on the typed word, your power as site manager is balanced by the criteria of the *postocracy* where words rule. Your users wield power in terms of the screen space they occupy, and you may be tempted to match some of them as they engage you in prolonged discussion and debate about your job. Resist the temptation. I learned at the WELL that you can lose sight of your most important role as service provider when you join your service clients as an equal.

Managing the WELL, we spent hours a day conversing with our users, usually with our management hats on, but often as friends and fellow community members. We encouraged all of our staff to do likewise. As a customer service technique, it was consistent with the way our co-owners from the *Whole Earth Catalog* had long communicated with their readers, intentionally blurring the line between content providers and content consumers. But we didn't yet understand the dynamics of the many-to-many communications medium.

Although our guard-down participative technique was part of the mix that built the WELL's strong user culture, it often led to awkward situations when business priorities made it necessary for us to take actions questioned by some of the more vocal members of the community. We found that it was impossible to have it both ways: to be accessible and open to the community while also retaining our autonomy as captains of the business. Where you draw that line separating you from the community while still allowing you to keep in touch with it is critical.

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to post opinions than to support give-and-take conversation. A staff person may oversee the interaction without participating in it. But wherever your site is providing a place for group discussion, you're missing an opportunity if you don't have a staff member using the platform to converse with your users.

It makes a big difference to an important segment of your audience if you engage in public dialog with the users. Recall what I said in the previous chapter about trust being contagious. Participating with your users on "their turf" is significant to them and also brings vital information to the rest of your staff regarding the community's feelings about your site.

Most of your staff will be too busy to ever truly immerse themselves in the community (some may never register or log in to the discussion environment or interact with a single user). But those who are assigned to be your *online staff* will mix with your members and view your site partially through their eyes. It's the online staff who will provide your outreach and contact. And it's your online staff who will detect and interpret the incoming signals, conveying them to the appropriate ears within your organization.

Your Eyes, Ears, and Voice in the Community

Staffers who participate with users through discussion platforms and email correspondence will, through their presence and actions, have significant influence on the users' sense of being included and valued. Where staffers are conspicuous in the community, they are considered by the members to be role models in addition to being public servants and discussion facilitators. Selecting candidates for online duty can be compared to choosing flight attendants, camp counselors, or schoolteachers for, like all of them, your online representatives are stewards and caretakers of people whose trust, attention, and comfort is all important.

Your online staff may extend beyond your inhouse employees to remote consultants and volunteers. To some of these you may grant responsibility for hosting discussion in special-interest forums. (Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion," is all about the discussion host.) Others may present themselves as writers, teachers, or masters of community ceremonies and rituals. Whatever their roles, to some extent they all represent your organization to the online public.

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Those who spend time interacting in the community environment are your best sources and channels for feedback from the participants. They experience your site from close to the users' vantage point and thus are in positions to better understand their opinions. There's a lot of valuable information in those opinions, no matter how coarsely they may be expressed, for improving your site and your management of it. If the tone of a discussion indicates that your site design is confusing, a good online representative will draw out the specific criticisms in terms usable by your site design people. Where there are compliments about a new feature sprinkled through a chat, the attentive staff person will pass them along, too, as confirmation that something is working right.

Your operation may be small enough to require only one staffer (possibly you) to be active in the community, or you may have so much traffic and interaction, and so many diverse interest areas, that you require a large online crew. Whatever your scale and range, there must be one individual serving as the focal point who coordinates the rest and keeps the *spirit* of community in perspective and alive for both users and staff. This *evangelist*, who stays tapped in to the pulse of the community, is what John Coate refers to in his essay as the *Cyberspace Innkeeper*. My less colorful utilitarian title for the position is *Community Manager*.

The Community Manager

The community segments of a Web site typically consist of discussion forums and chat areas, interest-aggregated content, and site-specific policy and support information. It's in the discussion spaces that a visitor can see how active and involved the community members are on the site. Take a tour of so-called community sites and you'll run across the telltale evidence of too little leadership and supervision. You'll find chat boards with meager participation on some sites and with aimless, tasteless blather filling others. You'll find disjointed and dead-end attempts at conversation on message boards, showing little sign of a regular clientele or active relationships.

You get the feeling, stopping in at these hollow meeting places, that whatever hope once existed for a vibrant community has long since been abandoned. You can almost hear the creak of shutters swinging eerily in the wind on rusty hinges in these cyber ghost towns. Okay, maybe it's not *that* spooky, but the

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places *are* deserted. There's no staff present stoking the fires of conversation or priming the pump to get it started. There's no sense of relationship being stimulated, encouraged, and supported. The rare response seems to echo in the empty message board: "Hello, is anybody here?" These are the signs of inadequate or lackadaisical community management.

The Relationship Mechanic

A good Community Manager understands how human dynamics work in the electronic environment. Where groups converse online, there is the potential for the whole gamut of human relationship models to play out, from love to hate and from cooperation to conflict. The CM realizes that ruling with a heavy hand to eliminate the more negative behaviors stifles the community's abilities to confront and resolve its own social problems. The most effective approach to teaching online groups to resolve their own internal dysfunction is to observe, comment, and support the viewpoints of users who express good common sense. Working subtly in public dialog and in the background through communications with members, the CM affects relationships without being overbearing.

The Community Manager is like the mechanic responsible for keeping a car in good running condition. She schedules preventive maintenance and listens for those barely audible pings, knocks, and squeaks in order to fix them before they become real problems. She performs all of the simple routine maintenance—changing the oil, checking the tire pressure—that makes the biggest difference in the car's performance and life expectancy. She tinkers under the hood to optimize performance even when everything's running fine, but she keeps in mind the maxim "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." And when something does break, she rolls up her sleeves and makes the necessary repairs efficiently without overcorrecting and causing new problems in the process. Unlike a car, though, a virtual community can communicate with its mechanic. A community as a whole appreciates attentive care and responds to it, in part, by learning how to fix and maintain itself.

Giving your Community Manager influence and input into all aspects of your site design and operation speeds both the community's development and your response to its members. Just as the mechanic must have control over the car he's charged with maintaining, a CM needs control over the conditions

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under which she does her work with the community. She expresses and practices care for the people and for the processes that go on between them. Whatever empowerment is given the CM can be distributed by her to the responsible members of the community who are most likely to produce things of value for their fellow members and for the site as a whole. Distributing responsibility is one of the surest ways to strengthen a community's social foundation.

In *Net Gain*, Hagel and Armstrong propose an organizational structure dedicated specifically to community development and support, headed by an Executive Community Producer. Their structure presupposes a large operation with editorial, marketing, design, moderation, and customer service departments, all reporting to the Executive CP. It would take an annual budget of a million bucks just to support the staff they describe, but their structure is dead-on in its placement high up in the organizational chart of a position representing community priorities and perspectives.

The community mission must permeate your entire organization if the community itself is to thrive. It's not necessary that the CM be the boss of your whole shebang; just that she be endowed with credibility and input to the parts of the site operations that impact the community. Figure 4.1 illustrates another perspective of the organization, with the Community Manager occupying a position at the hub of operations, serving as the communications coordinator between the users, the hosts, and the site staff.

The Responsibilities of the Community Manager

The first responsibility of the CM is to connect with the users. You may have no need for an Executive Community Producer, but even on sites too small to justify a job title with the word *executive* in it, there should be someone filling the shoes of the Community Manager. Someone must be assigned the job of relating with the people assembling on the site.

The relationship mechanic's role that I described can also be likened to a gardener's, who tends to the first buds of community as they appear, and then nurtures them through growth to their eventual flowering and fruit-bearing. From your site's earliest visitors come the first clues of how people react to what you've built for them, and with those visitors the CM has her first opportunity to establish the kind of relationship with the community that will be most

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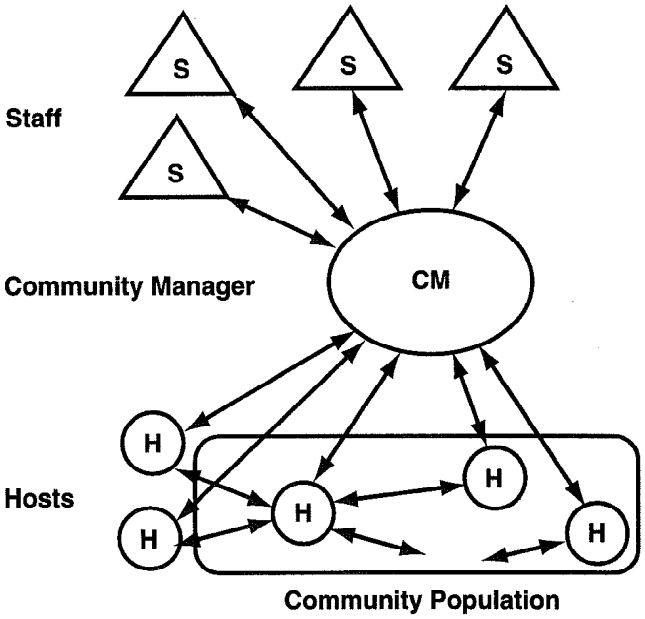
Figure 4.1 The Community Manager is the intermediary between the community and the staff who makes it all possible.



satisfying for both users and Web site. Proactively connecting with visitors as they arrive informs them that your site puts a high priority on building relationships with its guests.

Every site's CM will have a different job description, but there are some common responsibilities involved in the management of online community that are best held by one person rather than a crew or committee. Especially on sites where the emphasis is on providing editorially created content, the community itself needs a powerful advocate on the staff, and the following duties can be said to fall under the Community Manager's advocacy role:

- Selection and management of online hosts
- Configuration and operation of the interactive platforms
- Facilitation of conversations between community members

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- Coordination of communications between the site's staff and its users
- Editorial control over content aimed at the community
- Control over commercial and transactional activities aimed at the community
- Implementation and enforcement of policies in the community

Commercial and transactional activities have to do with selling products and services to the community members. My use of the word *control* doesn't imply that the CM should be the editor and manager of these activities. It simply means that the CM's input is critical and should carry enough weight to *veto* specific content and commercial relations that would compromise the users' trust in your site. There will always be temptations to take actions that appear to be shorter routes to profitability. The CM reminds the organization that building community often requires patience and restraint when it comes to selling to people who are focusing on interpersonal communications.

The CM's input on these matters is critical because the CM's mandate *is* to grow the community. That can mean protecting it from content or exploitation that would immediately or ultimately stunt or reverse its growth. It should be the CM's responsibility to make sure that nothing undermines the members' sense of trust, and that the organization as a whole is kept informed of what is pleasing or offending its audience.

The CM may wield the most influence around the community, but she doesn't have to be the most visible staff member in it. She can remain in the background, communicating with members indirectly through the discussion hosts she manages or even through an assigned spokesperson. But the greater the importance of conversation to the community, the more appropriate and advantageous it is that the CM participate directly, keeping up to date with the average user's experience. The nature of your community dictates the need for the CM's conspicuous and sustained presence, or how that presence is delegated.

Talk City, a community site with a large and fast-growing population, has a Vice President of Community overseeing the Community Manager, Chat Master, Community Standards Manager, two Special Events Producers, the

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Director of Entertainment and Kids Programming, and the Community Producer for Kids, Families, and Entertainment. Obviously, the responsibilities and presence of the CM can be distributed among many specialists and further delegated to people who represent the site in the individual discussions and chat rooms. You'll recall that in the Tentative Twenty, LiveWorld described itself as "a virtual community." The staff descriptions of Talk City bear that out. Managing community there is a job shared by many.

The Skills, Know-How, and Personal Qualities of the Community Manager

Your CM should have more than just good social and management skills. She should be an expert with the technology provided to support community activity on your site. She should understand the processes of Web publishing well enough to work with your production and system administration teams, and to recommend feasible improvements of benefit to the community. She should, in fact, be able to carry on knowledgeable conversation about the work of *everyone* on your staff whose work impacts the community space. That can include the content editors, business developers, and the advertising sales team.

The CM should be completely at home in the chat and/or forum environments you provide, with full understanding of the special configuration options that are available to both hosts and users. In the area of policy, she should be well versed in current laws relating to personal privacy, copyright, and the illegal uses of online media, and she should be qualified to advise the community on development of its own local standards of behavior. The CM serves as your company's resident expert in the evolving culture of its top-level community and of the many microcommunities that may develop beneath it.

The Light Touch

Certain personal qualities must be present if a CM is to serve as both wielder of supreme authority and nurturer of trust in a virtual society. John Coate describes these well in his description of the role of the Cyberspace Innkeeper (found at www.sfgate.com/~tex/innkeeping):

> *As manager of an online environment you have a lot of clout, should you choose to wield it, so you need to be almost reassuring to people that you*

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aren't interested in such heavy-handed control practices. Try to use a light touch in your actions and in the way you communicate to people both publicly and privately. Even if you are refusing to take a suggested action. People like to know that their views are respected and considered and that they won't be treated in an arbitrary manner as if they were a number instead of a person. For a long time I have had the very strong impression that if I act too capriciously or with a heavy authoritarian hand, a bunch of people would sort of turn and say, "Oh, gee, I didn't know you were really the Brain Police. I guess I was wrong." Just about anything that smacks of heavy-handed administration has a kind of chilling effect on a scene that is based on the free flow of ideas. People won't stick around if it isn't any fun or if they feel they are being squelched.

The CM must model tolerance, fairness, and patience, and insist that those reporting to her as hosts of public conversations do the same for the areas under their charge. It's her job to uphold standards for civil discussion and to simultaneously keep conversation happening on the site. Exercising control where necessary without negatively affecting participation is a sensitive balancing act, especially within populations that question any top-down control. Every instance can be a challenge to the CM's diplomacy skills.

Sensing Traffic and Tastes

Like a traffic engineer adjusting vehicle flow through a city as vehicular patterns change, the CM should pay attention to the loading of discussion *neighborhoods*, reacting where they show need for expansion. An effective conversation can only accommodate so many participants before it turns into something more like an opinion board. As the *pace* of responses increases in a discussion area, an attentive host will recognize the need to create more opportunities for people to join in who might otherwise feel squeezed out by the overabundance of posts in existing topics. Particularly in cafés, families, and highly focused communities where interactivity is most intense, the CM should be involved in adjusting the discussion platform to accommodate traffic configurations.

In shrines and theaters, content receives more of the user's attention and the CM must be sensitive enough to community tastes to keep the content fresh, engaging, and compatible with the user's deepening or changing interests.

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Most commercial Web sites follow traffic patterns using logs of page views, but direct feedback from users, collected by the CM, is more informative and detailed. It indicates not only how many users visit a page, but what they think of it, and the CM actively goes after such information through engaging in public discussion and by designing email feedback links that users actually respond to.

Leadership and Example

Where appropriate, the CM should be comfortable delegating responsibility to discussion hosts in a diversity of settings. You may have many microcommunities with a variety of social mannerisms and needs on your site, and each one may call for a different style of host involvement. Your CM should be well versed in the ways of online conversation and debate, and adept in the arts of bringing order to interactive chaos and resurrecting interactivity where it has tapered off. Regardless of how independent and self-reliant you'd like your community to be, the leadership of the Community Manager will, at some times, be invaluable as the site adapts to growth and changing technologies.

Above all, the CM should embody the intended attitude of your site. If its tone is meant to be cool and edgy, that's the kind of CM you want. If it's academic and fact centered, the CM should fit that description. Her enthusiasm for human interaction should be contagious, both to the users and to the rest of your staff, for the CM is the guide constantly leading your organization in its relationship with the community.

Discussion Hosts: Employees and Volunteers

The human extensions of your ideals into the community are the people who are present there day in and day out on your behalf. They provide continuity and much of the *sense of place* to your site. Your Community Manager may be the commander and *uber-host*, but the *discussion hosts* are the ambassadors and foot soldiers who carry your intentions to the users and convey their messages back to the rest of the organization.

If your site is very small or just starting out, you may be personally filling all the roles of site manager, community manager, and discussion host. In that

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case, your visitors are communicating directly with you and you with them; there are no intermediaries. Thom of the Vintage Bus site and the providers of similar Web shrines fill their roles as combined creators and hosts out of dedication to a cause, hero, or interest. More expansive and commercial sites require much more specialization and division of labor, with different people in charge of refreshing content, managing servers, and building pages. Highly interactive communities whose populations are constantly expanding their selections of discussion topics require whole *teams* of discussion hosts whose skills directly affect the quality of the resulting discourse. Chapter 9 elaborates on these skills, but for now I'll focus on how you find, recognize, and build working relationships with the people who are qualified to fill these roles.

Hiring and Compensating Hostly Talent

Where do good hosts come from? If you're launching a Web site with discussion platforms, hoping for users to build conversational content and settle in as regular participants, it's a natural thing to wonder. You're probably going to need competent hosts to ride herd over both the conversing and the settling.

Most commercial sites strive to build traffic as quickly as possible which, as I've said, presents a huge challenge to people's efforts to find stable social groupings where relationships can take hold and grow. The crew you have in place when new visitors first arrive in your chat rooms and message boards are the resident greeters and orienters of the *newbies*. As those newbies settle in and gradually join the ranks of the regulars, your CM may begin to choose discussion hosts from among them, but in the beginning you must rely on the CM's experience and judgment to assess your needs and seek out the right hosts to be online and ready when you first open your site's doors to the public.

As your *host of hosts*, the CM should have a history showing plenty of experience in the social trenches of online interactivity. Like an avid and accomplished traveler, she should have visited a variety of virtual cultures, spending enough time in each to appreciate their differences and similarities. Her background should have taught her to recognize the personalities and habits that distinguish effective discussion hosts.

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Recognizing Likely Hosts

In the role of chief host talent scout, deep involvement in the community pays off, for it's only by watching people in action that one can find out how they behave in various social situations, how they tend to deal with other people, how much they know about the specific topic of conversation, and how they spend their time on the site. Good candidates for hosting group interaction are identifiable first of all by their enjoyment and comfort in the environment. They are helpful and nonjudgmental in their exchanges with others, and they earn the respect of their fellow participants. As the Web offers increasing opportunities for users to initiate and innovate with site-provided tools, we find more potential hosts who are active rather than passive, creating things that get them noticed.

Recognizing the Host-Entrepreneur

In my experience, the most effective hosts are the ones who rise to their roles from within the community, creating and presiding over new discussion areas, motivated by their own interests and expertise. Natural enthusiasm can't be replaced and, often on sites where users have room to be creative, the entrepreneurial spirit finds outlets. To harness that spirit, you should have a program in place for supporting the real grassroots content builders on your site. Such a program or policy may grant host privileges to *topic entrepreneurs* on a probationary basis so that they can demonstrate their skills and commitment. Or, as we'll describe in the next chapter, you should provide interface templates for participants to work with. Don't miss out on the upside of such possibilities out of fear that you will lose control over your site's content. Instead, welcome the originality of these new creative forces.

Community sites provide channels for user creativity on many levels. GeoCities and Cities@The Globe (www.theglobe.com) actively promote their members' construction and hosting of original homepages. Discussion systems like Café Utne and the WELL allow all of their users to initiate new conversation topics over which they retain limited control. By enabling users to create and control content, a site provides a low-risk training ground for developing hosting skills.

Talent scouting in the community can do more than spot potential discussion hosts. There are other personalities that enrich the local spirit and attract

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new people: comedians, experts, and raconteurs among them. These characters may not welcome or be compatible with the duties of hosting, but if their talents get them noticed, it's probably because they enjoy entertaining people. Strong personalities are assets that you'll want to keep around even when they sometimes stir up trouble and strong reactions. You never want your community to be boring, so a few gadflies and contrarians, bothersome as they might seem at times, can be helpful in adding spark to discussion.

The Value of a Good Host

For all the six years I managed the WELL, I wished in vain that I could have afforded to pay some of the individuals who served as hosts for our conferences. Clearly, some of those volunteers were major attractions, not just custodians of written conversation, but teachers, entertainers, stimulating leaders, and starring members of a cast of characters that lent the WELL its unique identity as a hybrid virtual soap opera and symposium.

We could not have afforded to lose our stars, and the possibility of that worried me often, knowing that at any time, the departure of 20 or 30 key individuals could have done to the WELL what the loss of Kramer and Elaine would have done to *Seinfeld* in its heyday. Yet the WELL was unable to afford to pay them beyond what it sacrificed by not charging them for their access. The value of the complimentary time we awarded them amounted to almost 25 percent of our total revenues, but we knew their value to us was worth more than that. As it turned out, very few of our most precious hosts and human assets left the WELL for financial reasons. The tradeoffs must have been worth it for them to accept the conditions and continue serving. Being a volunteer host on the WELL carried other perks, not the least of which was esteem in the community.

In Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," we'll consider various compensation models for online hosts. Suffice it to say here that, given the advertising-subsidized "free" access model of today's Web, it's impossible to financially justify paying a good host a decent hourly wage. Do the math. The traffic totals for the amount of discussion that one person can realistically host over a given time period can't possibly raise sufficient ad revenue. There are special situations in which hosts are paid where the discussion has promotional value to the organization. Private, subscription-based online seminars

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and major promotional interactive events are examples in which high-quality, experienced hosts may be hired and paid to lead or facilitate discussions with limited life spans. (For IBM's *Kasparov vs. Deep Blue Chess Challenge* in 1997, we were funded sufficiently to pay our 10 hosts at the rate of $20 per hour.) But for ongoing topics requiring a regular presence, a volunteer whose personal interest in the topic drives his participation is likely to be the best and only affordable solution. The question becomes, then: How do you attract quality hosts and, once you know you've got them, how do you keep them with you?

The Intangible Incentives of Hosting

If you have no budget to pay for hosts' services, what else do you have to exchange? I showed an example in the previous chapter of how GeoCities regularly celebrates one of its recognized community leaders. Public appreciation is a powerful thing. Remember that the Web is a media stage where people who may have never been publicly recognized for their wit and creativity before can get what may be, to them, extraordinary and gratifying public exposure.

Many hosts I know have said that even lacking expressions of appreciation from site management, they find satisfaction in knowing that they provide a service valued by the participants of their discussions. To be of service and therefore *to be an integral part of a community* is reward enough for many. In giving them the responsibilities of hostship, you empower them to do something that is fulfilling to them. Of course, you should express appreciation however and wherever you can. For volunteer hosts, it's critical that you maintain communication with them and provide all the support possible to make their work enjoyable and hassle free.

Treating Hosts As Advisors

If there are multiple hosts on your site, they comprise a special community with common interests. They share similar duties, rewards, challenges, and, with you, a commitment to serving the members of the greater community. By welcoming them into an advisory capacity, you demonstrate your respect for their views and, hopefully, persuade them that they, too, are stakeholders in your venture. The respect you show for their feedback and counsel is yet another form of reward. You should treat their advice and opinions as you would those from an expert focus group. Give them your regular and undivided

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attention and you're more likely to retain their loyalty. But don't go overboard in your gratitude . In granting responsibility, you need to protect yourself from the possibility that some hosts may turn out to be problems for you. The awarding of privileges in the community must come with some corresponding limitations and strings.

Making Agreements and Contracts with Hosts

Whether paid employees or volunteers, your online hosts represent you in the community. Either they directly carry out *your* directives or they carry out their own with your blessing. Hosts are commonly given special technical privileges for configuring the discussion platform, and special usernames that designate them as leaders in your discussion areas. With that special status comes the potential for misunderstandings and abuses of power that may be associated with your organization. Whatever extraordinary status you grant to hosts must be subject to revocation for certain causes. Those causes are spelled out in a host service contract signed by you and every person to whom you grant special privileges.

As I've emphasized, anyone serving your user population interactively should model the standard of behavior you'd like all of your participants to follow. Generally speaking, whatever the host does, others are likely to emulate. If the host swears, others will swear. If the host flames, others will flame. If the host writes eloquently, others will strive to attain that standard, too. The wording of your contract may describe such subjective ideals as "setting an example" and "being supportive," but for a contract to have any teeth, its conditions must be more specific. If compensation is involved, that too must be specified, whether it be a salary, a consultant's fee, or complimentary services.

The duties of a host must be described in some detail, dependent on the interactive format of the site. They might be delineated in terms of the minimum number of hours a host is to be present in his forum. For chat systems, hosts might be required to log in to their chat rooms on schedule. You might insist that hosts regularly participate with your CM in private group discussions. You might set traffic quotas that must be met if a host is to keep his forum open. And you are certainly justified in prohibiting behaviors that would in any way harm or threaten your good relationships with users or customers. Policy in connection with hosting will be covered in more detail in Chapter 9.

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If your hosts are paid—as they are by certain providers and in certain scenarios such as special online events—the need for contracts is even more critical, for failure to comply with the terms can mean that a host can be fired without pay. And failure to comply on your part may mean losing a trained host on the eve of your big event, something you *definitely* don't want to happen. Hopefully, your selection of hosts will prove wise, your contracts with hosts will all prove to be formalities, and you will maintain amicable and mutually beneficial relationships. That's the best thing for the community as a whole. Teamwork between the management and hosts of a Web community is important because members see the relationship between online leadership and site management as a significant aspect of the social framework. Conflict between the two represents a threat to the stability of the community.

How Many Hosts Are Enough?

Not surprisingly, there is no pat answer to this question. You should have enough hosts in place to keep your discussions *current*, *orderly*, and *interesting* according to your overall purpose. If you can function with fewer hosts and your users are happy with the quality of interaction and service, there is no need to feel that you should have more. If your system is one that provides tools and space for members to build and host their own communities, the question of "how many" is moot. The new content areas will naturally host themselves.

Your hosting needs depend on several factors:

- The discussion platform you are using: Is it chat or conferencing?
- The amount of focus in your community: Is it dedicated to a single interest or is it a diverse social hangout?
- The number of people participating and their traffic patterns: Is all of their usage during prime time or is it evenly distributed throughout the day?
- The amount of content you provide that is linked to conversation: Does the content drive the discussion or do you depend on hosts to do that?
- The extent to which interaction on your site requires moderation and facilitation.

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In terms of resources required for specific applications, more hosts can mean more management responsibilities. Make sure you have a definite need for a host before placing one in a role where he or she won't be kept busy. This is where the intuition and involvement of the Community Manager is so important. The CM should be able to tell, through traffic counts and her own participation, where there are gaps in coverage and where hosts are underutilized. (More, again, in Chapter 9.) The specific hosting skills you need depend a lot on the nature of the discussion platform you provide. You probably provide either real-time or asynchronous group interaction, but many large sites now provide both.

The Hosts of Real-Time Discussion

The nature of chat is live conversation during which the participants react immediately to each other's comments. Words don't hang around for long in a chat room. Once they scroll off the chat window, they are gone and can't be retrieved unless the conversation has been saved in a *log* for later reading. An open chat room is one in which all of the participants' words are visible to each other. A moderated chat room window displays the words of the moderator and guests, but *not* those of the audience who may only communicate among themselves using private messaging. There are varieties of chat formats and platforms, but what they all hold in common is the requirement that all participants be logged in at the same time.

A host may lead the conversation or monitor it for violations of the rules, but interaction moves so fast in a chat room that there is little else a host can do. Most current platforms include software *filters* that provide the ability to automatically intercept and censor designated taboo words before they are sent to the screen. Some chat programs can even shut off a user's access to the room or to the entire platform for sending forbidden words repeatedly. But profanity is only one of the behaviors a host may be called on to regulate. And regulation is only one of the functions of a chat host. For the most part, the host is there to do what a party host does: greet the guests as they arrive and keep conversation rolling. There may be *housekeeping* duties such as saving and posting chat transcripts, or creating and leading chats on specific topics. There are many possibilities of what can be done, as long as the host is there *on time*.

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Chat Events and Chat Communities

There are two main forms of hosted chat: *events* and *communities*. Events are held on a preannounced schedule, usually with a specific topic or guest. At the scheduled starting time, the host opens the chat room and greets visitors as they log in. At the end of the scheduled duration of the event, the host bids farewell to the attendees, and the room goes dark or gradually vacates. Figure 4.2 shows a list from On Now, a schedule of chat events that were active on the Web at the moment the screen shot was taken. On Now is a product of LiveWorld Productions, the same company that produces Talk City.

Chat *communities* are chat rooms that remain open for people attracted to their particular themes. Some have hosts, but most develop populations of regulars who show up predictably at certain times and, almost as in a group relay race, *pass the community baton* to the next round of regulars dropping by to chat during the next shift. Hosting isn't handled by any one person or group, necessarily. It becomes instead a collective exercise, shared by the people who habitually frequent the room during different time periods. So the *community* associated with the room is in actuality a series of different but overlapping time-based communities. In Figure 4.3 we see a collection of chat communities from WBS, the Webchat Broadcasting System.

People who host busy open chat rooms must be alert and well adapted to the characteristic speed and disorder of the medium. Most rooms place limits on the maximum number of users allowed to post at the same time. That limit is often between 20 and 50 people, but 20 people firing responses at each other simultaneously, interweaving six or seven different conversations while new visitors try to get noticed, is a major challenge for the attention control of anyone.

Chat *auditoriums* where hundreds or even thousands of users can attend a moderated chat event are available in various locations on the Web. The job of moderating a conversation between a moderator and guests on the chat *stage* is often split between two or more people. It may involve interviewing guests or leading a panel discussion while choosing from the stream of questions sent to the stage by the audience. Selected questions are passed on to the guests and their replies are then sent to the chat window that is visible to the audience. Often someone must do the typing for the guests, too. This can be a hectic but

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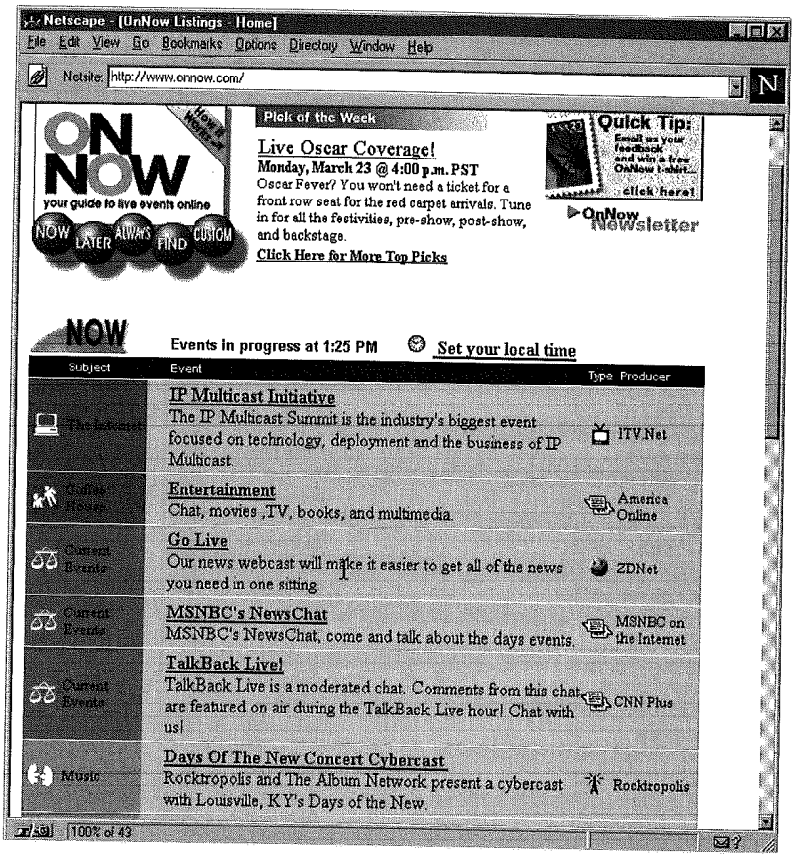
Figure 4.2 Almost just like TV! Tune in the Web page and see what's on at LiveWorld's On Now. In most cases, these chats have hosts or moderators leading the interaction.



Talk City is a property of LiveWorld Productions, Inc.

mercifully short-term task, and requires practice and skill to make the results appear smooth to the audience.

The Hosts of Asynchronous Discussion

Much slower-paced, asynchronous discussion does not require that participants be logged in at the same time. In fact, it doesn't matter when the various

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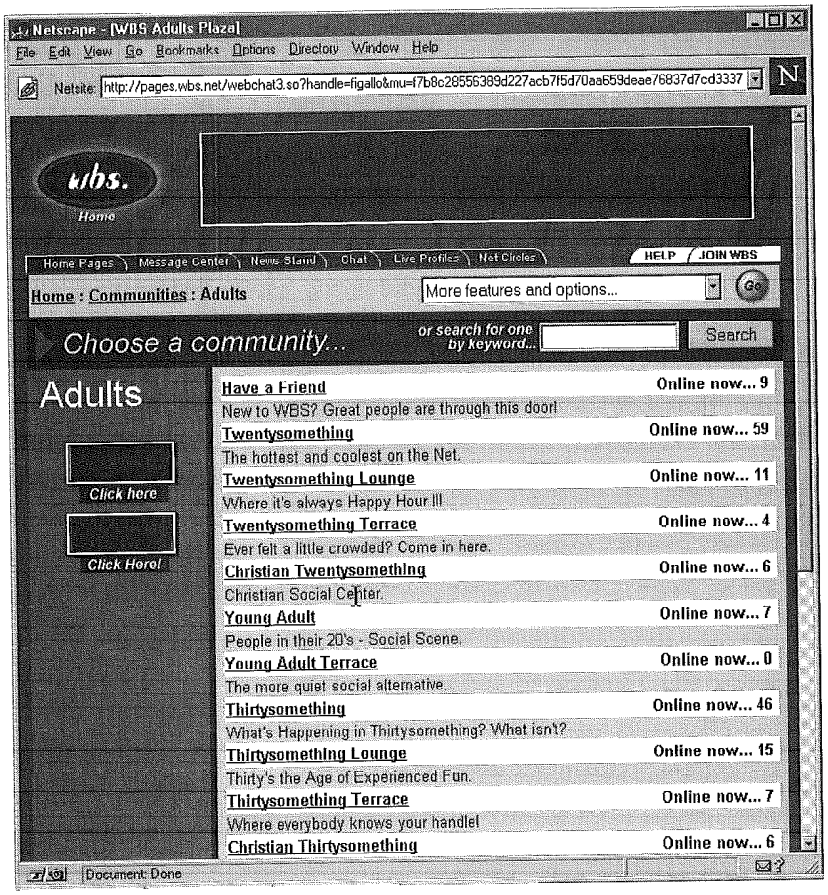
Figure 4.3 The Adults chat scene at the Webchat Broadcasting System. Pick a room and find your most compatible group. Hosting these open chat rooms is informally handled by their regular participants.



WBS, WebChat®, and the WebChat Broadcasting System are trademarks of WebChat Communications, Inc. Copyright 1995-1998 by WebChat Communications, Inc. Infoseek Corporation. All rights reserved.

contributors to a conversation post their comments. But there is an interesting dynamic to asynchronous discussion: The greater the number of contributors, the more frequently each of them must check in to the conversation to stay

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current and involved. Chat rooms limit the number of talkers, but an asynchronous conversation can have any number of participants. For the host, that is the major challenge. A daily visit into a collection of conversations is usually sufficient, but events and passions can sometimes cause a topic to attract more traffic and grow so quickly that several check-ins during the course of a day become necessary.

Because the participants in an asynchronous discussion have the luxury of time in which to compose them, their responses tend to be far more verbose and premeditated than those in a chat. There's no hurry to reply to a greeting or question because there's no expectation of a real time response. The asynchronous medium sacrifices the sense of timely presence found in chat for a greater sense of depth and expression in the conversations. But there are variations on the asynchronous theme just as there are with chat.

Asynchronous platforms come in two main flavors: *linear conferencing* and *threaded message boards*. These will be described in more detail in Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments," but in their use on the Web, linear systems support more lengthy and coherent conversations while threaded boards support many brief interchanges. Message boards are generally easier to use, but less versatile for habitual users. The classic role of discussion host is more closely identified with linear conferencing systems. Threaded message boards—also called *bulletin board systems*, or *BBSs*—are used more for what their names imply: to leave messages for others rather than carry on continuous discussion. Rarely do you find an involved host on a message board. Because conferencing discussions hold together better, the people who use and host them are often more committed to their topics and to their resulting communities.

Keeping Staff and Community in Synch

Consistency of point of view is just as critical among the different segments of your staff as it is between your organization and its hosts. Although most of your staff may not interact directly with the community, its messages are nonetheless conveyed through the way in which your site is designed, in the information published on its pages, and in how it's marketed to the rest of the world.

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If there's conflict between the interests and needs of your community and what you publish on your site, you can bet that someone in the community will notice and make it a topic of discussion. You will have a controversy to deal with, which can lead to either a crisis of lost trust or an opportunity to renew trust, depending on your handling of it.

Controversy and ferment are not necessarily bad things in a virtual forum. In fact, they have the capacity to revitalize relationships by stirring emotions and engaging people's attention. But controversy around your *purpose and motives* can cause people to question their membership in the community you're supporting. Inconsistency in what you present as your focus or service priority will cause members to think thoughts like, "Maybe I'm not really supposed to be here if that's what these people actually believe."

Reliability is a cornerstone of trust. The Community Manager keeps trust intact by maintaining the site's consistency of service and focus. Confused or angered users *may* let you know their feelings, but most who feel that you've betrayed them will simply point their browsers elsewhere and remove you from their bookmarks lists. The sense of community can be a very fragile thing.

Business Models Change Faster Than Communities

The larger the company, the larger the staff, and the more complex the organization. The relentless drive to find new ideas for content and design defines the Web industry. New technologies and competition force production studios to change and adapt month by month. In doing so, the focus and nature of a site may easily wander at the same time that the focus and nature of its community becomes more established. Before you know it, the changing editorial direction and business model are wildly out of synch with the solidifying needs and values of the community.

Certainly the most gargantuan example of a change in business model shaking the foundations of community was America Online's switch from subscription-based pricing to flat-fee pricing. Not only did the sudden switch result in an immediate overload of AOL's dialup network, but the disappearance of hourly charges eliminated the usage commissions that its independent community hosts had long depended on for their financial support. People who could

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once afford to spend the time hosting and building social scenes with AOL's chat rooms and message boards were forced to find alternative income sources or abandon their communities altogether. It was a practical business decision, but it upset many of the niche communities AOL had worked to nurture over the years.

Electric Minds, the Web-based discussion community founded by Howard Rheingold, also found itself facing changing financial realities that resulted in a jolting business transition less than a year after its launch. And the WELL, which for a decade was a stable if not wealthy subscription-based conferencing network, had its business model torn to pieces as it made its transition to the Web where free access has become the norm.

As you face similar pressures, someone in your organization will need to remain true to the community ideal that attracted your members in the first place. Trust can be easily lost by neglecting to forewarn the community of upcoming changes, by not responding promptly and courteously to complaints and requests, by changing site design elements or policies without regard to their impact on users' habits and traditions, and by distancing yourself from the attitudes and voices of the people who regularly frequent your site. Once lost through perceived betrayal, trust is not easily regained. The multitude of choices on the Web make it likely that you won't get a second chance.

Finding and Hiring Experience

Given the qualifications we've described, where do you find people who understand the needs of an online community while possessing the skills to manage the different areas of a Web site? It should come as no surprise that such people become more and more plentiful as time goes by. Online communities draw Web professionals to them for the same reasons they draw any other populations: The presence of colleagues with shared interests and helpful information. There are forums on the Web frequented by Unix system administrators, graphic artists, webmasters, editors, writers, marketers, and even community managers.

Over the years, the WELL has served as a kind of informal training ground for virtual community leaders. WELL veterans have gone on to found, manage, and work for many prominent Web-based community systems including Women's Wire, Electric Minds, HotWired, the Gate, Café Utne, *Salon*, Stim,

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People Magazine online, and other Time-Warner online sites. Today, those and many other systems provide the experiences and training grounds necessary for future community staffers just as the WELL has done. There are many more systems, platforms, and communities in existence today that can be visited and compared to one other.

With this proliferation of intentional online communities and platforms for group interaction on the Web, more and more people are spending time in virtual forums exchanging ideas, witnessing romances and hassles, taking note of good design and bad. As customers, they have observed how staff attitude and action affect one's experience. They have come to recognize how freedom granted and guidance given can influence the mood and motivation of an online group. They appreciate the feeling of being both consumers and producers in the context of an online community.

Hire people who have spent time in managed communities. Hire people who have paid good enough attention to their experiences that they can describe how they were affected by them. Such employees will be made wise in the best ways of managing community effectively from the top down, which is to pay attention and respond to what the users tell you *from the bottom up*.

Summary

Your staff has a relationship to your community that is led by the person who serves as your *Community Manager*. The CM, as advocate for the sense of the community and the interests of its members, must also understand the overall operations of the Web site in order to act as the intermediary between users and management. The CM also hires and oversees the online staff who interact most closely and regularly with the user population.

Your *online staff* is made up mostly of discussion and content hosts who may work in various business arrangements with your site. Most will be volunteers with whom you barter for their services. The skill sets and experience required of hosts depend largely on their duties and the nature of the interactive platforms they work with. You grant hosts certain privileges and powers and they serve as your representatives in the online community. You should consider

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them and any of your staff who interact directly with users to be role models in your community.

The Community Manager must stay in close touch with both management and users in order to avoid the sudden separation or gradual drifting apart of their needs and values. For that reason, it's a good idea to hire staff who are familiar with the viewpoint of the online community member. Such experience is by far the best teacher.

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DESIGNING THE COMFORTABLE INTERFACE

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You do what you can to make your virtual home comfortable, for that's the way a home should be. On the Web, comfort is conveyed through the way you relate personally with your guests as described in the previous chapters; however, the design elements that guests encounter on your site—color, shapes, words, convenience, and organization—are at least as important. Your overall design should anticipate the community you expect in its content, style, and arrangement. If you know who your guests are going to be, you should give them what you think they'll want. Beyond that, your design should give them options to personalize it to fit their needs and preferences.

You have only a few seconds to convince each visitor to a Web page to stick around, even if just for another few seconds. But a community requires its members to do more than just investigate its site: It needs for them to keep returning to it. It must therefore deliver more than just one rewarding experience. The interface must satisfy its visitors *repeatedly over time*.

The interface must be useful but unobtrusive, attractive but not distracting, versatile but simple. The most important job of your interface is to stay out of the way of community. In your efforts to entertain or impress, you can't allow your site to be frustrating or unappealing to the very people you are trying to attract. A community site has a definite target audience, so it should be designed to fit and please that audience in very way possible. As we've seen, communities differ in their interface needs as much as they do in other aspects of their descriptions, so what might be a well-designed home for one group

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could be a house of horrors for another. Some communities will actually be defined by the interface that attracts and supports their members, while others will be drawn together solely by their content, even if it's delivered through the most basic of designs.

The interface works like a combination of your welcome mat, your front door, and your living room. If it works to bring visitors that far into your site, you have a chance of introducing them to the rest of what is there—the social clubs, the games, the support groups, the libraries and schools—or of handing them the tools to build their own communities within your site. Knowing the needs of your target users is where your design work should begin.

No Interface Element Is Trivial

Everything on your site makes a difference to its visitors, from the colors and type faces to the way the window is divided and the site is mapped. All of the basic principles of good graphic and Web design apply to a community site at least as much as to any other. This book isn't the place to learn those basics, but clearly your pages should be attractive, effective, and relevant to their intended audience. Your navigation should make sense and be easy to follow, and your pages, especially your homepage, should be quick to download.

The chat or forum platform you choose is, of course, a critical piece of the interface. Its suitability can make or break the users' willingness to participate and can define the nature of the resulting social interaction. Frustrations with poor design or a badly configured discussion interface will drive people to abandon the platform altogether. Inadequate user support for the platform will discourage otherwise eager visitors. Slow response time in the discussion areas or in loading pages anywhere on your site can dissuade people from joining in spite of their attraction to everything else you offer. When people come intending to talk to each other, they don't appreciate technical delays, especially when the wait is caused by the very component that's supposed to be *facilitating* their communication.

This is not to say that perfection and slickness of design and function are always the priority. There are many examples on the Net of older technologies and less elegant interfaces supporting loyal *legacy* communities. Once a community becomes established, its members are likely to become attached to the

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features they "grew up with," even when they know that an upgrade will bring "improvements." Comfort and familiarity can be powerful forces for resisting change even in cyberspace.

Bonding with the Interface

The Net's brief history has many examples demonstrating that once people commit themselves to an online community and become comfortable with its interface, they are likely to tolerate or overlook its flaws, even to the point of resisting improvement. Many online users over the years got used to what would now be called "user-hostile" interfaces on systems like CompuServe, the WELL, WebChat, and Prodigy. It took a long time for each of those systems to adopt more modern front ends, in part because their users didn't demand that they do so. They'd gotten used to what they had.

Once an interface is learned, no matter how poor its design, many of its most active users are loath to give it up. They dig in their heels at the prospect of having to learn a whole new way of doing what might have taken them years to master. Loyalty in an online community often extends beyond the people to the actual environment that enables their meetings. This could explain why, in the real world, many old clubs, pubs, pool halls, and corner markets deliberately retain their splintery floors, carved-up tables, and stained ceilings. The cultural values placed on vintage furnishings, *atmosphere*, and *funk* also reach into the world of the online interface.

Of course, I don't assume that you run a vintage cyberspace tavern, oozing with historic digital charm, so my recommendations in this book follow a more modern rather than retro approach. Design principles for our applications should work to attract new traffic and keep it coming back. The Web, as the platform for all of our interface elements, is always changing and its users are constantly learning how to work with it. You can't stand still technologically on the Web, but you must consider that the majority of its users do *not* upgrade their home systems fast enough to keep pace with the Web's leading edge. And the largest growth segment in Web usage is the home market.

Sticking with Your Core Technologies

Core technologies are those that are central to attracting and keeping your target audience because they are the ones that are most used. If chat is what holds

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your community together, the chat platform is core to the member experience. The same goes for your asynchronous discussion platform. Lumped together, I call these *group interactive platforms*, or GIPs. Avoid providing GIPs for use of your community that you'll soon be forced to change due to population growth or advancing technology. Nothing could be as disrupting to a user population as a change in that piece of the interface.

But what does "soon" mean in the relative time frame of the Web? You can't stop progress and the development of new and better Web products. Isn't it inevitable that you'll force your members to change GIPs at some point or to install new software to follow your site's new direction? Probably so, but you should be aware of the possible sacrifices in terms of members left behind. Your technology may advance, but that of many of your users may not.

Anytime in the development of a stable user base is a bad time to switch technical horses. There never has been a graceful way to deal with this. If you work in the online business, you almost have to buy a new PC every two years. But from the user end, once a technology has become so familiar as to be transparent, changing that technology causes disruption. In the cases of chat and forum environments, the medium itself becomes an integral part of the community experience, one that the community holds on to even when you assure them that its replacement will be dramatically better. What to do?

Advances in program design and system bandwidth will bring continuing breakthroughs in group interactivity in the future, but migrating an established population from the clunky old message board they've used for the *whole past year* onto a spiffy new full-featured graphical conferencing system is going to cause at least some kicking and screaming from the community about "the killing of traditions and old values." You can't plan for everything, but you should do all you can to avoid major disruptions in the community experience.

Providing Convenience

A community on the Web, by definition, counts on regular visitors. Designing a place for them to *stick* involves attracting their attention, but once they've arrived, the design task becomes an exercise in learning the habits of the regulars, serving their continuing needs, and providing them with convenient ways for reaching their objectives. Depending on their type of community, they may come primarily for a regular dose of current information or their daily fix of

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challenging conversation (yes, you *do* want to get them addicted), or they may come to service both habits. Make it easy for them to find what they seek and, above all, avoid confusing them.

As time passes and your regular visitors mature in their knowledge and expectations of your interface, they become familiar with the full scope of your site. But with the passage of time, your site also generates more content and discussion for them to choose from. Mature users establish routines for their visits, and they expect more from the interface than they did when they first used it. To save time in their increasingly busy Web-surfing day, they look to you for added conveniences.

Here's what *design convenience* can mean from the user's perspective:

Predictability. Not having to relearn where everything is on the site with each new visit.

Customizability. Utilities for setting up routines and views of the site that fit individual user habits.

Site memory. Having the Web site learn from the user's activity what he wants to see and what he's already seen.

Orderliness. Content and discussion arranged in ways that make sense to the user.

Convenience and Its Tradeoffs

When you get "convenience features" on a new car it often means added weight and expense and, as my Mom used to say, "More darn things that can go wrong." That can also be the case with your interface. Adding new features and options adds complexity to your design and operation. Of course you add them to please users, but unless you're careful, you may confuse as many people as you help. And unless your visitors are blessed with the latest hardware, browsers and high-bandwidth Net connections, those cool features may only please a small portion of your audience.

In the next two chapters we'll describe some convenience and customizing features that come packaged with chat and threading platforms. They give each user choices that affect his or her view and use of the interface. For the rest of your site, outside of the GIP, you have options for providing similar choices, but

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you should be careful in choosing which options to offer. You must strike a balance between convenience and other needs of the common user. Often, simplicity, rather than technical complexity, is the most convenient feature you can provide.

Does Predictability Bring Rigidity?

Predictability can be both an asset and a liability. One very predictable interfaces on the Web is that of C/Net. You know, when you go to any of C/Net's sites, that (1) it will have a vertical yellow band down its margin, (2) that band contains the links for navigating between its sections. For what C/Net does—serving as a source for current information and resources—the unchanging format is valuable to its users. But not all sites host communities of information seekers. Some want to be entertained and surprised by pages that change the rules on them regularly. Some people even like to be given puzzles, but few look forward to being befuddled. Keep it interesting, but don't make it difficult.

How Custom Views Fragment the Audience

Allowing visitors to customize their use of your site is a good thing for those who spend much of their time each visit repeating the same click sequences. But for those using your site for the first time, menus of options can be confusing and time-consuming obstacles to their finding what's most important to them. Customization also presents the site provider with some difficult choices. First of all, such customization requires your site to remember each user. It also brings up the question of site memory and certain privacy issues. But more to the point, do you really want your users to have different views of what you present?

Part of what makes a community good for both you and your users is the common appeal of your content and the overall experience. That commonality is part of the bond between the users. It also saves your having to address many different viewpoints with your site. If registration is a good tradeoff for you—if you need it anyway to regulate participation in your discussions—then providing convenient customization can be a plus. But understand that the more those options permit the individual user to filter what he or she sees of your site, the less cohesive will be your community. As Jeffrey Veen writes in *HotWired Style: Principles for Building Smart Web Sites* (HardWired, 1998):

> *Critics of personalized media have wondered what is lost when everyone no longer gets the same mix of news and information in the same order.*

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If a newspaper is created solely on my interests, they argue, then I don't get the value of a common stream of information with my neighbors and my community.

Site Memory and the Specter of Big Brother

Cookies update the site's memory of what users do there each time they visit. This is especially helpful to users in an asynchronous discussion because cookies may be used to keep users logged in to the system while they follow links to other Web sites mentioned in conversation. A regular participant in online conversations prefers to pick up where he left off, seeing only the comments posted since his last visit rather than searching through each conversation from its beginning. The site can remember those "last seen" responses for each user, but it involves a tradeoff of some user privacy. The asynchronous discussion software may provide this tracking ability, but whether it be through cookies or the platform, the site remembers what each user does.

Cookies allow a Web site to recognize and admit a registered user and automatically adjust for his demonstrated usage habits whenever he visits. It's the user's choice whether or not his browser will accept cookies that tell Web sites where he's been and what he's seen and done there. If your site uses cookies, it's fair and wise to let your visitors know. Many users of the Web set their browsers to not accept cookies, and many more have their browsers warn them when a site offers cookies. So it's best to make cookies an option whose conveniences the user can choose to accept.

Orderliness and Getting to the Good Stuff

Users shouldn't have to figure out how your site is arranged when they arrive. Its design should follow a format with which they're familiar: menus, hierarchies of information, current and archived information. Growing sites are always struggling to build new structures to contain expanding content. Sites are broken down by sections such as C/Net's News.Com, Computers.Com, Download.Com services, all accessible from the C/Net homepage, all sporting the vertical yellow stripes. But just as predictability can be too, well, predictable, order can get in the way of showing the user what's most important, current, and appealing.

The members of your online community may visit your site to carry out regular routines, but they may also be attracted by your personality and creativity. It may be your style to simply keep the tree-structured content menus

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filled and the discussion platform operating, but you may also be an entertainer and innovator, breaking the rules of order to attract your users with content that promises to surprise them each time they visit. Hit them with the good stuff as soon as your homepage downloads and let them sort through the order afterward. There will be plenty of structure and orderliness once users get to the GIPs because discussion software is programmed around databases. Again, from Jeffrey Veen's *HotWired Style*:

> *...when it comes to presenting your site to your audience, forget the tree. Your file structure and what the visitor experiences as a site structure can and should be completely independent of one another.*
>
> *Conceptually, this can be a hard leap to make. First, stop thinking of your top-level page as a static document. True, there is one index.html that sits at the very top of all the other pages on your site. It is the document everyone will see first when they go to your URL. But it doesn't have to exist as a simple menu listing everything else. Make it a window into your site—and a place to start experiencing your site's content immediately.*

Choosing Appropriate Technology

There's a tendency to overdesign community Web sites. Due to the rapid advance of Internet-related technology, Web design has yet to stand still, and there's no sign of things slowing down. New features and tools are constantly being created. The expansion of HTML capabilities, refinements in Java, JavaScript, and ActiveX, audio and video streaming, higher modem speeds and bandwidth, and improved GIPs combine to transform our experience of the Web almost daily.

Fancy doodads, tricks, and tools are commonly introduced to us first as novelties, but in the long run people only *adopt* tools for regular usage that provide them with utility and convenience. Because community implies regular participation, designing a site for a community should follow fairly conservative principles: simplicity, compatibility, reliability, coherence, and good old-fashioned user friendliness. If you're planning to host a population of habitual users, you have to regard your entire interface in terms of usefulness and convenience.

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Delivering the Social Goods

Though many new technical wonders will surely appear on our screens before this book is published, I must emphasize here that the interface to community activity and interests on the Web is not so much about cutting-edge technology as about delivering the social goods. The interface should, as simply as possible, facilitate the conversational and information delivery needs of the community while encouraging long-term participation. Introducing the latest, gee-whiz Web technology is only appropriate if you know that your members can (and will) use it.

Once you choose a technology you are, in effect, defining your community's boundaries. There is no more effective way of excluding people from an experience than putting technology requirements on it. The Web is a humongous test bed, constantly being subjected to new content and programming that works only on the most advanced PCs, on certain versions of certain browsers at certain connect speeds. The more stringent the requirements, the smaller the potential audience of capable users. Unless you define your community as one that operates in the technical stratosphere, be careful what you include in your site design. Community is usually about *inclusion* rather than *exclusion*, and that applies on the technical as well as on the social level.

Making Your Site Usable by the Community

Some sites attempt to serve populations with different levels of technical capability and access by designing distinct interfaces and giving users a choice of which best fits their situations. The Webstock '96 site greets visitors with a choice: high bandwidth or low? (See Figure 5.1.) Depending on the users' setups, they can choose to see a site with the bells and whistles of Shockwave, RealAudio, and JavaScript (see Figure 5.2), or one with more basic Web features (see Figure 5.3). Designing such a site entails building two different sites that share certain information and cost you extra money, but it does allow you to wow some of your visitors with technology that may enhance their experience while not leaving the rest completely behind. The risk is that the high- and low-bandwidth communities will have very different experiences of your site and thus won't really mix.

It's important that you test your interface thoroughly on the most used browsers and browser versions and on different computer platforms, especially Windows and Macintosh. As of today, the leading browsers would include all of the

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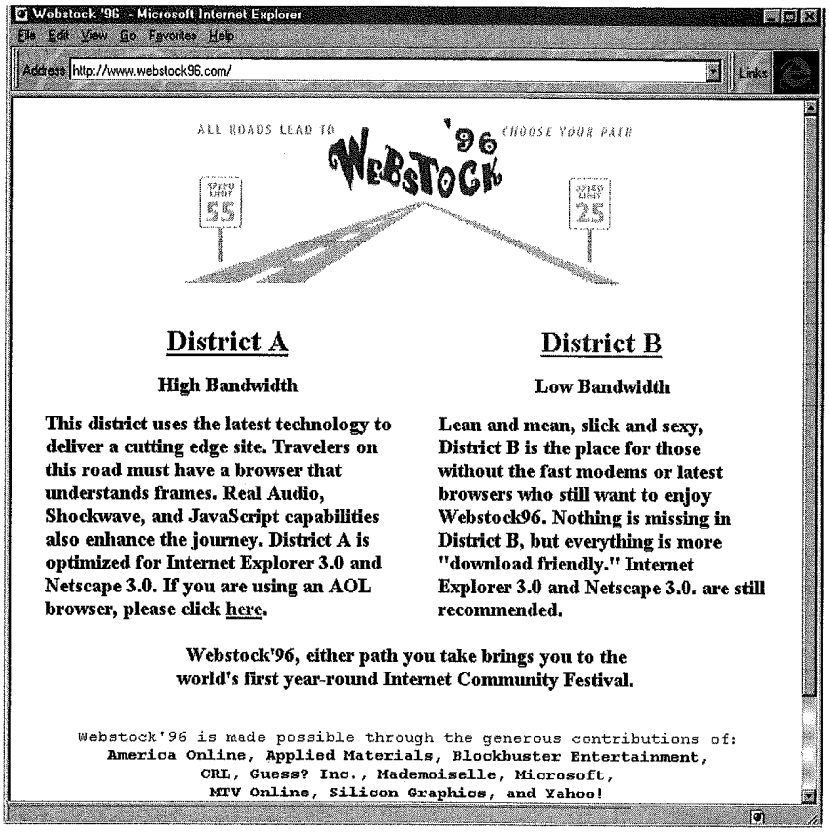
Figure 5.1 The Webstock site addresses the disparity between various users' PC setups by offering two different versions of their community site.



Netscape and Microsoft Internet Explorer versions, America Online's proprietary (Microsoft IE-based) browser, and the latest alternative favorite, Opera. Even without the fancier technical doodads, some things like screen layouts, type fonts, and colors look different from one browser or computer to the next, so it's good to have some idea of what your community members are using. Designing a site to be usable by noncurrent versions of the most popular browsers is called *degrading*. Probably the most common example of degrading is providing *Alt* tags around graphic images for those whose browsers don't display graphics or for those whose slow Net connections make downloading images too time consuming.

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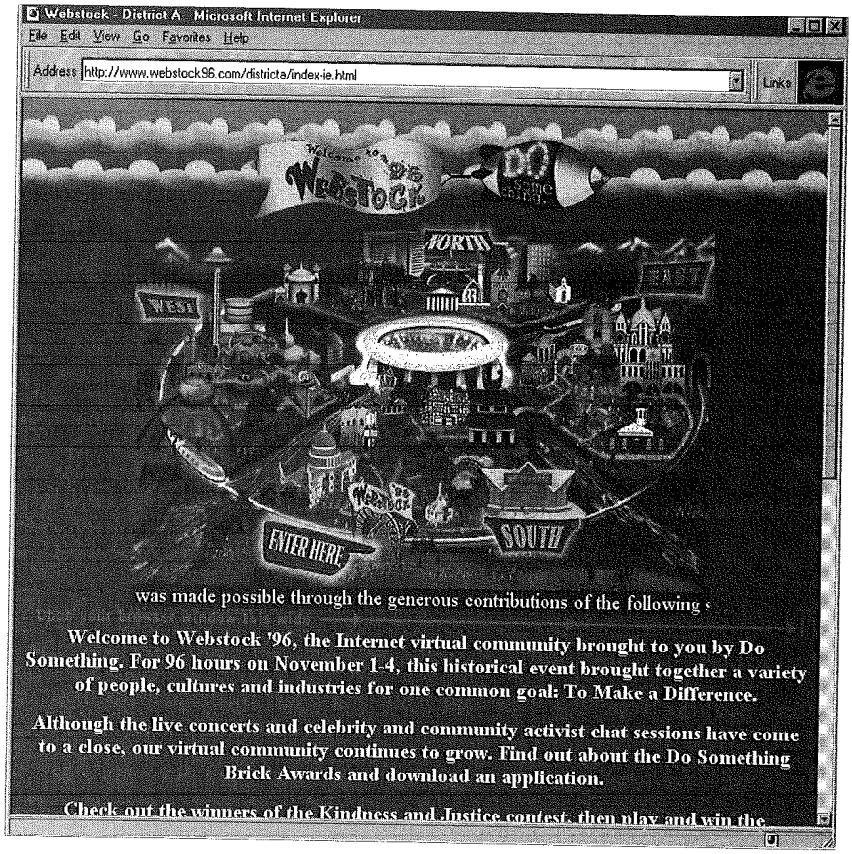
Figure 5.2 For users with fast modems and powerful computers, this version of Webstock sends plenty of animated GIFs down the pipe.



A chat program that requires Java compatibility may leave many users of older PCs and even newer Macintoshes behind. If your site addresses the high-tech crowd, you're probably safe in assuming that they all have the most recent browsers, the most powerful machines, and fast Net connections. If, on the other hand, your community serves elementary school students, you know that many of them are reaching the Net through slow connections with older computers and software. In any case, optimize your site for the setup you expect your community members to have and be as inclusive and degradable as possible.

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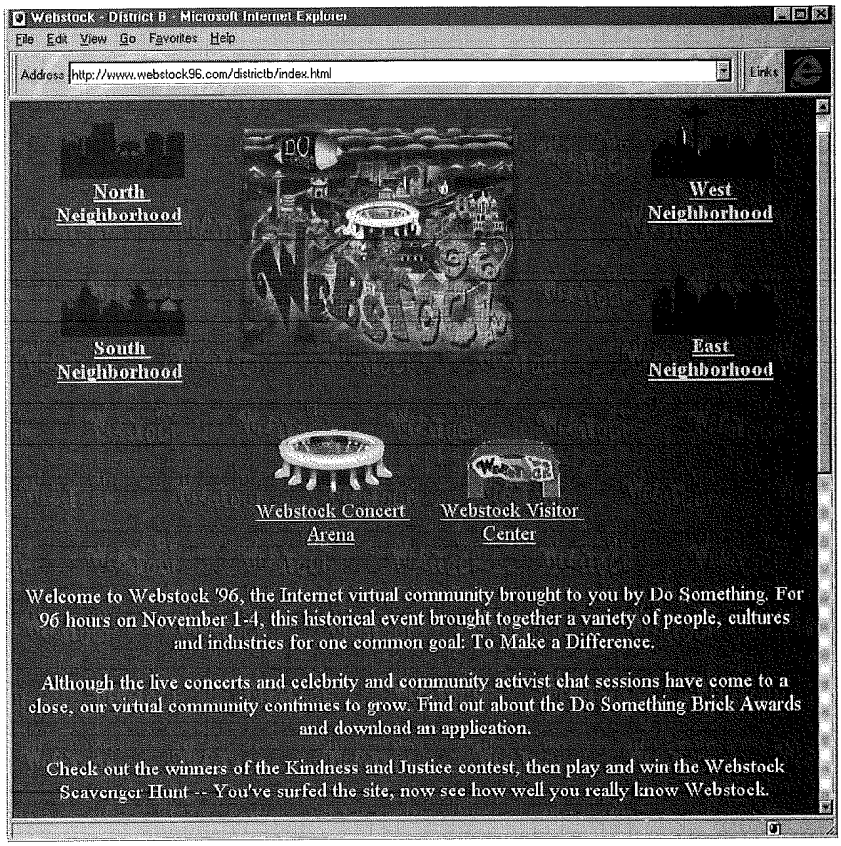
Figure 5.3 For users with slower modems and computers, this version of the Webstock site presents more normal HTML.



Serving the Community's Focus

In discussing different types of communities in Chapter 2, "Identifying Group Styles and Needs," we saw that groupings of people vary in their unity of focus as well as in their degree of interactivity and cohesion. These differences dictate the designs of their meeting places on the Web, but the *focus* of your community is your first consideration. Interactivity and cohesion may grow as the community does, but initial focus is determined by you as you define your community, describe it, and design your site around it. Will it serve a population

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with narrow interests, or will it serve one with diverse interests? Will it have the ability to expand in whichever directions the original community takes it, or will you set firm boundaries for your community's focus? It's your choice where to begin. No matter how the community evolves on its own, its eventual focus will be a product of the original one that you choose, but your interface design can serve as the container and limiter to excessive focal drift.

The Expanding, Migrating, Fractalizing Focus

The more your community talks with itself, the more you can expect its focus to change over time. The exchange of opinions and ideas is a fomenter of change. If the group can talk about the original topic, they will begin to talk about something related to it, or, for that matter, completely different from it. When people get to know one another, they find new common interests that beg to be discussed. If you, through your hosts or your Community Manager, are involved in those discussions or at least "listening in" on them, the hints and clues of change in public interests, attitudes, and preferences will be detected long before they would be otherwise.

The community tells you when its focus is changing, but you have to be paying attention to the clues. The most straightforward clue is in what your community says about your service and users' needs in its public forums. Make a place for just that on your site and come right out and ask them. You don't have to eavesdrop to get the information. If you invite it, it will get to you. Initiate the conversation. It will be worth your while.

If you're not paying attention to the changing mood and opinion of your community, you risk being surprised by its "sudden" migration. The community's interests may have moved from sports scores to sports personalities. There may be 20 active discussion communities where there used to be 5. Message board participants may be feeling held back by the limitations of the interface as they attempt to carry on more coherent and lengthy conversations. It's better to recognize such situations as they are happening than to find out about them after the users have become frustrated and left. Sites that begin with a very narrow focus are, as I explained in Chapter 2, the most likely to expand, subdivide, or *fractalize* when they have the means for members to interact. Pay special attention to them as they grow and you'll be able to accommodate their expansion gracefully.

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Giving Users Control: Templates and Kits

What if you start your site with *no* particular focus, beginning only with a platform that permits users to interact and create content, and your commitment to support community building? You'll probably attract users who are looking for a place to interact and create content. Once your site begins to populate you'll find communities coalescing around discovered common interests almost immediately, with minimal direction by you. Given the freedom—through your interface—to create and manipulate, users will *show* you the kind of discussion and content they want. You won't have to ask. They'll build new homepages and neighborhoods (as they do in GeoCities and The Globe), or initiate new topics and directions for conversation (as they do in Table Talk and Café Utne).

Designing a site that encourages the user to be a builder requires that you provide *templates*. Chat and threading platforms are templates for containing and formatting discussion. The words and topics may be different, but all of the discussions on a platform fit the same structure. GeoCities provides templates for its members to build their homesteads into GeoCities neighborhoods (see Figure 5.4). They join, fill in the application, choose a neighborhood and address, then use the page-building tools or create their own pages from scratch. For the site provider, there is little muss or fuss because every contribution fits into a known template compartment. The provider has control through the limitations designed into the template while the users have access to easy-to-use channels for their creativity.

The Mining Company takes a slightly different approach to granting power to its users for creating content. They provide templates, under a commercial arrangement, for people to build focused Web community pages about their area of expertise. If you, as a Mining Company user, have a favorite interest—one you know a lot about—you can apply to be a guide for a community in that interest area. Take, for example, *Fresh Water Aquariums* in the *Living Area* (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6). If you qualify (and if the community area of your choice is not already taken), you take a three-week online training course and are given a template into which you build your community structure, including chat rooms and bulletin boards. As a contractor to The Mining Company, you get a percentage of its total advertising income, proportional to the traffic you host.

Providing kits—as do GeoCities and, more entrepreneurially, The Mining Company—encourages users with strong focus and expertise not only to be content builders for the mother site, but to be small business partners enjoying

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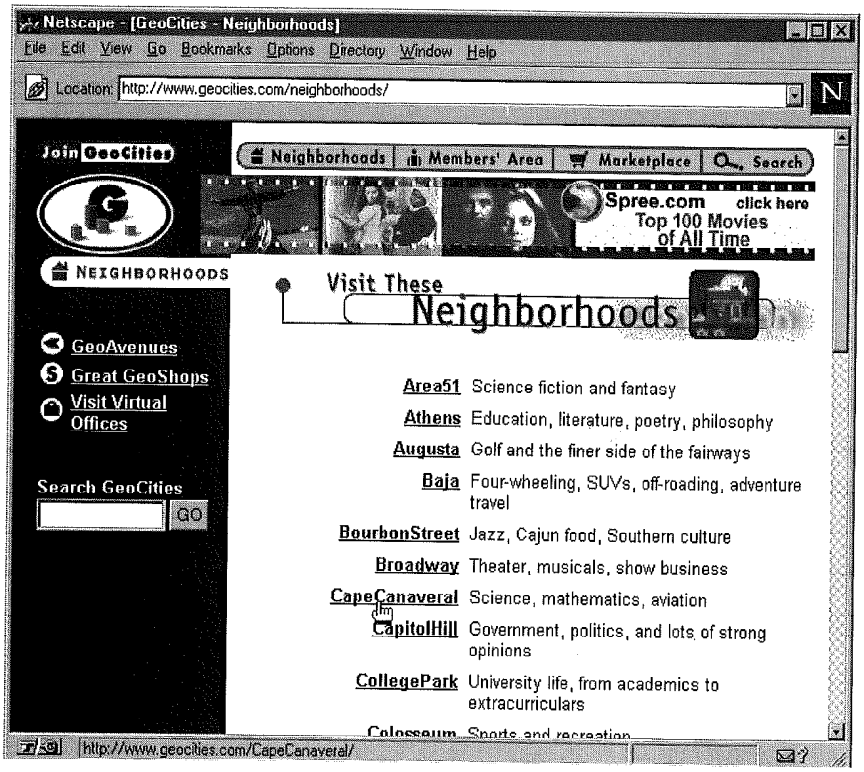
mutual benefits. If your site is going to support grassroots creativity and diversification of focus, having templates and kits in place will help you support and manage the new communities of interest as they emerge.

Recognizing Specific Interface Needs

A Web site may serve the totality of TV viewers or only those who habitually watch *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Create a site for the general population of TV

Figure 5.4 At GeoCities, subscribers are invited to create homepages and move into one of the many interest-focused neighborhoods. User-created content is a major attraction in this Web world.



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watchers and you'll draw a cross section of people who are into the tube. Create one specifically for fans of Xena and you'll have a narrow-focused and smaller (but still populous) group of TV viewers with very different expectations. TV watching is what the two groups have in common, but their differences in focus will show on their respective Web sites in the dramatic differences between their content and design.

A general TV site aimed at the tube-tuned community, like Ultimate TV, is almost sure to be centered around a constantly updated programming directory with accompanying articles (see Figure 5.7). A diffuse community defini-

Figure 5.5 Under The Mining Company's arrangement, users can become guides and build communities within Interest Areas as listed along the left column of this page.

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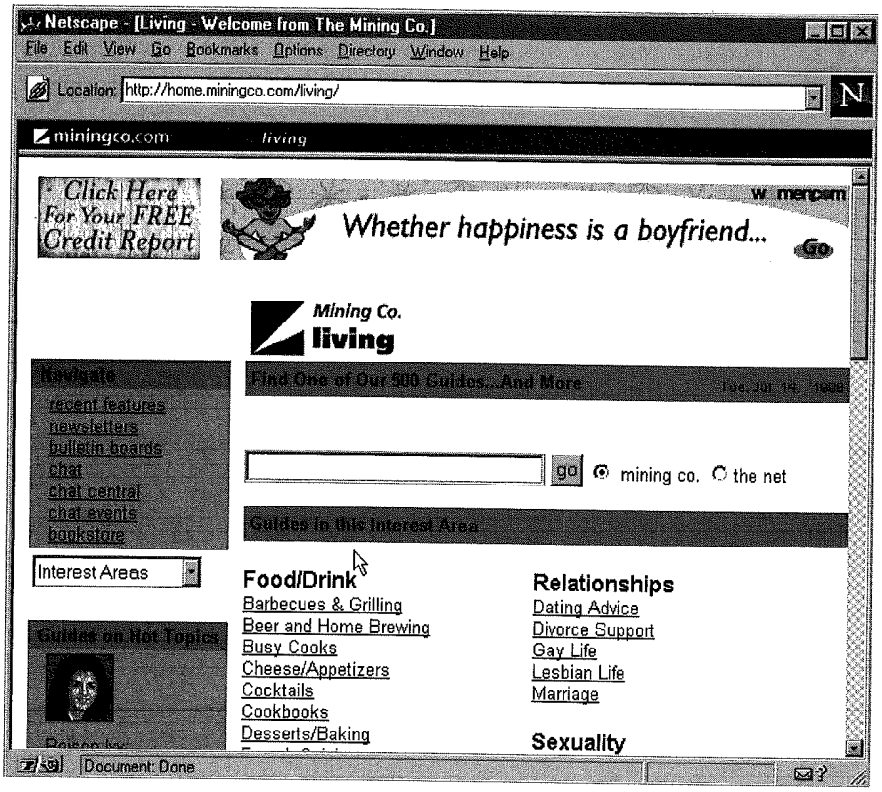
Figure 5.6 A breakdown of The Mining Company's "Living" Interest Area showing the communities found therein. Community guides are trained and use a special template for building their communities. They share the total ad revenues.



tion requires an index to lead people to its more specific subcommunities. One specific Xena site (Yahoo! found 123 of 'em), the Xena Fan Fiction Page, features reader contributions of fantasy stories about the Warrior Princess (see Figure 5.8). The understanding that these Xena fans have of each other's interests and experiences with their idol's TV program is deeper and more intimate by far than the general attraction that TV addicts have to all things

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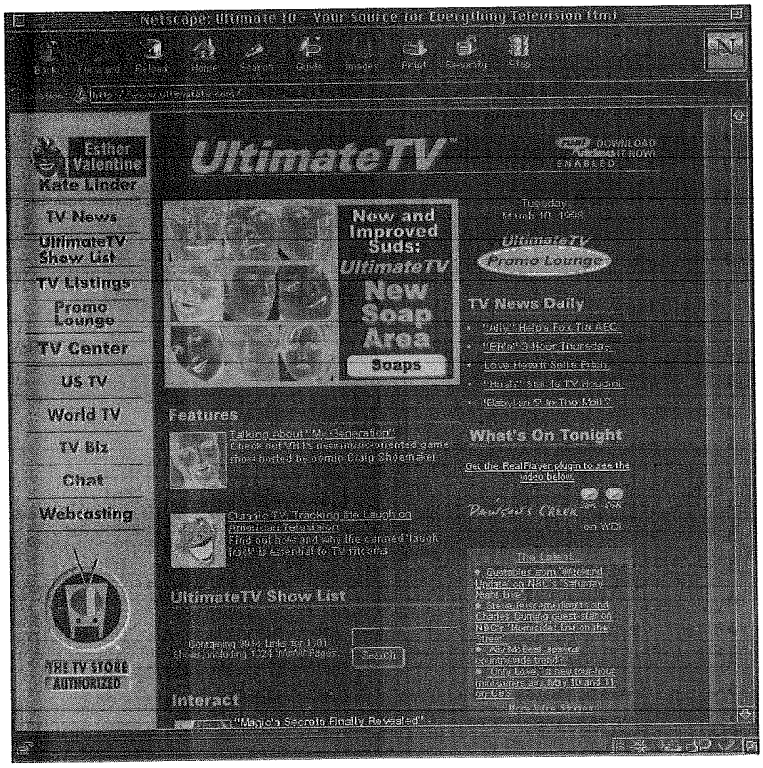
Figure 5.7 Ultimate TV caters to the interests of the general television-watching community with an *index* site. It does have discussion boards devoted to specific programs, but its central purpose is to cover the entire TV universe.



Courtesy UltimateTV (www.ultimatetv.com).

televised. Writers and readers of the Fan Fiction page comprise a focused *shop* community while habitués of Ultimate TV seek a *mall* where they can explore the myriad elements in the television universe.

In Chapter 2, I pointed out how theater populations gather around content areas and are stimulated to converse by the content itself. I noted how shop communities blur the line between content provider and user because their

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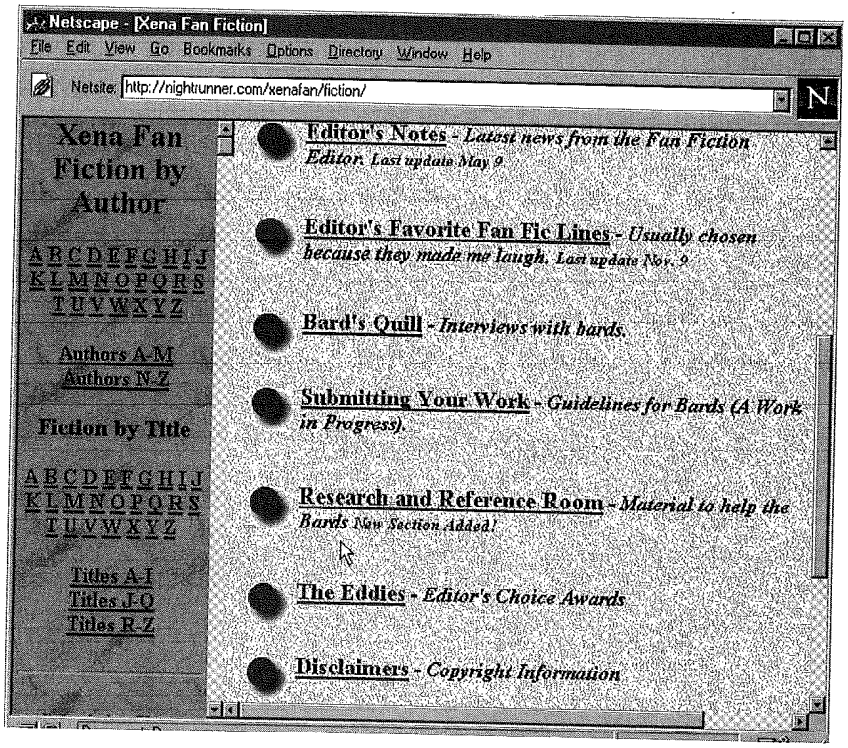
Figure 5.8 The Xena Fan Fiction site serves a focused community of TV watchers with content specific to their core interest: *Xena: Warrior Princess.*



users often have as much information about the community's focus as the site provider. Matching the balance of content and discussion to the community's needs is a critical requirement of your site's design.

Fitting the Discussion to the Profile

The fact is, some communities are just more talkative than others. It's the nature of the focus and the members associated with it that determine its predisposition to be verbose or restrained. Less chatty groups will tend to gather around shrines where static content is king and conversation is optional, while

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more gabby types will flock to cafés where content consists of what people say to each other. Knowing this facet of your anticipated community's personality is essential. It can save you from hiring the wrong people, purchasing the wrong discussion software, and building the wrong Web site. Oh, is *that* all?

Table 5.1 shows examples of some of the possible discussion styles of communities and the discussion platform types best suited to them. Look forward to the kind of conversation your community's members are most likely to enjoy

Table 5.1 The Different Needs and Interactive Styles of a Community Call for Different Platforms for Supporting Its Discussion

Needs, Preferences, and Discussion Tendencies of Members	Appropriate Discussion Platform Features
They like to meet at regular hours at a regular location for lively banter.	Chat rooms
They expect to be using the same platform, extending their ongoing conversations for years.	Asynchronous forums with options for personal configuration
They want to archive their conversations for future reference.	Asynchronous forums or chat plat forms with logging
They are more interested in the sense of immediate social contact and presence than in the substance of the conversation.	Chat or instant messaging
They want to learn something systematically.	Scheduled chat sessions or hosted conferencing
They want to express their opinions but don't care to spend time in extended discussion defending them.	Message boards
They prefer to read longer, informative responses and to reply in the same manner.	Asynchronous forums

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and benefit from. Many site providers fail to consider what's most appropriate for a given community, installing a platform because it's the one they're most familiar with it, or because it's the easiest one for new users to learn. In many cases, their choices work but are not ideal; people use them, but they don't fulfill the changing needs of the community as well as a more appropriate platform might have. The next few chapters will describe more specifically the tradeoffs of discussion platform features. No platform is perfect in its utility for both new and veteran users. Luckily, the design of these platforms continues to evolve and I expect to see *graduated* discussion platforms (which can be upgraded at the user's option from beginner to advanced to expert configurations) and *convertible* platforms (which can be configured by the site provider to serve different conversational situations) in the not-too-distant future.

Is your community wrapped around a subject that people enjoy talking about like sports, politics, sex, entertainment, or Internet industry gossip? Do its members have information to swap with each other? Are they writers or consultants who work from home and seek opportunities to interact with others in the same situation through the Web? Are they the gregarious types who are likely to hook up with new friends through a Web community, or are they more private and prone to remain anonymous, dipping in and out of chat rooms as much for diversion or entertainment as for social contact? As we'll see in the next three chapters, these usage habits will help point you to the structure and type of interactive platform most suitable for your community. Chat and forum platforms are not interchangeable; they don't serve the same discussion needs, and many sites choose the wrong one for their communities, stunting their growth and limiting their potential.

Fitting Content to Needs

When members return to your site, they expect to find something new there to greet them. Even the most fanatical shrine-goer will eventually tire of seeing the same old Elvis memorabilia. Your content must hold your community members' interests over time. That content may consist of news and researched articles pertaining to its focus or—where group interaction is featured—fresh and engaging conversation, hosted by skilled people and populated by interesting ones.

The more specialized your community, the more refined its focus, and the more accurate, detailed, current, and new its content should be. Personal

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investment sites and travel sites host very focused communities that need access to current information about specific topics; for example, stock prices, company information, hotel vacancies, air fares. The people who come to such sites may be interested in sharing their experiences and ideas with other visitors, but if the content isn't up to snuff, they'll find another source at another URL.

If the information meets their standards, visitors may use the discussion areas attached to the content to fill knowledge gaps that remain when all the prices, rates, schedules, and numbers have been digested. What do others think of the chances that Company X's stock prices will drop soon? How did other travelers like that budget hotel in the Campo di Fiori in Rome?

Most sites provide content as news or entertainment. It's important that they bring fresh stuff to their pages regularly, but users don't necessarily rely on their being up-to-the-minute accurate. Articles for a Web magazine may be posted weekly. New research can be posted as it is gathered. A rock band's site may be very active when a new album is due or a tour is imminent, but idle the rest of the time. An idle site loses interest fast. To maintain audience interest between newsworthy events, you must either manufacture a stream of semi-newsy *fluff* or provide the means for your audience to interact with you and with each other to keep them engaged.

If you're successful in recruiting good discussion hosts and attracting interesting conversationalists who are themselves knowledgeable about your focus, you've scored some valuable assets. Some of your content, at least, will be generated by the community itself, not only in the volume and quality of its discussion, but in the suggestions for new editorial content that it makes to you. If you're paying attention, the question of what new content you should provide on your site could become easier to answer the longer your community is in existence.

Driving Discussion with Your Content

Reflecting back to our model of theater communities, visitors who frequent sites fitting this description are drawn more by the content offered than by the lure of discussion with fellow visitors. But using the content to lead them into associated discussion is a good way to hook them on returning to your site. Few sites do a great job of directing people from content to relevant discussion. They may put a button in their navigation toolbars pointing to *Chat* or *Community*, but they don't associate their discussions *directly* with the content being viewed.

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Until recently, this has been made difficult by the fact of there being few GIPs that could gracefully link directly from an HTML content page to a specific conversation within the discussion platform structure. One of the difficulties had been the necessity, on most sites, for the user to first *log in* to the discussion environment, a two-step process that involved first entering a username and password, and then starting up the chat application or clicking to the forum environment. Once in the GIP environment, the user would then find the associated discussion. After the relatively long transition from content to conversation, the mental link between the content and the conversation had broken and the user lost enthusiasm for following subsequent links. Some sites, though, managed to do a pretty good job in spite of the less-than-perfect software solutions available. Now the value of linking from content to conversation has been recognized by community site providers and the GIP developers who design for them.

ThirdAge.com links users directly from its content pages to discussions that, in themselves, provide more specific content. In Figure 5.9 we see not only *Dr. Bortz On Call*, but a *Join the discussion!* box with links to specific conversations using the site's asynchronous forum platform. In the left-hand navigation frame, we see links to the general ThirdAge.com Forum and Chat areas. One can enter a forum on ThirdAge.com without registering and logging in, but one must be registered and logged in to *post* a response to a forum. Click on *Yoga* under the *Hot Forum Topics* and you get the screen shown in Figure 5.10. You can read, but it informs you that you must register and log in before you can contribute messages. This read-only capability is a good one to have for asynchronous conversations. Being able to read the interaction allows people to get accustomed to its style and tone without committing themselves to participate. For many, it's the most effective enticement for actually registering and participating.

Scheduled chats involving special guests are, in a way, a hybrid of discussion and content in that they allow users to participate while providing the hard information or entertainment that can come from experts, celebrities, and people's accounts of their interesting experiences. On the chat schedule page of ThirdAge.com are listed a variety of regular user-hosted, user-centered chats for Monday and a celebrity chat for Tuesday (see Figure 5.11). Another link points to a schedule for celebrity chats that take place in the Auditorium. These moderated events can accommodate larger crowds through the design of

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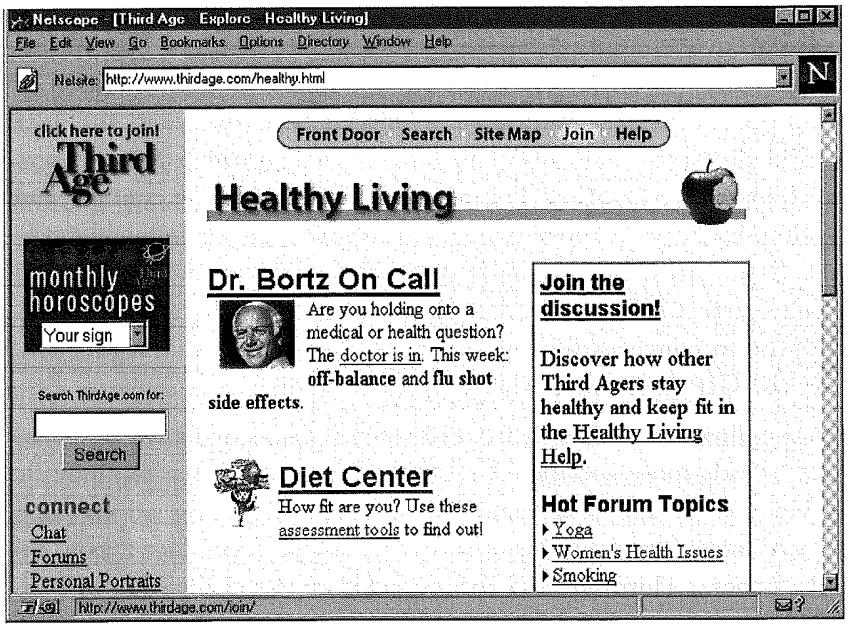
Figure 5.9 On the ThirdAge.com site, visitors to Dr. Bortz are pointed to discussions involving the Doctor as a way to allow them to get more involved with the community.



the chat platform. Again, we see user interaction mixed with expert-provided content in a Web environment that permits hundreds of people to attend and hear the guest speaker simultaneously.

Another approach to integrating content with conversation is the interface design angle taken by *HotWired*. The asynchronous discussions on the site are called *Threads*. Each content area, such as the Media Rants page written by Jon Katz, has its own collection of *Topics* that are usually initiated in reaction to the regularly changing columns and articles. Note in Figure 5.12 that the topics can be brought up in the frame adjacent to the Media Rants column itself. The user can adjust the border between the editorial content and the discussion content to change the proportion of the window devoted to each. The responses posted by column readers can, in this format, play directly off of the content in the column that shows up next door.

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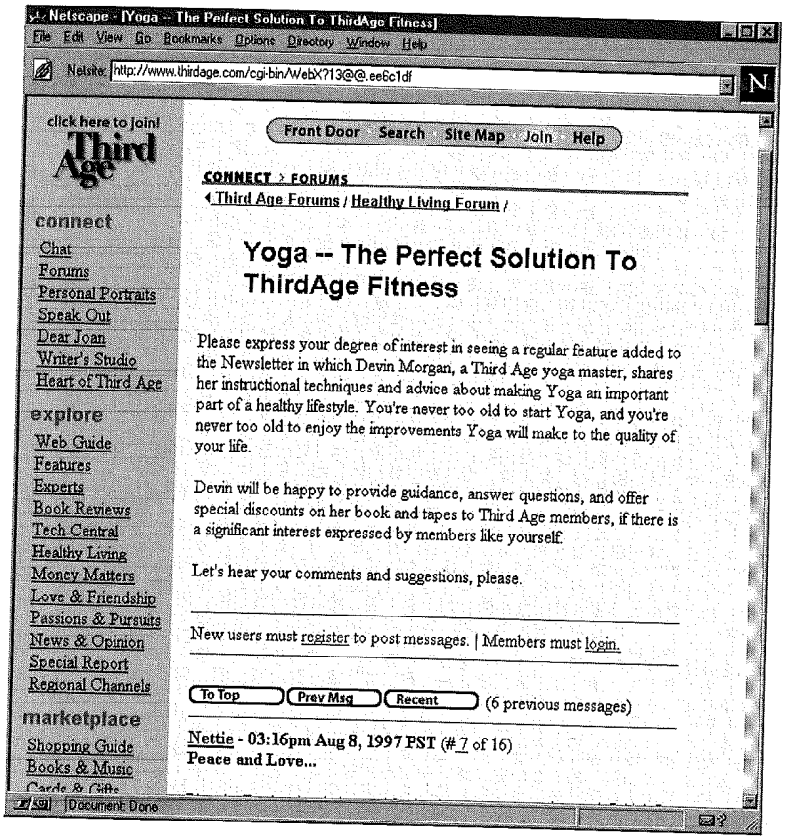
Figure 5.10 Showing visitors the contents of discussion will lead many of them to register so they can also contribute. Registration is valuable to your site in terms of identifying and learning about your visitors.



Aggregating Content and Communities

In describing GeoCities and The Mining Company, I presented the example of two sites that are intentionally partitioned according to the various interests of people who visit them. GeoCities calls their partitioned areas *neighborhoods* and populates them with *homesteads*, while The Mining Company's are labeled *interest areas*, populated with *communities*. Other large-scale sites that deliberately attract a broad range of users rather than groups with narrow focus use similar models to differentiate their content and discussion spaces.

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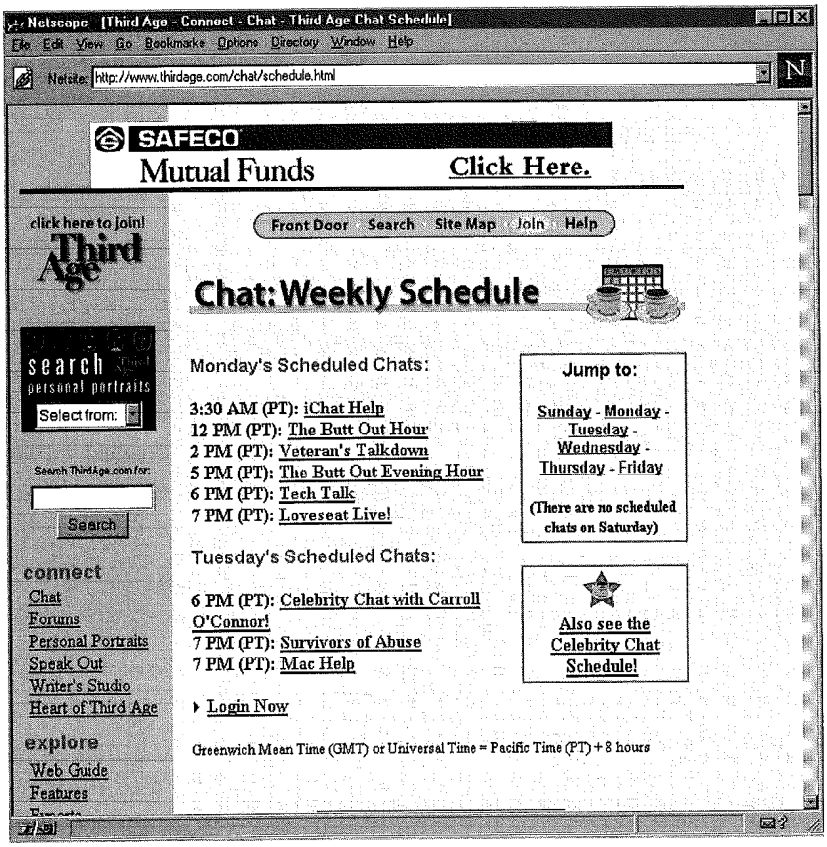
Figure 5.11 The ThirdAge.com chat schedule serves a mix of interests with user-to-user interaction and the more contentlike feature of celebrity chat presentations.



The Globe, another homepage kit site, segments itself by *themes* filled with *cities*, each city populated by *sites*. Members of The Globe who build their own homepages can locate them within any city that matches their interests. For example, one could locate her homepage under the Romance theme, in Singles City, in the *district* of Ladies Lane where 126 other Globe members' pages are found. Within each district there are facilities for discussion and for starting interactive *interest groups*. All of these virtual geographic divisions serve to accom-

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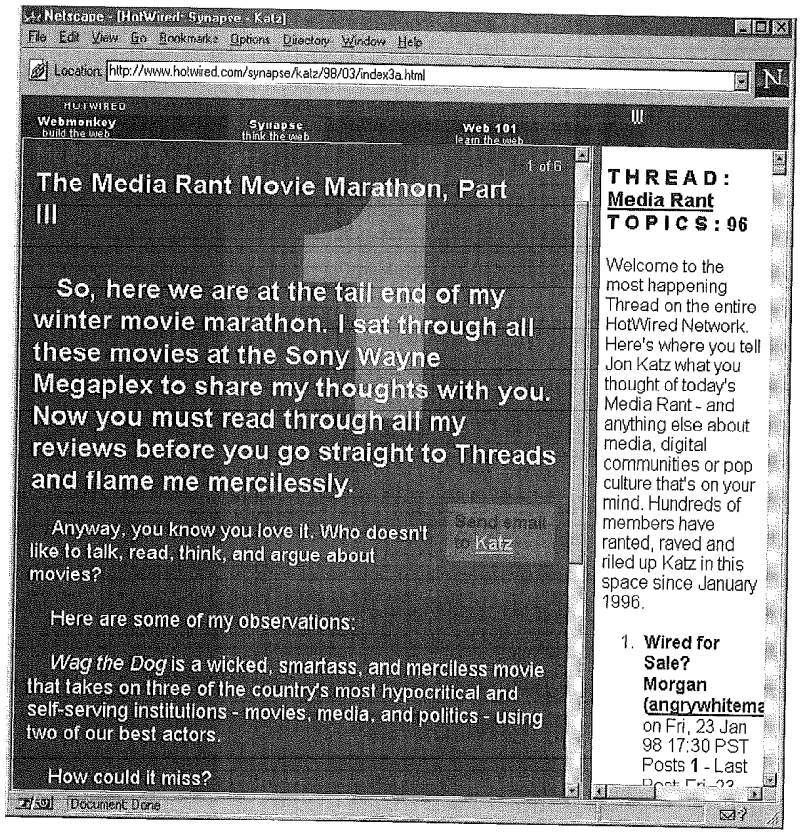
Figure 5.12 Content shares the screen with conversation in HotWired's Threads area. The viewer can adjust the share of the total window occupied by the article on the left and the discussion on the right.



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modate finer and finer levels of focus and identification within the population, and it's within the most focused of groups that people often find the sense of community they miss in larger assemblages where interests are all over the map.

The organization of content by interest channels visitors and hosts into their most natural and satisfying focus communities within the site as a whole. The effect of such aggregation may be that members stay longer, contribute

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more, develop great collections of relevant conversation and user-created content, and attract more members like themselves.

Featuring Conversation as Content

If conversation is the real product on your site, your task is to make it as accessible as possible to your visitors. You must design your homepage and your GIP to ease the new user into the conversation environment with clear instructions, unambiguous links, and a conversational interface that doesn't confuse or strand him on dead-end URLs. The design and content of your pages should stimulate visitor interest in the conversations, for a motivated first-timer is a lot more likely to push through interface difficulties in search of valuable rewards.

Conversations of Quality and Good Information

Cafés with focused communities tend to produce the highest-quality discussion because their participants are enthusiastic online conversationalists who are really into the topics. The interaction in such communities is usually led by a relatively stable cast of characters and contains a good mix of humor, personal stories, and factual information. Group discussion goes deep enough that the relationships between members can be easily recognized by topic readers, and people begin to join as much to follow the social interaction as to participate themselves. The community itself becomes entertaining and, often, educational. An impromptu conversation between several knowledgeable film buffs can achieve the quality of an expensive seminar. A spontaneous online book discussion can be as rewarding as any subscription-based commercial club. These are the types of communities that are capable of creating feature-quality content as the product of conversation.

Increasingly, well-planned online meetings and educational courses are taking place using the facilities of discussion platforms. Such guided collaborative conversations can be more enriching of their participants than many Web pages full of tables of static information or data drawn from searches. The content that emerges from interactive, community-based online seminars is that of a live and very dynamic database of human minds.

Conversation as Its Own Advertisement

If your group interaction is also your content, you should put it to use in the same way that magazine covers point to articles within. If you have hot, timely

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discussions happening in your community, they're the ones you'll want your new visitors to experience as first impressions of your site. If the discussions are in the form of scheduled chats, highlight them well with their times and topics on your homepage. If they're ongoing asynchronous discussions, provide the easiest path you can for your visitors and members to join them.

At The Gate (the Web site of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and KRON TV), the Conferencing Manager is constantly on the lookout for the liveliest and most timely conversations going on among its members. Short descriptions appear on the gateway page to the site's discussion area that link directly to the topics in progress (see Figure 5.13). Clicking on the *About Race* link brought me to the page you see in Figure 5.14.

Pointing visitors to live conversations that fit their interests is perhaps the best way to introduce them to the style and diversity of your community. The editorial choices you make in the conversations you point them to are valuable in selectively recruiting new members.

Clear Navigation

Clear and simple navigation is important anywhere on the Web, and it's especially so on community sites where you need to maximize the likelihood of return visits by every potential member. Web surfers aren't likely to come back to sites whose interfaces are confusing to them. Some navigation problems are more typical of community sites than others, and many of those involve the implementation of discussion environments. First, though, we'll look at some of the basic antidotes, remedies, and preventatives for disoriented users.

Conspicuous Customer Support

The gracious host is always at hand, offering help and support to his guests. A new visitor or one with a question about the operation or organization of your site should be able to get quick, clear answers. Instant custom responses may be impractical to promise, but prompt answers are a reasonable expectation on a site that claims to support community. Support in the form of personal acknowledgment and response to users is an aspect of discussion hosting that will be further described in Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion." Except in cases of user registration and lost password problems, you shouldn't

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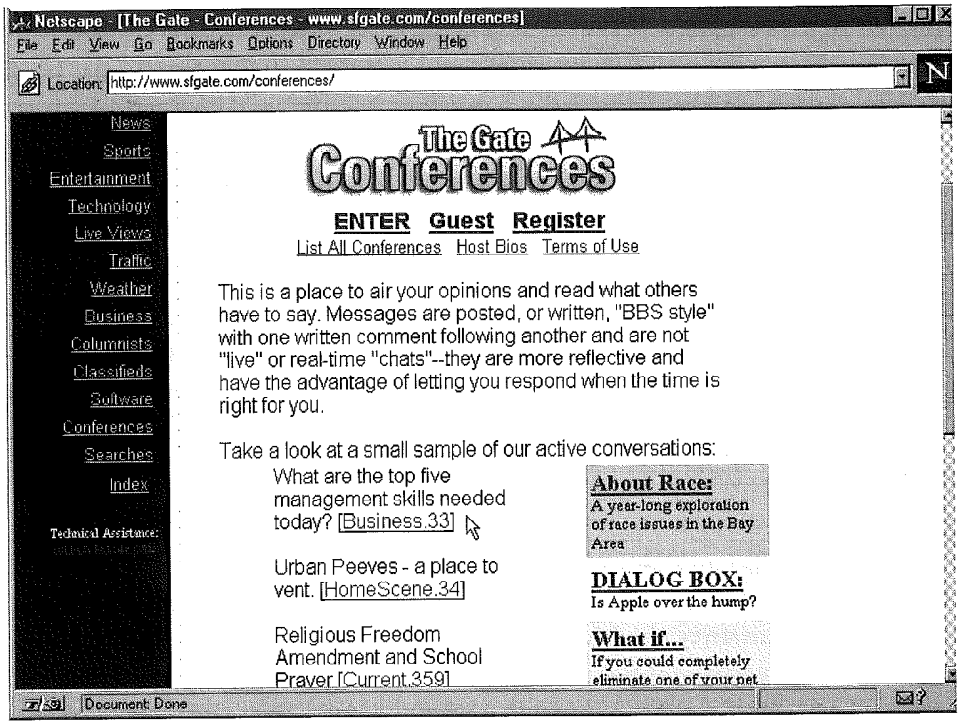
Figure 5.13 The Gate lures its visitors into the Conferencing area by putting teasers on a gateway page to stimulate curiosity.



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need to provide much personal support if your online documentation is widely available, context-relevant, and clearly explained.

The Ubiquitous Help Button

The question "Where is a Help button when you really need one?" should never come up with your users. If there's anything on the page that could possibly cause confusion, there should be directly accessible explanation. A Help button should be positioned in an obvious location on the page. Users should

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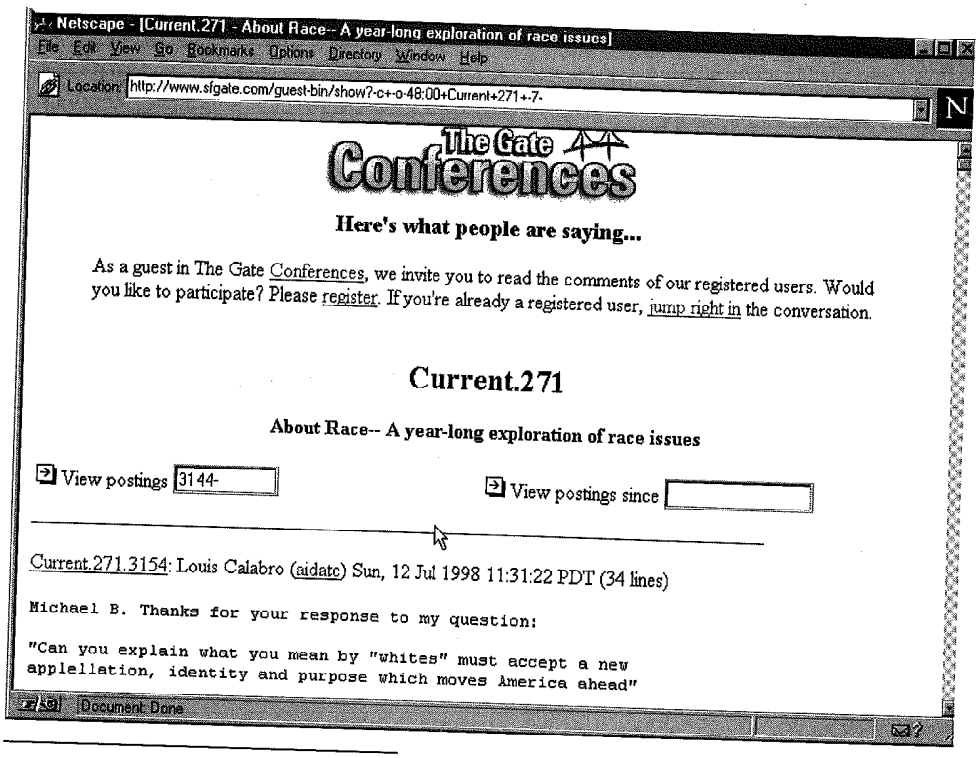
Figure 5.14 Clicking on a teaser link on The Gate brings you directly to a view of the conversation. Visitors can read, but they have to register and log in to participate.



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be given the option, in case the information fails to answer their questions, to click on an email link to your very responsive Support Person.

Help is especially necessary wherever users must go through a registration process or where any information is entered by them and saved on the site. Help is needed at all times and everywhere within any chat or conferencing environment. Help is needed wherever material for downloading is made available and wherever any financial transactions take place. In fact, the only

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place I can think of where a Help button might not be needed would be on a page with nothing else but readable content. And even there, if any of the features just discussed exist somewhere on the site, a Help button can't hurt.

The User-Helping-User Culture

The development of this aspect of interactive community usually happens naturally. As people go through the learning process in a new environment, they become teachers for those who follow them into the environment. Whether it's born out of kindness and consideration or an inner need to publicly exhibit mastery, this culture of helpfulness shows up all over the Net. It's common to see users of an online system knowing more about its functions and capabilities than the paid employees who man the Support desk.

As manager of the WELL, I could always count on my customers to teach me something about my system that I didn't know. As new people arrived into the early WELL's arcane command structure, there were always veterans present offering their hard-won advice and guidance. Some even volunteered to be part of our online support team, available to answer users' questions via the WELL's instant messaging system whenever they were online. Every online community should have the equivalent of a technical support welcome wagon, not just to instruct newbies in the tricks of the interface, but to introduce them to the culture. Users helping users is one of the most outstanding benefits of the virtual community.

Building Flow into the Site

Earlier in the book I touched on the idea that the members of a community get more out of a site if their use of it is smooth and efficient; in other words, if there is flow. Flow, like convenience, is a characteristic that, rather than attracting users to a site, makes them less likely to abandon it once they've begun to use it. Designing flow into the user experience makes participation feel more natural and less like work. It helps to make the interface disappear so that the information and interaction have more impact and meaning.

It doesn't take much to break the bonds of loyalty that a user has to a Web site. As new sites appear online and users are tempted to spend their limited time on the Web exploring what they *haven't* seen, they are unsentimental

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about dropping sites from their regular Favorites or Bookmarks lists to make room for new ones. Flow is the kind of design byproduct that affects users subtly, leaving them with the impression that spending time on your site was easy and painless. That may be just enough to convince them to keep you as one of their regular destinations.

There are some design choices that enhance flow but conflict with other concerns such as security and business models. If, for example, you lower all barriers to entering your discussion space, you have no means for regulating who gets to participate and, more importantly, who does not. You give up control over who affects the culture of your community. And if you configure your discussion system for maximum convenience and performance for the user, you may in the process sacrifice the relative inefficiency of maximum page views that are required to make an advertising-based revenue model work.

Providing for Quickie Sessions

A community member doesn't have to spend a long time on your site with each visit. In fact, one of the advantages of being familiar with a community is the ability to drop in briefly, catch up on one's favorite conversations, and continue to the rest of the day's activities. Few people have unlimited time in their budgets to dawdle around on a community site. And if they visit regularly, the dawdling involved in every inefficient or redundant page change and mouse click begins to accumulate. So regular users are especially appreciative of time-saving routines for making the most of every visit.

A regular user—Joe, for example—should be able to set up and follow an itinerary like the following on a normal visit to his forum-based community system:

1. Joe points his browser directly to the gateway URL leading to the conversation space.
2. The site recognizes Joe by his cookie and admits him to the conversation space without requiring him to go through a routine login process.
3. Joe is automatically presented with his personal custom-selected list of the conversations he's following along with a list of newly started conversations he has yet to see.

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4. From those lists, Joe chooses any of the new conversations he wants to visit for this session, which he may then add to his regular itinerary.
5. At each conversation, Joe is shown only postings made since he last visited. He posts his response in each conversation or "passes" and is immediately presented with the next conversation from his list.
6. After seeing and posting in all of his chosen conversations, Joe is returned to a screen that informs him that he has completed his itinerary. His session is over and he moves on to his next adventure on or off of the Web.

If the site is designed for good flow, there is always a link available to the user leading to the next planned stop on his itinerary. If the user reads to the end of an article or finishes posting to a conversation and there's no link leading to an expected or helpful destination, he's likely to feel stranded.

Don't Strand the Users

No, you don't ever want your visitors to be sitting in front of their monitors wondering, "Okay, what now?" Think of your site as presenting a large variety of possible tours that each visitor can follow, but always and in every situation providing a path back to a recognizable starting place. Just as you need a Help button to be available at all times, the equivalent of a *Home* button should also be at the head and foot of every screen to keep your visitors oriented and on your site. If the question comes up, "What now?" the user's next click could very well be to someone else's URL.

Registration, Login, and Drive-Thru

It's widely believed that Web users tend to avoid sites that require registration. I don't blame them if it's true, for I've had to register for an incredible number of sites to research this book. It takes extra time and each site is another login name and password, and often another special email message to keep track of. But the fact that so many new sites continue to require some form of registration, and that so many of these have large registered populations, leads me to believe that the resistance is not so great as Web folktales would lead us to believe.

It could be that people have increasingly come to recognize one of the main benefits of registration: regulatory control. I'm not talking about regulation in the same terms as capital "B" Big Government here, but in terms of the small

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government function of site administration. Requiring registration, as we discussed in Chapter 3, "Establishing and Maintaining Key Relationships," means that only registered users are given access to certain areas and certain privileges. Violators of community rules can have their access withdrawn. Were everyone to be admitted to participate, with no registration required, there would be no technical way to exclude disruptive people.

Still, registration can be an awkward break in a new user's exploration of a site. Usually registration is required to get through the gateway into group discussion. If new users are first allowed read-only access to discussions without being registered, they probably won't mind going through the process once they are sold on the quality and value of the community's conversation.

Remembering usernames and passwords can be imposition enough, but having to take a detour through a special page to enter them when what the user really wants is to jump directly into the gab fest can be irritating. The most graceful way of presenting the login form is to integrate it into any link to conversation. That way, the user doesn't have to go out of his way to search for it, or go to the special login page deliberately before then looking for his intended destination discussion. Any link to Chat should bring up the registration/login form. Any link to a highlighted discussion from the site's home or content page should do the same. If users must log in, it should be easy to do so. It should flow. And once logged in during a visit to the site, there should be no reason to see the login form again.

Another liability of registration is the need for secret passwords. Some sites require passwords to be of a certain length. Some require characters that are not letters. Some don't accept characters unless they are letters. People are likely to be registered for many sites with many different passwords. The result: People are very liable to forget passwords for any given site. A convenient and quick way to help your registered users find forgotten passwords and usernames is a necessary feature if you want to keep them visiting. Here are a few different approaches.

Figure 5.15 shows how HotWired handles forgotten passwords. You must know your membername, but even if you don't, you can email Support Services to get things straightened out. The Globe simply asks for your email address as shown in Figure 5.16. Since they authenticate that address when you register,

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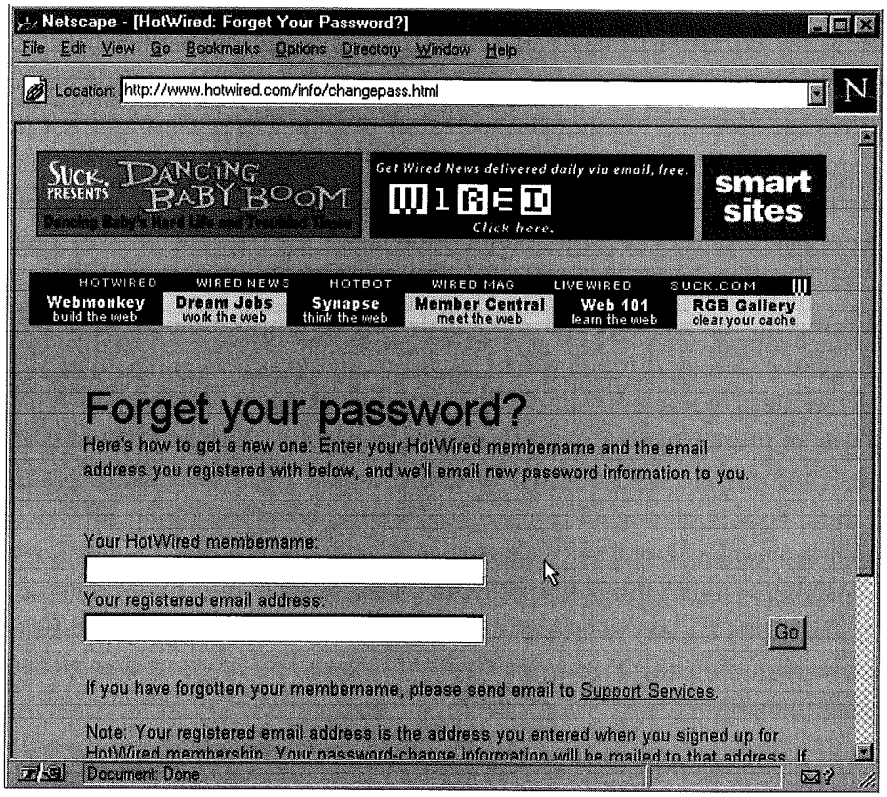
Figure 5.15 Helping users with forgotten passwords, HotWired asks you to remember your membername. Forget that, too? Then you have recourse through Support Services.



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they know that chances are good that only you will see the username and password they send there. The Virtual Community of Tomorrow (VCOT) takes a slightly different approach, asking you for your full name and mother's maiden name you entered when you registered (see Figure 5.17).

Some sites rely on giving *persistent* cookies to the browsers of registered users, which stay with them from session to session and allow them *drive-thru* privileges

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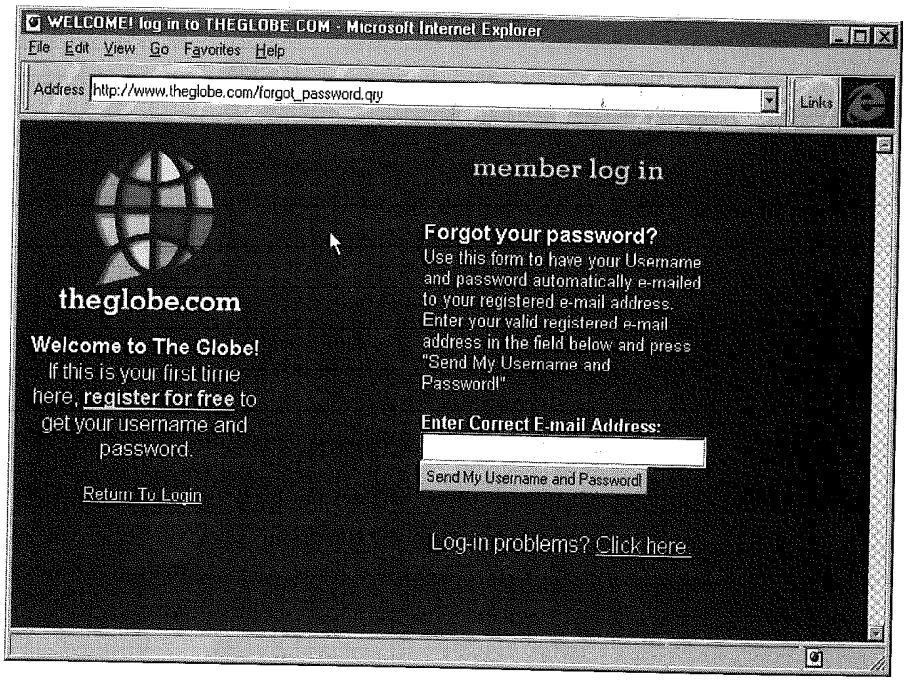
Figure 5.16 The Globe's approach to forgotten passwords is to rely on the verified email address you gave when you registered. If it's really you, you'll get your password in the mail.



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when they arrive and enter the members-only area. Although the security is not as tight as on sites where the user is asked for a password (anyone using the member's computer and browser can gain access to the community), the convenience and flow factor of this approach are significant. Again, though, you will find many users unwilling to accept cookies even with the convenience tradeoffs they bring.

Designing for System Performance

At this point in the chapter it should come as no surprise that performance speed and reliability are premiums in community-centered systems. Poor performance is the opposite of convenience and flow. Many factors con-

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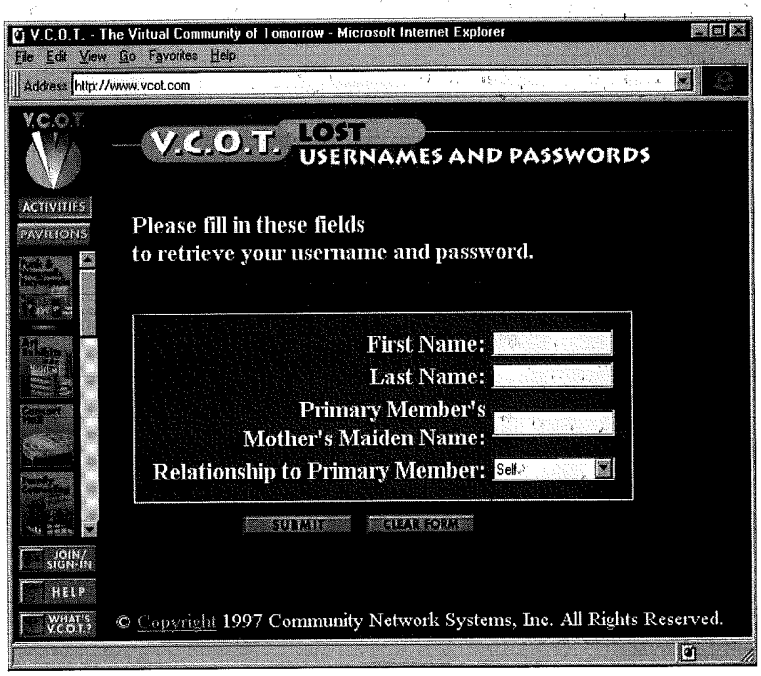
Figure 5.17 The Virtual Community of Tomorrow uses the same method as your credit card company, asking your mother's maiden name on registration and when account information is asked for.



© Copyright 1997-1998 Community Network Systems, Inc., a division of Versaware Technologies.

tribute to an individual's decision to adopt a specific online community as his or her home on the Web. Its technical performance is but one of those, but in the competitive environment of the Web, it's an increasingly important one, especially to people with limited time on their hands. People will put up with some inconvenience to gain access to interesting viewpoints and unique collections of information, but when they have an urge to communicate, they don't like being put on hold.

The Drag of Waiting to Interact

Waiting to talk to your friends is not like waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store. Social activity is something people do impulsively and spontaneously,

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more as fun than work. And if the community involves your work, you may be even *less* patient about delays on the way to making your connections. One thing you will find in almost any online community with some history is discussion about the system's performance. If the system is running slow, or if it is offline frequently, or if some of its features stop working, you can expect it to be raked over the coals by its members. The strong expressions of impatience I've seen over the years convince me that as much as people love meeting each other online, they have little tolerance for systems that make those meetings inconvenient due to technical limitations.

System performance is of great interest to users when it's not in perfect tune, and they should be kept abreast of any predictable interruptions in service as well as any known causes for performance problems. Treat your service as you would if you were running the local bus or subway lines for commuters. Schedule your maintenance for hours when there is little or no traffic. Schedule downtime during minimum traffic hours, and explain any unplanned service glitches to your members, expressing your acknowledgment and regrets for any inconvenience you have caused them.

Waiting on the Platform (but Not for a Train)

Much of the waiting I encounter on community sites is associated with some aspect of their discussion platforms. I can't help but wonder how many people are turned off to group interaction because of the wait factor. There are different reasons for these delays, and I'll describe some of them here.

Downloading Clients versus Waiting for Applets

In the following chapters we'll describe some of the most popular and best-designed platforms for real-time chat on the Web. Though chat is meant for interaction that takes place during a given time span, modern chat interfaces require most users to wait for anywhere from 10 to 90 seconds for the platform itself to load before any actual chatting can take place. There are two main ways of providing access to chat: through *clients* and through what I'm incorrectly lumping together as *applets*. In both cases, software must be downloaded to the user's PC, the differences being the sizes of the downloads and at which point relative to the actual chat activity the downloading takes place.

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With clients, the entire program is downloaded and installed on the user's PC at one time, a process that can take up to half an hour over slower Net connections. When clients are run, the program must be started up on the PC and then connected, through the Internet, to its *server* computer where the actual interaction between users takes place.

Applet-based chat interfaces don't require a long one time download of client software. Instead, they are downloaded each time the user starts up the chat interface. The download takes much less time than the full client (usually under a minute) and leaves nothing on the user's PC after the session is ended. The user doesn't have to spend the time downloading and installing a client, but the delay in waiting for the applet to load as the screen turns gray can be irritating for those not blessed with zippy connections and beefy PCs.

In between clients and applets are plug-ins, which must also be downloaded prior to the actual chat activity, but are smaller than clients. When a chat is initiated, some connection time is required between the PC and the chat server as with an applet. What usually determines which of the three is appropriate is the combination of chat platform offered on the site and the user's computer and browser. A good chat site will give a clear explanation of how the user's choice should be made. Some chat platforms detect the user's setup and determine which applet or plug-in or client must be used, and inform the user before initiating the download.

Everything-but-the-Kitchen-Sink Interfaces

Earlier in this chapter I emphasized the need to be selective in your choice of technologies used on your site. You don't want to force users to deal with more complexity than they need. You also want to avoid slowing down their use of your site with too much extraneous stuff. There are efforts on the Web today to build comprehensive *community service environments* containing not only asynchronous conferencing and chat, but instant messaging, facilities for sending out newsletters, and collaborative whiteboards and information libraries. Such environments may be appropriate for workgroups and company intranets, but they present huge design and usage challenges for most Web users. There is definitely a point of diminishing returns when the site provider attempts to offer too many conveniences.

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Overloading the Conversation Server

Occasionally, poor performance can be remedied by spending more time maintaining the content of the community space. On some conferencing platforms, performance suffers when conversation topics become bloated with too many responses or when too many conversations are being supported at the same time. These problems may be related to the capacity of the platform server, or to the way you've configured the software itself. You can avoid such problems by choosing your platform carefully and planning wisely for the amount of traffic it will have to bear. Find out from the provider of your GIP the optimum configuration for your server given the amount of traffic and content you expect to be hosting. Make sure the bottleneck is not in your hardware.

Summary

Designing a good community interface on the Web is a constant balancing act. Your interface includes everything from its graphic appearance to the details of its function. For it to be adopted by your members as a regular home on the Web, it has to be comfortable, designed with the needs of its intended users in mind. It must be convenient to use without being too complicated, and it must be kept technically up to date without forcing users to go through jolting transitions from one new technology to the next.

Flow is an essential design element of a community site because it makes the visits of regular users convenient and efficient without building the kinds of little frustrations in users that can cause them to quit returning. Good flow design depends entirely on the purpose of your site and the platform you use to support interaction. There are tradeoffs to consider in maximizing flow on your site that affect security or the assumptions of your revenue model.

In designing your site and its facilities, think in terms of satisfying your particular community's needs. If the community is defined by interaction, make sure you have the best and most appropriate tools to support that interaction. If it is defined by a need for information, make sure your interface's delivery is prompt, organized, and attractive. Every element of your interface design matters to users in first attracting their attention, in keeping their attention, and making every subsequent visit to your site rewarding to them.

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TOOLS THAT ENHANCE GROUP INTERACTION

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The most basic no-frills Web site is built using HTML to assemble text and graphics, but user interaction and more dynamic information delivery require software applications created specifically to work on the Net. This chapter is a general overview of applications you might consider using on your site. It is by no means an exhaustive list of possibilities and cannot predict what new ideas may arise in the future.

My intention is to demonstrate by example how different technical approaches can contribute to community building on the Web. In deciding for yourself and your situation which of these approaches would be appropriate, practical, and manageable, you must first understand the nature of the community you're trying to manifest. Whichever tools you choose will influence your relationship with your users and their relationships with each other. You don't want to spend time and money installing and presenting tools that will be ignored or abused. You want them to be used and appreciated because they address the needs of your members.

The most basic application, electronic mail, is the granddaddy of all network communication tools, and still holds the title, in my opinion, as the closest thing to a "killer app" in the online world. You'll probably use email, rather than group discussion, as the primary link between your visitors and your site staff. Even where you provide a GIP for your users to connect with each other collectively, many of them will resort to email to extend and deepen the relationships

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initiated in public discussion. Email is the great equalizer in that everyone can use it to contact whomever they choose and, in effect, create their own online communities of correspondence. Wherever you employ email facilities to connect with your community, you can be confident that everyone will be within reach and able to use it. The same can't be said for many of the other applications described throughout this book. Many people with access to the Net are still limited to seeing text on their computers and don't have fast enough connections to make full use of the Web's content and technology. Email, though, is the common technical denominator of everyone with a Net connection.

I've made many mentions in this book so far about group discussion platforms. In this chapter, I'll simply touch again on their main features and how they serve different purposes. The contrasting properties of chat and conversational forum interfaces define the formats and styles of interaction that can take place within them. Only one will best fit the particular needs and style of your target population, though there is increasing recognition that they can compliment each other very well within the same community. You should understand the specific strengths and weaknesses of each in choosing them as your primary group discussion method. The following two chapters make it clear that there are dramatic differences between feature sets of products within both the chat and forum genres. You'll find that the choices are becoming far less clear-cut.

Meanwhile, most new Web applications are developed—and will continue to be developed—anticipating ever faster personal computers and Net connection speeds. I'll describe how some of today's higher-bandwidth tools for the Web—streaming multimedia, for example—are being used today in online community settings. For the population segments technically prepared to use them, these tools certainly have the potential to enrich interactive life and work.

These technologies are evolving rapidly and will either continue to advance in their development or die off as time passes. My descriptions here should give a good current snapshot and overview of what's possible and what's already being done in adapting these new tools to community needs. There are many tools and techniques just going through their testing stages today, or waiting in the wings for a Web where there is more bandwidth available to the average user. The final chapter of this book will address these future possibilities.

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Bandwidth and Screen Space Hogs Ahead

The complexity of your interface and its demands for high-end computers and fast connections combine to determine who can and will use your site. Some current Web tools are only marginally accessible to users with pre-PowerPC Macs and pre-Pentium Windows machines. Many software applications, alas, don't have versions for Macintosh computers at all. Most modern applications expect users to have 16 megabytes of RAM installed, and are either impossible to use or require considerable patience when users have slower than 28.8Kbps modem connections. Since the Web and its helper applications are so very windows intensive, having at least a 17-inch high-resolution monitor has become, if not a requirement, a great convenience and advantage.

For populations equipped to use them, all of the tools I'm referring to can enhance the Web experience in a community context. A live audio program running simultaneously with a public chat about its contents adds a new dimension to the conversation. An online celebrity interview attended in real time by thousands can be exciting even as a virtual event. When friends can stay in touch with each other *live* as they simultaneously do completely different tasks on their computers, the Web begins to feel like a huge interconnected virtual water cooler. Video on the Web, though still primitive, promises to revolutionize our concept of television and our role, as Web users and viewers, in relation to it.

But not all of the latest enhancements require exceptional Web and PC setups. *E-commerce*—the ability to buy and sell products through the Web—is not universally dependent on customer bases having state-of-the-art equipment and Internet service. Its main purpose is to make shopping more convenient through the Web, but it is also providing new revenue possibilities for community-based sites. I'll save most of these technologies—the electronic shopping cart and the secure transactions over the Web—for Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models."

The Discussion Platform

Certain general features make discussion platforms—chat rooms and forum systems—valuable for groups with special interests. I'll give a more detailed description of the leading chat platforms in Chapter 7, "Platform Alternatives

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for Chat," and will do the same for asynchronous discussion platforms in Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments." Included in all three of these chapters will be references to the new wave of what I call *Web worlds*: platforms that provide multiple, integrated interactive facilities where entire communities can be built and supported. Chapter 10, "Web Worlds," presents a concentrated description of the current crop.

Discussion is both an attraction to people wanting to connect with others and a content builder for people looking to see what others have to say. It can be entertainment, education, and personal support at the same time. It comes in many different flavors and formats. I'll look at the common features of real-time chat platforms first, then I'll take a look at those that handle asynchronous conversation.

The Features of Chat

The most distinguishing characteristic of chat is its now-ness. Chat enables people to send messages to each other in group settings in real time. For people looking for connection with others that have the feel of real and immediate presence, chat is the Web's current best solution. Even if all that one sees are words moving through the shared chat window, the immediacy of the response is a reward.

IRC (Internet Relay Chat) was the first method used for real-time group communication over the Internet. In the free and open environment of the Net, any user was (and still is) able to open an IRC channel. These now number in the thousands, with many of them having been active for years. In fact, many of the chats that take place on the Web through interfaces that work within browsers are really just IRC channels with a pretty face.

But we're not going to use *channels* to describe the meeting areas for chats. In most locations, these have come to be called *rooms*, probably adopting the terminology used on America Online, which has for many years provided heavily trafficked chat areas on its proprietary system. There are innumerable chat venues on the Web and many ways for using them, best described by the time-bound relationship between the users and their meetings. Some chat users visit the same room at the same time day after day. Some browse the Web looking for chat rooms based around one of their interests or their lifestyle, age, or religion.

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Some just like to dive into an unstructured exchange that has no particular focus and *troll* for connections with people who are doing the same. There are chat rooms that stay open all day every day, and there are those that are open for scheduled, focused conversations only on certain days between certain hours.

In designing the interface for your community, you must decide not only which chat platform to use, but how to *program* your chats. Will you produce scheduled and hosted chat events? Will you provide and name your site's chat rooms to serve communities of interest and common experience? Will your members be allowed to create their own rooms with your blessing? We'll tackle the considerations behind some of these questions in the chapters on chat platforms and hosting. For now, let's survey the features of the basic chat interface and get familiar with some of your options.

Basic Features: Public and Backchannel Connections

The essential components of an operating chat room can be seen in the screenshot of the Literazi chat room from Talk City. In Figure 6.1 you see the Chat Window and the Response Window. Most chat platforms also include a Participants Window as seen to the left of the Chat Window, displaying the names of other people currently present in the room. Most platforms permit the user to click on another user's name in the Participants Window and initiate a private real-time conversation in a small separate browser window. Just as email serves as the private personal communications channel for most Net users, such private interactions are a major part of the social interaction for habitual chatters. Email and one-to-one chatting are *backchannel* communications that reinforce the relationship-building that goes on in more public group-oriented situations. You'll also notice in the screenshot that although Literazi is a room devoted to discussion of books, what's going on in the main discussion window has little to do with books; it's more like, well, *chat*.

Some chat platforms permit users to include graphics as part of their identities. These may be in the form of pictures or icons accompanying each posting, or they may incorporate the pictures as *avatars* that can be moved about on the screen in graphic-based chat environments. Virtual world environments feature stylized three-dimensional graphics, but there are also chat platforms that use 2-D avatars such as WorldsAway shown in Figure 6.2. Though graphics add

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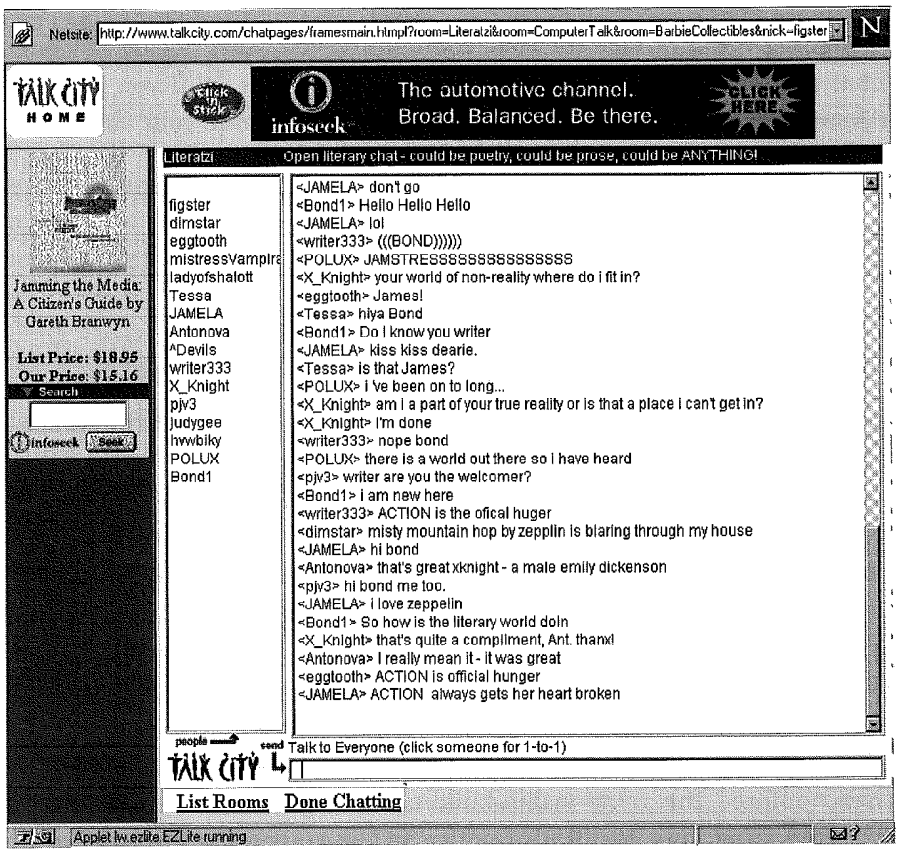
Figure 6.1 A typical basic chat screen using Talk City's EZ Talk Lite interface. It provides a place to type messages, a place to see messages, and a place to see who else is present.



Talk City is a property of LiveWorld Productions, Inc.

another element to what would otherwise be communication via text, their effectiveness vary depending on whether they enhance or detract from the actual communication. An accompanying graphic can distract from the conversation if it's not appropriate or slows down the loading of the communications page. Look for more on these in the next chapter.

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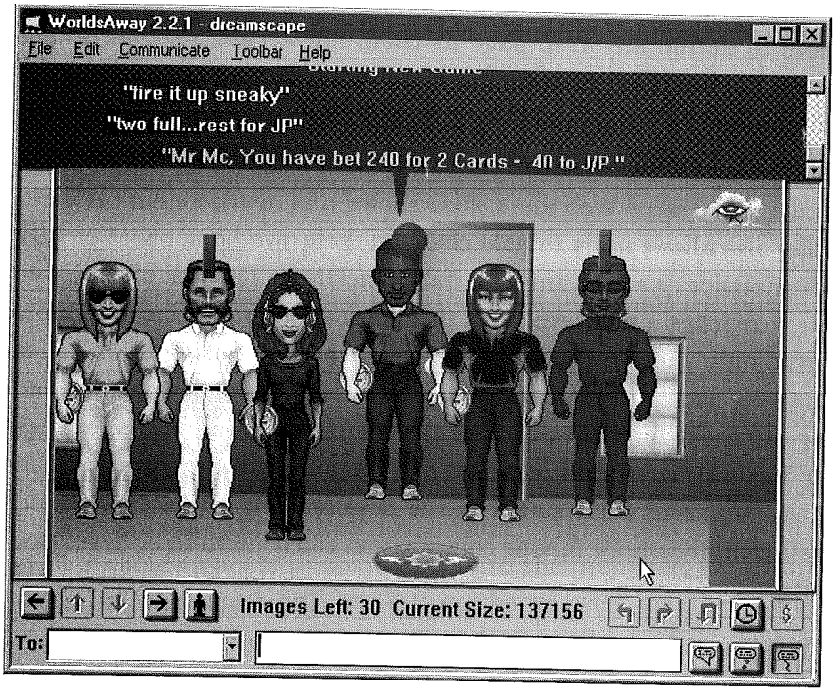
Figure 6.2 WorldsAway provides each participant with a selection of bodies and heads for building an avatar. Here a group of Dreamscape residents are chatting.



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Portable Chat on the Web

Until recently, chat has taken place in dedicated, isolated windows, separated from any other site content and established in URLs generated by the chat server. Although the user can open additional windows to display content to accompany the chat activity, the chat interaction happens in a static virtual location. Now there are platforms that support the illusion that the chat is taking place on whichever Web page its users choose as their meeting place. The chat room, in effect, is defined by the chosen URL rather than the one assigned by the server. Groups of chat participants can even move en masse from one URL to another while chatting, an activity referred

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to by one platform as *touring*. In actuality, the interaction and the users involved in it are still defined by the address on the chat server. The Web page that serves as the background for the chat is simply a variable associated with the server's chat definition, but the effect is as if the chat participants are able to define any Web page as their conversation space. There will be more on the specific platforms that do this in Chapter 7, "Platform Alternatives for Chat."

Being able to move a chat intact from one URL to another offers the possibility of guided and narrated Web tours, slide shows, and instructional tutorials. Chat portability also allows users to hold chats on their own homepages or with the page of their choice as a relevant or suitable backdrop. The mix of conversation and context reaches a new level with this approach to real-time communication. Unfortunately, these capabilities are only achievable using downloaded clients, which many users are reluctant to deal with. And once downloaded and installed, they can cause further waiting as the complex software loads for each session. Both Virtual Places and ichat permit mobile chatting through their clients, but they represent early stages in the development of the capability. I expect more efficient means for mixing conversation and content to be developed in the near future.

Chat Client Designs

Chat service on the Web is mainly delivered today via two design schemes: clients (which in the previous chapter I divided into downloadable clients and applets) and HTML. Some chat platforms are available in both forms though HTML chat hardly deserves consideration as a real-time medium. Chat using HTML, where the responses are not pushed to the user as they are added, requires constant reloading of the chat page. Clients, about which more will be said in Chapter 7, install on the user's PC and communicate with the chat server, which sends continual updates as people participate. The responses appear on the client user's screen immediately as they are received at the server. But not all clients are compatible with all PC setups. Some are full-blown programs that must be downloaded and installed just like a browser. Others are *plug-ins* that work with specific browsers or Java applets—small programs that download and work on the

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user's PC only for the duration of the chat. Users participating in the same chat but using different clients may see different views of the chat window, but the messages of the users are the same. Virtual Places operating through its ActiveX plug-in client looks quite different from Virtual Places running through its full and independent downloadable client. Only the full client version displays avatars in the form of thumbnail GIF images superimposed over the Web page that serves as the chat room. The plug-in version works like a more conventional chat room, but with the chosen Web page displayed above the chat window.

Auditoriums and Event Centers

Another capability being built into chat platforms permits large audiences to witness real-time interactive events in what are called chat *auditoriums*. The most frequent use of these so far has been for celebrity interviews with moderated audience participation. Auditorium configurations can handle crowds numbering into the thousands, but they rarely attract anywhere near that number. Rather than allow every attendee to post in one overcrowded public chat window, the auditorium format permits only the event moderator and her chosen guests to post publicly to the audience. Depending on the event, its arrangement, and the platform being used, members of the audience may participate in several ways. They can send questions and comments to the moderator and guests through a special response window. They can chat during the event with others located in the same *row* with them in the audience. And, with some platforms, they can enter their opinions in a poll for guests, the moderator, and the entire audience to see. Large-scale real-time Web events serve communities as the only way to present so many people with the same content at the same time while offering them channels for immediate involvement and participation.

Both ichat and Virtual Places offer large-event capabilities, and one company, PlaceWare, specializes in developing such interfaces and hosting services. Its platform permits audience members to conduct "breakout sessions" with other members of the same Row, to click on choices that change their seat colors to give feedback to the presenter, to "raise their hands" to be recognized by

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the presenter for asking questions, and to move within the auditorium to the Seat of their choice, next to friends and associates.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Real-Time Chat

Chat is good for certain situations and for certain communities. It is not appropriate for others. Certainly not everyone enjoys using chat, but there are millions who use it regularly and prefer it over any alternative. Its suitability depends on the application and the personality of your community and its individual members. If you're deciding whether or not a chat platform will enhance community on your site, you should consider these pros and cons:

Pros

- There's a low entry barrier to chat. Its use is straightforward and intuitive, and most chat platforms on the Web are similar enough in look, feel, and operation that newcomers to an interface who have experience on any other chat platform will adapt to it quickly.
- Its structure is not confusing. Little navigation is needed to find your favorite chat room, and the organization of chats—whose content usually disappears once the chat session is over—is flatter than that of the more hierarchical asynchronous discussions that must be stored and catalogued on the site.
- There is a sense of presence, spontaneity, and actual conversation in chats. Responses to your comments appear as you watch. Some people even keep a chat window open as they work, to keep them company.
- You can talk to people and see their reactions as events actually unfold on the Web or in the real world.

Cons

- The multiple, unrelated, and interwoven conversations of a busy chat room can be frustrating to follow.
- Serious or sustained discussion can be difficult, even impossible, when people are posting simultaneously and constantly interrupting each other.

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- Long postings, stories, and explanations don't lend themselves to the short-response format.
- If you and your friends can only get online at different times, forget about chatting with each other.
- Same with special events: If they don't fit into your schedule, you can't be there to participate.
- Waiting for chat clients, plug-ins or applets to load is a drag.

The Features of Forum Platforms

In asynchronous forums, participants read and post responses that remain on the system for others to read when they exit. When they return, they're shown the postings that have been added during their absence. And depending on the practice of the particular system provider, postings may be available for reading that were made days, weeks, months, or even years ago.

There are two main formats and philosophies for asynchronous conversation and, as we'll see in Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments," there are some platforms that follow a little of both. There's no universally agreed-upon terminology for these approaches, but the most common distinguishing descriptions used are *linear* and *threading* interfaces. Linear systems feature conversations that begin with a title and description and then proceed in a *single sequential list* of responses posted by the participants. Threaded conversations also begin with a title, but postings can be responded to directly, branching off new conversations, or *threads*, from the original topic. Each branch can become its own sequential list of responses. Thus, threading systems, sometimes also referred to as *branching* or *tree-structured* interfaces, encourage multiple conversations to develop from the original topic.

Another key difference between different forum platforms is in how conversations are displayed to users. *Scrolling* conversations display each topic or thread as a continuous document containing the sequence of postings. Figure 6.3 shows four sequential postings in a scrolling conversation. *Bulletin board* conversations require you to open a new window to view each posting from a topic or thread. An example of this one-response-at-a-time display is in Figure 6.4, a shot of a response in a discussion using Proxicom Forum, a threaded, highly

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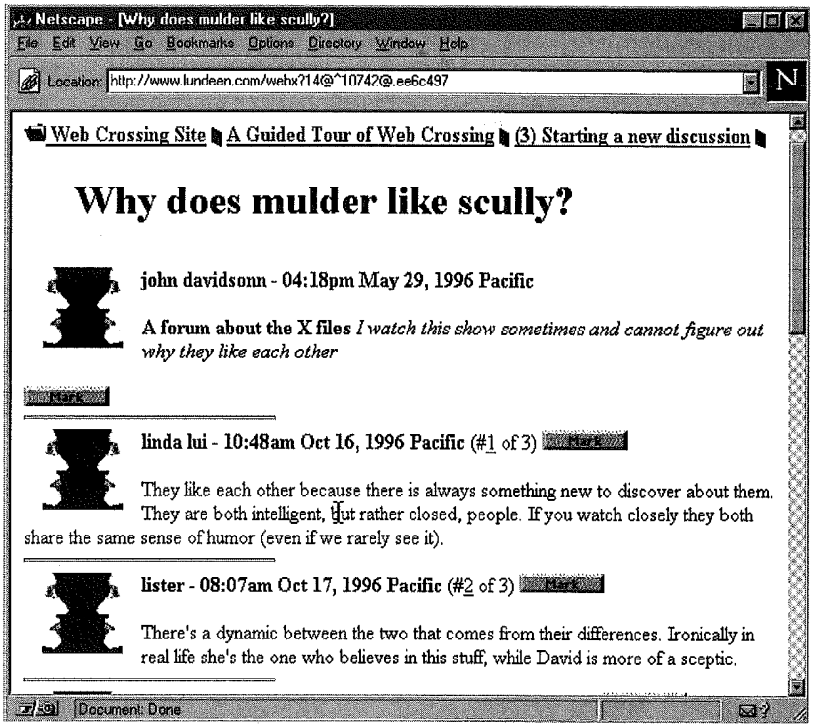
Figure 6.3 Lundeen's home site shows how scrolling conversation formats allow you to read the whole discussion as one document beginning with an opening comment or header.



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customizable platform. A scrolling conversation reads like the script of a play. A bulletin board conversation reads like a stack of index cards or messages posted on a bulletin board. Most conferencing systems use scrolling conversations. Most threaded systems have used the bulletin board approach but some now offer scrolling threads.

The implications of these structural differences for the style of conversation, the type of community, and the purpose of the discussion are many, but can be summarized as follows:

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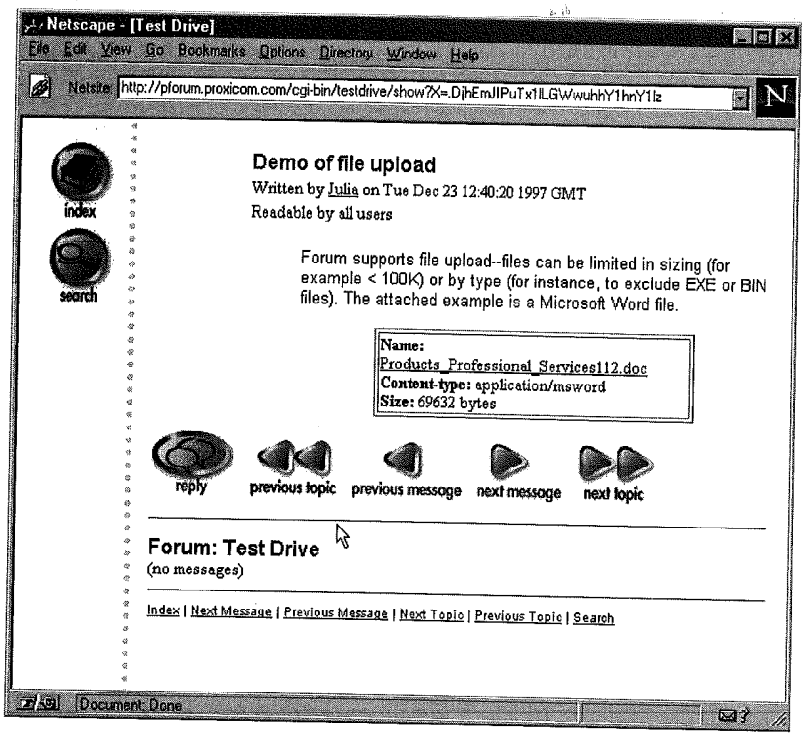
Figure 6.4 Proxicom's home site shows how bulletin board formats display only one response from the discussion at a time. In this case, you move forward or backward through the topic, or to other topics, by use of the navigator buttons.



- Conversations tend to be easier to follow for new participants in a linear environment because there are no confusing branches sending the topic off in many different directions.
- Conversations are more coherent and continuous in linear environments because they are displayed as a single scrolling document that flows without having to open a new window to read each contribution.

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- Entry points for involvement are more obvious for participants to see in threaded systems because the separately displayed subject lines of each response stand out to the reader as *subtopics*, attracting more specific reactions than responses embedded in a document-like conversation. See Figure 8.2 in Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments," for an example.

Of course, the coherence of any online discussion depends on more than just the structure of the interface. It also depends on the participants, the topic, the community focus, and the hosting. Table 6.1 shows how one topic commonly spawns another in the midst of a linear discussion. Table 6.2 shows how the same topic would branch off into others in a messaging discussion.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Asynchronous Conversation

Historically, there has been a wide cultural gap between populations who meet in forums and those who meet in chat. Part of this is certainly attributable to differences in personal taste. Where forum aficionados prefer the longer postings,

Table 6.1 Using a Linear Interface, New Ideas in a Discussion Are Handled by Initiating a New and Separate Derivative Topic

The Sports Conference	
(Original Topic)	**(Derivative Topic Spawned by Response 3)**
Topic 4: Bicycling—started by Joe Let's talk about bikes.	*Topic 10: Trail Riding*—started by Jane Let's talk about off-road bicycling.
Response 1—by Jill I like riding in the city.	*Response 1*—by Sam I'm glad you started this topic.
Response 2—by Jack I like riding on the trails.	*Response 2*—by Sadie Me, too. I hate skinny tires.
Response 3—by Jane Let's talk about mountain bikes.	*Response 3*—by Sean You bikers ruin the hiking trails.
Response 4—by Jeff Jane, you should start a new topic for that.	*Response 4*—by Jane Please start your own topic.

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Table 6.2 Using a Threaded Interface, New Ideas in a Discussion Are Handled by Replying Directly to the Response, Creating a *Thread* from the Main Topic

The Sports Forum		
(Original Topic)	**(Thread from Response 1)**	**(Thread from Response 2)**
Topic 4: Bicycling— started by Joe Let's talk about bikes.		
Response 1—by Jill *Subject: Riding in the City* I like riding in the city.	*Subject: Riding in the City* by Sue Yes, it's so dangerously exciting.	
	Subject: Riding in the City by Saul But it's faster than the bus.	
Response 2—by Jack *Subject: Trail Riding* I like riding on the trails.		*Subject: Trail Riding* by Jane Let's talk about mountain bikes.
		Subject: Trail Riding by Sadie Me, too. I hate skinny tires.

the act of reading, and the ability to take time to compose responses, chat lovers thrive on the constant action and staccato interchanges with the group. The strengths and weaknesses of forum-style communication are almost the mirror image of the strengths and weaknesses of chat:

Pros

- It makes it convenient for people to participate according to their own schedules and free time.

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- Using the interface requires no applications to be downloaded and run.
- Because responses remain available for a while, each discussion has some history and can be joined by people over a longer time period.
- A typical visit to a discussion area includes exposure to a variety of conversations as users move from one topic to another.
- Many forum platforms allow responses to include active Web links, which can be used to enhance, support, and illustrate the words and ideas the user posted.
- Discussions in forums tend to be deeper and more detailed because people have more time to think about and compose their contributions.

Cons

- As discussions in a forum-based community accumulate and diversify, their organization can become quite complex and difficult to navigate.
- There is less sense of presence between participants without real-time response from others.
- Discussion is less spontaneous because participants are not responding at the same time.
- Because different platforms use different structures and terminology, users of one platform won't necessarily recognize how to use another forum platform.

Only you can decide which conversational approach—real-time or asynchronous—is most suitable for the community you intend to support. As the following two chapters illustrate, the choice is becoming less an either/or proposition with the development of hybrid systems and the increasing sophistication of the Web population. But in terms of the specific type of programming you expect to present and the types of people you hope to attract, selecting the proper discussion format is essential.

Boosting the Backchannels

The most visible means for supporting a community online are focused content and public group discussion, but there are other tools available for serving

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needs and facilitating people's contact with each other. Permitting users access to *private* discussion areas on chat and conversation platforms is important to many groups, especially if they define themselves as an exclusive community or would feel inhibited transacting their business in a busy public forum. Once relationships are established in public systems, people will want to isolate their most trusted interactions from the fishbowl of open access. Private discussions, through email, one-to-one messaging, and exclusive forums, are the backchannel foundations of a lasting community. Boosting the backchannel is one way to add to the user's feeling that you are serving his important personal communications needs.

Private Meeting Places

Most chat and asynchronous discussion platforms provide for private meeting areas where users can create temporary chat rooms or more permanent, controlled access topics. Not all Web sites permit unregulated use of private meeting areas—some have fears of liability issues where users are passing information in private—but most respect the need that many users have for such options. In making these areas available, the provider must respect the privacy of the group even though it has the technical means to violate that privacy. The following chapters will describe specific platforms that provide for private forums, and the hosting issues that come with permitting users to manage them.

Web-Wide Paging

This relatively new application is styled after America Online's *Instant Message* (IM) feature, and there are now quite a few commercial but freely distributed implementations of this handy utility. The ability to use the Web as an open communications network for getting in touch with friends and coworkers in real time is quite revolutionary. Web pagers make the entire Web a cyber water cooler around which users can connect casually and selectively at the moment they are inspired or when they are alerted that a buddy has arrived online. We found on the WELL that real-time private communications between individual members added another dimension to what was otherwise a meeting place where one-to-one relationships grew slowly through public group conversation. The WELL allowed its members to see who else was logged in at the same time

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and to send real-time messages to them. Today's Web-wide pagers feature what is generically called a *buddy list* that lets users see when friends or associates are on the Internet with their compatible pagers running.

These tools are currently only for user convenience, not for displaying advertising or content (although America Online's Web product does include a button that can subscribe the user to the America Online service). The use of one-to-one messages reinforces the same interpersonal connections that add value in other collaborative community platforms. People who exchange greetings, ideas, stories, and opinions via private channels like email, pagers, and private forums deepen their knowledge about, and commitments to, each other. In Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," I mentioned the "everything-but-the-kitchen-sink" interfaces being developed to emulate the internally complete America Online environment. Some of these interfaces now feature private paging as integral parts of their community toolkits.

Unfortunately, all of the available Web-wide pagers are currently incompatible; none are able to connect with any of the others, but there are indications that this will not long be the case. Their features vary, too. Some permit multiparty chats in addition to one-to-one, some permit file transfers, some have "do not disturb" features, and some require the user's consent before being added to someone's buddy list.

Among the pagers or "buddy list" programs available at this time are:

- AOL's Instant Messenger (www.aol.com/)
- ichat's Pager (www.ichat.com/)
- ICQ ("I seek you" Get it?) (www.mirabilis.com/)
- LiveList (livelist.onlive.com/)
- PeopleLink (www.peoplelink.com/)

ICQ, distributed by Mirabilis (which has just been acquired by AOL), has had over 11 million of their clients downloaded and manages its floating community of real-time communicators through an elaborate set of tools activated by its software. The paging client needs no browser operating to function but instead opens various windows on the computer screen for setting preferences and exploring its indexes of communities. Its chat partner locating windows

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gives the user many choices for selection criteria, and its registration process provides many options and levels for maintaining personal privacy.

Adopting one of these as the preferred utility for your community could help unify your group's interactions, but you can assume that many of your users will have already chosen one and defined their real-time communities by who is already on their lists. Getting people to drop one pager for another and thus require them to move all their buddies is unreasonable. It's unlikely that many will want to run more than one of these at the same time; for one thing, they use a lot of RAM on your PC.

Email Lists and Newsletters

Don't discount good old reliable email as an important arrow in your community-building quiver. In fact, a regular newsletter to your members is one of the smartest ways to maintain their interest in your site. A well-written regular email communication not only can alert them to information and events, but can refresh the connection and trust between you and your members. The keys to effective email use are:

- Know what your members want to hear about from you.
- Keep the newsletter contents brief and focused.
- Include Web links to pages you'd like them to visit.
- Give members easy options for receiving or not receiving the newsletter.

Newsletters are one-way communications from you, the provider, to the members who choose to subscribe to them. Some of the most powerful and long-lived communities on the Internet are not even on the Web. They are mail lists that permit their subscribers to respond to them. They work well if the size of the participating community is not too great, but often, when their populations increase or when controversy erupts, they become difficult to manage and keep pace with. Subscribers find themselves swamped with mail list responses and often unsubscribe to get out from under the deluge.

Many, if not most, of us could do with less email. Few appreciate being targeted with unsolicited messages. Such Spam is now regarded as one of the banes of interconnectivity. So when you send out email messages to your members, be sure to give them the choice to *opt in* to the service rather than making their

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subscription to your list the default condition. Keep your messages short and full of information and links that will deliver value to subscribers. You'll be respected for your consideration.

Personal and Community-Wide Filtering Tools

If you're setting up a chat community for kids, you certainly don't want visitors passing through indulging in adult humor and R-rated language. A site designed to attract people for discussion of personal investing won't appreciate vulgarity in its forums. There are legitimate reasons and situations for controlling what can appear in the chat window or conferencing response. That is why some platforms provide filters that block the display of words that they select and enter in a designated *taboo* file. Use of such filters amounts to preemptive censorship, and it should be applied very carefully and sparingly in communities of grownups. Even among groups where civility is highly valued, the perceived threat that prefiltering poses to peoples' ability to express themselves openly and naturally is taken very seriously. Wherever possible, regulate language through agreed-upon community standards and a strong support network among your users rather than through technological controls.

On the other hand, I heartily endorse allowing the users themselves to selectively block specific words and the contributions of selected users from their chat or conferencing experience. It's the user's right to see only what he or she *wants* to see, and to feel protected against self-defined "unpleasant" social encounters. The personal filtering that renders chosen users invisible on some platforms is called *ignore*. On the WELL, the tool was named the *bozofilter* for quite obvious reasons. Users who can ignore whomever they want have an easier time relaxing in diverse communities. They're less likely to get involved in flame wars, and less likely to be chased from the community by the actions of the few characters they find to be obnoxious.

There are other filters on a Web site besides those that hide offensive words. There are also *navigational filters* that save users time by allowing them to minimize the menu choices they're forced to deal with; for instance, in locating their favorite chat rooms or forum topics amid a screen full of possibilities. These filters may be part of the discussion platform itself or they may be options that you build into your site's *user preferences* interface.

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Navigational filters come in either the *opt-in* or *opt-out* model. Opt-in filters allow the user to choose from the entire list of destinations those that will go in her personal menu. Opt-out filters require the user to eliminate all of the destinations that he does not want to keep in his personal menu. The end goal is simplification and, as with the social filters, the ultimate aim is to enhance the user's experience by giving them only what they want to see and no more. The more control the user has over the quality of his experience, the less control you must exercise in trying to uphold or guarantee that quality. And perhaps just as important, many Web users enjoy exercising the ability to customize their own view of a service, as long as the process is simple and not confusing.

There's an additional level of filtering that is beyond the control of the user, but is performed by some chat platforms to prevent technical disruption of the interaction. Its function is to scan constantly for character elements in users' responses that could confuse the chat server or could be interpreted as commands by the server or the client user's browser. Elements such as control-key letter combinations, HTML tags, and various sounds and graphics may be excluded from responses to protect the system from user-initiated technical difficulties.

Classifieds and Auctions

What more typifies real-world communities and neighborhoods than the garage sale and the local bulletin board? The Net lends itself to defining communities according to many different criteria, and the resulting possibilities for relationships based on trading, barter, and exchange are limitless. Exchange can itself be the core of a very powerful community, as is demonstrated by the List Foundation (www.listfoundation.org/) and eBay (www.ebay.com/).

The List Foundation began as one person's effort to use a mail list to alert fellow computer geeks in San Francisco to events of common interest (see Figure 6.5). The list gathered more contributors and soon split into other mail lists, including one for announcing job openings, one for sales of personal items, and one for apartment rentals. The community grew and Craig's List, as it was originally called, become one of the more reliable and respected places to find jobs and new employees in the Bay Area. This past

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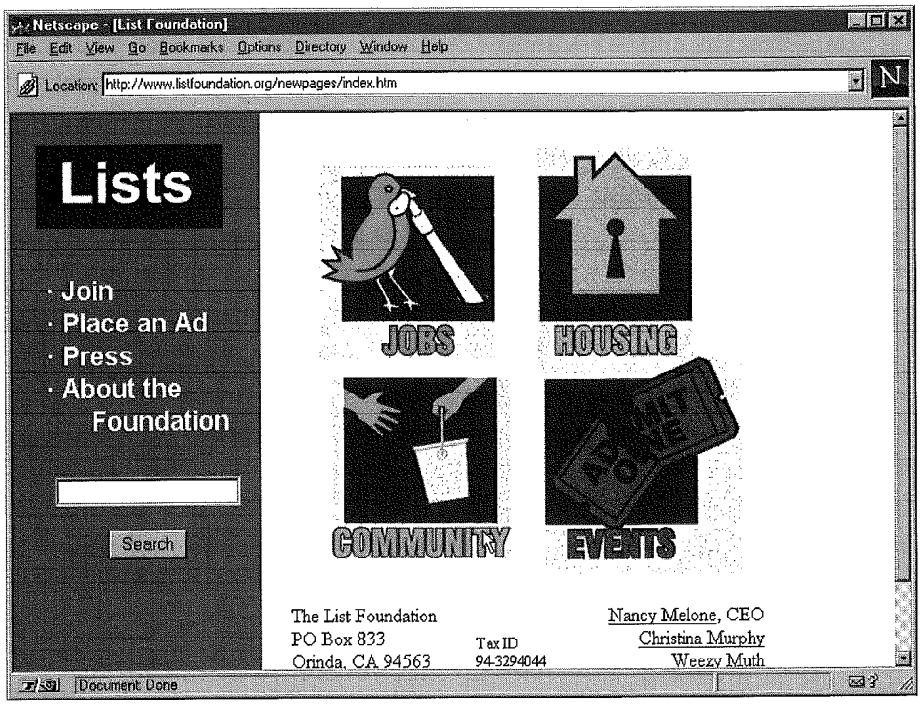
Figure 6.5 An online community can form around services provided through a simple Web site and mail lists. The List Foundation is a favorite service in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Copyright 1997–1998 List Foundation.

year, a team of list members came together to convert one person's hobby gone wildly successful into a legitimate, nonprofit organization. Now employers are charged a small fee for advertising openings, and the List Foundation sponsors face-to-face parties for its subscribers and the San Francisco area's new media community. The List Foundation is expanding its service model to other major cities.

Web users with something to sell can put their possessions up for bid through eBay's online auction interface (see Figure 6.6). For a small fee, they get to set a minimum bid on their sales items with minimum increments for additional bids. eBay provides the organization and notification when a high

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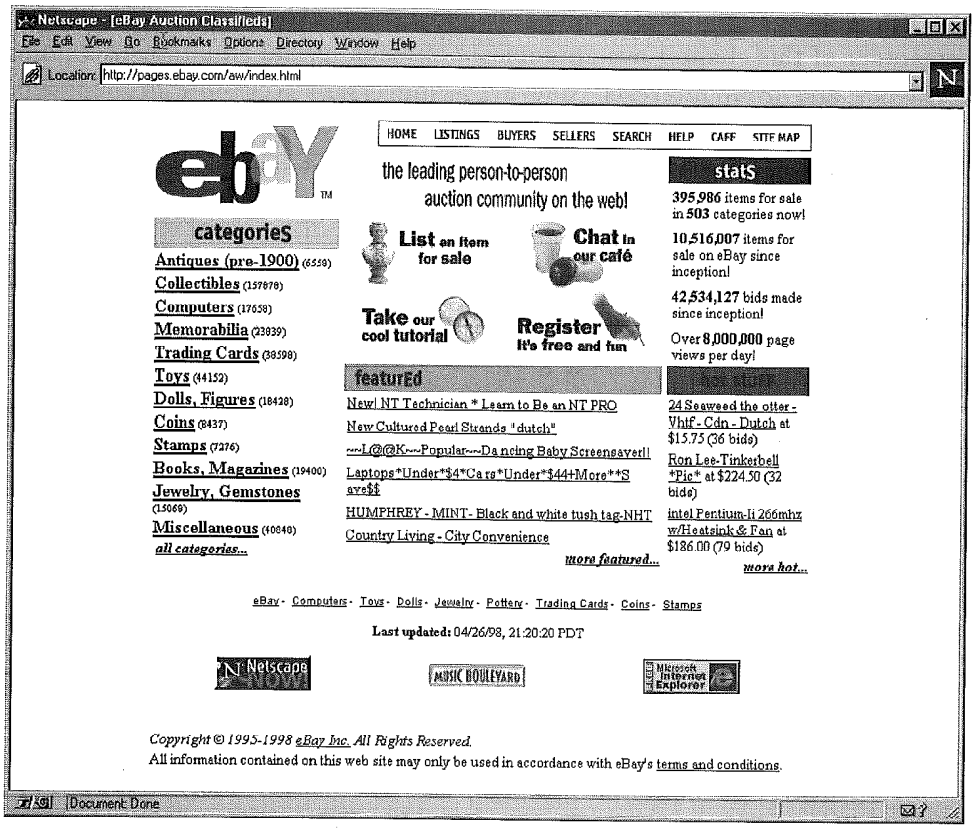
Figure 6.6 A Web-based trading community called eBay illustrates social interaction by selling items person to person. Check out those stats.



Copyright 1997–1998 List Foundation.

bid has been determined. There are strict conditions for participation, but much of the auction activity depends on the honor system. Without mutual respect and honesty, the online auction format would collapse. The eBay Café serves as the discussion and feedback forum for the community where questions of fairness and ethical conduct are often discussed. Sellers who draw more than three complaints from bidders have their selling rights withdrawn. eBay makes money, but the service it provides is a great use of the Web and is appreciated by its patrons.

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Other Technical Aids

The never-ending parade of new techno wonders on the Web keeps adding to the list of potentially community-enhancing tools. Those described in the remainder of this chapter are appropriate only for special situations, community types, and group interests. None are as universally accessible as email and basic discussion platforms, but though they're not yet central to community activities, they may become so in the future as the Net speeds up for all of us.

Graphical Environments

You certainly don't need to offer graphics as part of your discussion platform, but if your members have the technical capacity to use such interfaces with acceptable performance, mixing graphics with conversation can enrich the identity that each user puts across to the community. Virtual Places permits users to communicate through small thumbnail avatars that they can move about on the chat screen. The Palace also uses cartoon characters, photos, or elaborate graphical creations—the choice is up to the user—to depict its participants. While the Virtual Places chat environment *is* the Web itself, The Palace operates in its own online universe of custom-designed backdrops and spaces. Both of these platforms will be described in more detail in Chapter 7.

Three-dimensional virtual worlds environments on the Web, while requiring high-end PCs and fast Net connections for acceptable performance, really do give one a *sense of place*, of being somewhere physically different. To my knowledge, there have been no studies of the personality differences between individuals who are drawn to communicating through graphical avatars and those who are satisfied with a username spelled out in text, but I think there must be some differences for the purposes of defining communities. Users represented by graphics create an impression in their communities beyond what comes across in the words they post. Just as some people are more expressive in their words and sentences, some are more expressive in the appearances they conjure up for themselves online.

The drawbacks of graphical platforms, besides requiring that their users be better equipped, come in the host's higher system, maintenance, and customer support responsibilities. Graphics take up more disk space, require

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more bandwidth, and you have to watch over the graphical as well as the verbal behaviors of your members.

Traffic Measurement and Analysis

All commercial Web sites keep track of their traffic to know how many eyes have seen their advertisements as well as to measure visitors' interest in the various pages on their sites. Reading traffic statistics tells the site managers, interface designers, and ad salespeople which content is most attractive and how the flow in their site design is working. Communities need this analysis just as much as noncommunity sites, but in their group interactive areas, they have additional traffic parameters to gauge.

Knowing how many people visit your various discussion areas tells you about the interests of your population and the effectiveness of your conversations. Traffic-measuring tools that come built in to chat and threading platforms vary widely in their reporting, but some can give you helpful information, such as:

- How many different people post
- How many responses each person posts
- How frequently each participant posts
- The size of postings

Together, such statistics can give you a profile of your community's activity. You can tell what percentage of your members is responsible for what percentage of your posting content. You may be surprised at how few people provide the bulk of your participation and content contributions. You'll see which areas of your discussion have solid, sustained participation by a group of regulars, and which have very transient participation by a constantly changing population. Using participation traffic figures, you can better allocate scarce resources and eliminate dead spots in your discussion space.

Knowing which browsers your visitors are using can also help you determine which Web technologies will work for your audience. If few of your visitors have the latest browser versions, you know you'll only be able to reach a small minority with the latest technical features. And knowing the referral

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URLs where your traffic is coming from can clue you in on where links to your site would be most useful for drawing new traffic.

Polling Users' Opinions

People are fascinated by public opinion, especially where their own is included. For some issues, discussion is just too slow and complicated. The underlying feelings of the whole population can be hidden beneath the expressions of a vocal minority. Opinion polls give people the quick and simple overview that they are *really* looking for. Many sites now have daily opinion polls on issues of interest to their regular visitors. These can be fun even if they have no statistical validity beyond the specific collection of users who respond to them. For users, they are anonymous and almost effortless, causing far less emotional strain than defending a controversial viewpoint in a public conversation.

There are commercial polling facilities available on the Web and many sites now build their own. One of the original commercial polling platforms is Votelink. For a fee, the company can arrange for a poll to be linked to your site and changed by you on a regular basis. On its own site, it provides a variety of running poll questions (see Figure 6.7) with bar graphs showing current poll results (see Figure 6.8) and associated discussions. NetNoir asks its users to design polls that they think would be interesting, as shown in Figure 6.9.

Streaming Media: Audio and Video on the Web

A survey done using the HotBot search engine showed that between September 1997 and mid-January 1998, Web pages containing streaming media content increased from 100,000 to 280,000. This was just the beginning of what should prove to be a continuing trend.

Steaming media allow people to listen to radio programming and watch TV transmitted over the Web. Programming is now being produced especially for broadcast to Web users who have downloaded free and readily available media player software. A consortium of major Web companies is preparing the Web for *multicasting*, a more efficient use of the Internet as a carrier of many broadcast channels. When that becomes a reality, and when

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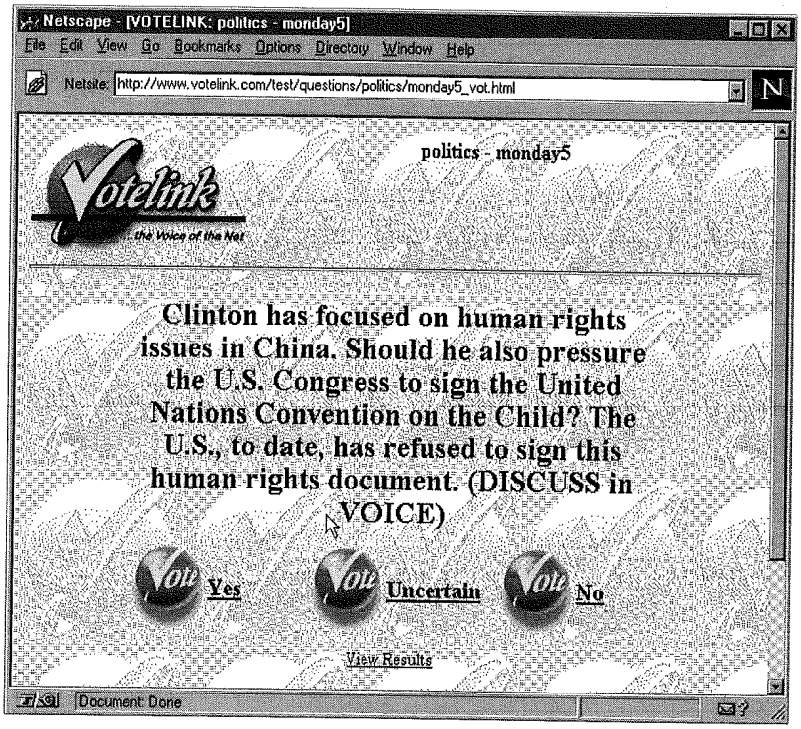
Figure 6.7 Everybody has opinions. When an issue is hot—which this one was in early 1998—a poll like Votelink's lets people express themselves in a simple and painless way.



© *1998 Votelink, Inc.*

a common standard has been agreed upon for receiving streaming content, we'll be able to tune our browsers in to shows and events while chatting or conversing together about them.

Even today, the potential for using streaming content in conjunction with other group interaction is strong on the Web. Rocktropolis (www.rocktropolis.com/) *cybercasts* music album cuts to its audience via RealAudio while hosting moderated public chats with the recording artists. The audience can listen to the music and send questions to the band about the particular song as it's playing.

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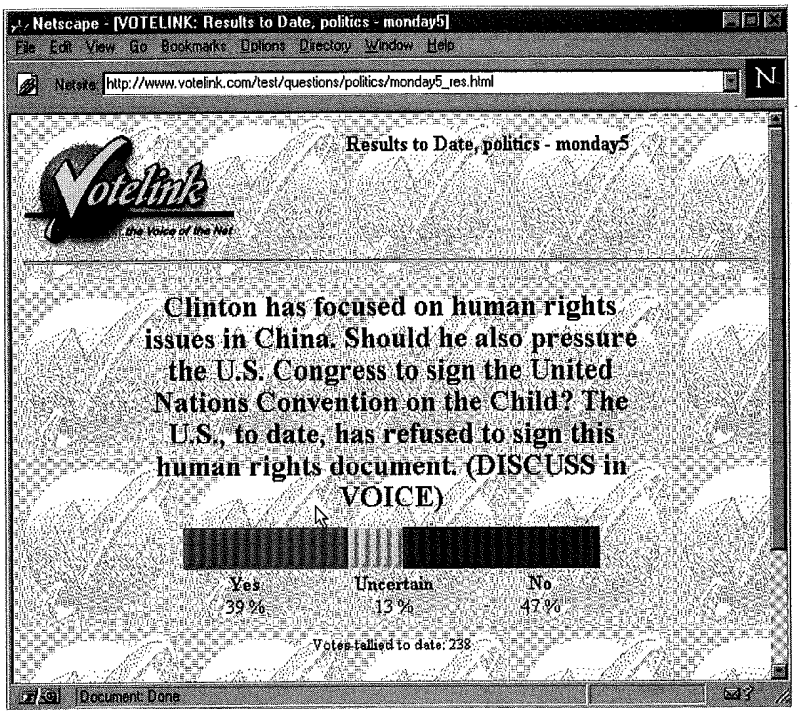
Figure 6.8 People want to know how the rest of the people feel about hot issues. On Votelink's site, you get to see updated results instantly.



© *1998 Votelink, Inc.*

Take a look at Figure 6.10 and see how many talk radio programs were listed in Yahoo!'s Sports Radio Events as available over the Web on one day in February 1998. Habitual listeners of talk radio programs are a lot like a community in that they share an attraction to the personality and views of the talk-show host. They enjoy listening to the call-in content from their fellow listeners. These are semiparticipative communities where one frequently hears the "long-time listener, first-time caller" adding a new voice to the conversation. Many radio-show hosts also take fax and email submissions from their audiences. Adding a real-time chat component to a streaming radio channel would seem the logical next step.

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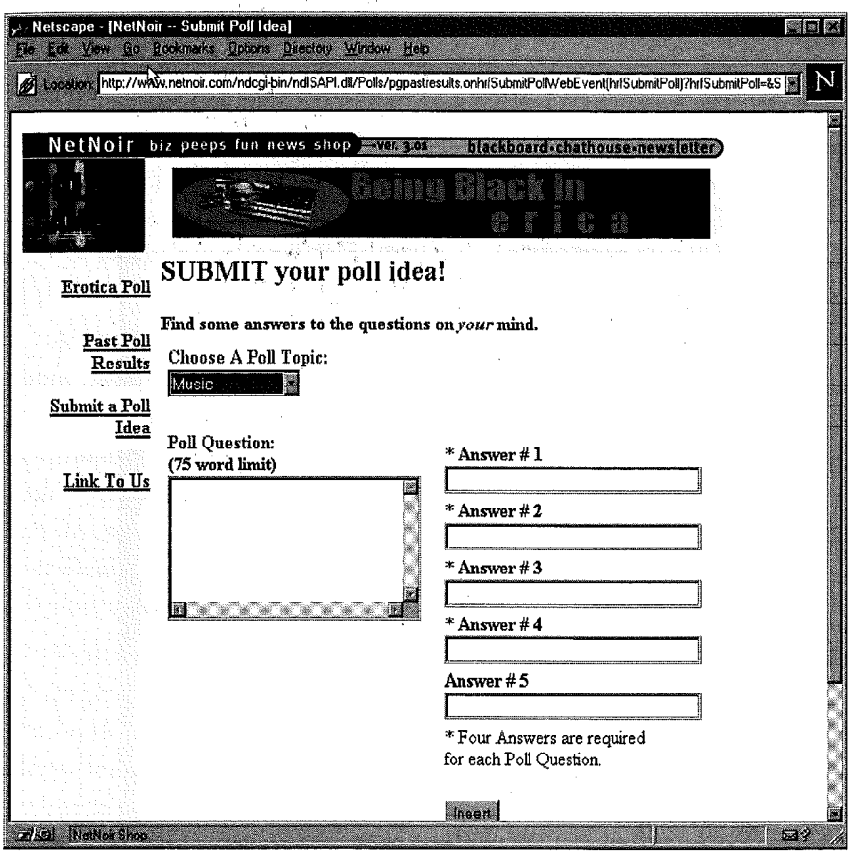
Figure 6.9 Sometimes the issue of a poll can be chosen by the site's users. NetNoir, a Black interactive community, provides this page for user-designed polling questions.



Summary

There are many applications besides basic Web pages that add to the community experience, and more are appearing almost every day. However, not all of them are usable by everyone. Technical limitations of personal computers and software combine with the limited bandwidth available to people using different-speed

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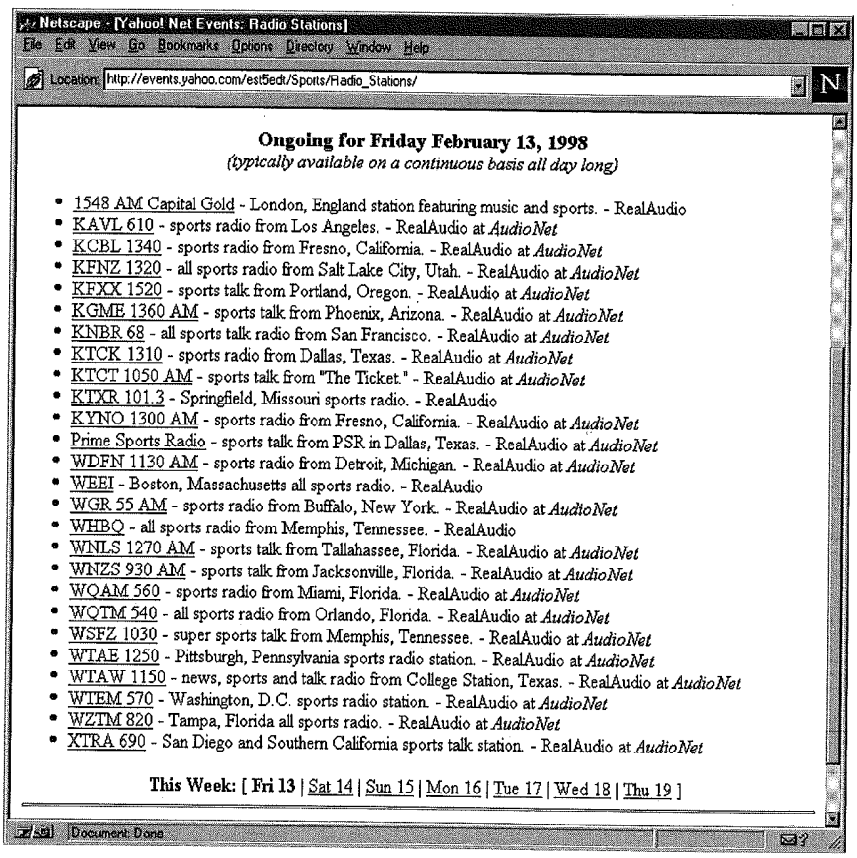
Figure 6.10 It really is talk radio. This is just a small part of Yahoo!'s listing of live radio events being transmitted over the Web. These shows are no longer local or even syndicated. They're broadcast around the world over the Internet.



modems and Net connections to determine who can use which Web sites for what purpose. In defining your community, it's critical that you identify the types of technology that will be usable by its members.

Group interactive platforms begin with electronic mail, which should be used wisely because it is the most ubiquitous and universally usable application

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on the Internet. Discussion platforms fall into two main categories: real-time chat and asynchronous conversation. Within each of those categories there are differences between the styles and philosophies of interaction. Choose the platform that will best match the kind of interaction and technical capabilities of your target population.

Chat can be run by users through downloadable client programs or through applications that remain on the specific Web site, downloaded only when chat is being used. Some chat platforms employ graphics to help establish user identity in the community. Members of chat communities must be able to log in simultaneously with each other. They are attracted by the sense of presence that real-time communication brings.

Asynchronous conversations remain on the Web site even when participants have left. Conversational topics can be read and added to day after day as long as the provider allows the topics to remain accessible. On *conferencing* interfaces, conversations are displayed as long, scrolling documents on the Web page. On *bulletin board* interfaces, the responses in a conversation are displayed one by one. Interfaces that allow *threading* permit participants to respond specifically to earlier responses, thus branching new conversations from the original topic.

Features and tools such as private discussion areas, Web-wide paging and messaging, and streaming media offer many possibilities for servicing interpersonal relationships and portraying different dimensions to our human identities over the Web. It takes a while for the mainstream to catch up to the technical requirements of many of the most modern tools, but new ones are constantly being developed as people demonstrate new needs.

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PLATFORM ALTERNATIVES FOR CHAT

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Conversing in real time is the most popular group activity on the Web. People chat for recreation, entertainment, mutual support, and education. Within company sites they use chat for training and work-related collaboration. Chat brings a sense of real presence and immediacy to interpersonal communication. Using chat, comment, and reaction happen within moments of each other, in the same online session, without having to navigate to another page. It's the closest thing to actually *being there* with fellow participants that you can find on the Web. That sense of being together in the same place is what makes *rooms* the appropriate metaphor for describing what is actually an electronic connection defined by time.

A few major vendor/developers and a handful of smaller ones provide commercial and freeware chat platforms today, but many sites now build their own interfaces using Java and ActiveX. These tools work with the most modern versions of Netscape's Navigator and Communicator and Microsoft Internet Explorer (MSIE). Many people who were chatting on the Net before the Web browser was invented still do so using bare-bones interfaces over IRC, the Internet Relay Chat channels. Other interface envelope pushers socialize in real time through animated avatars that depict them moving about within elaborate graphical environments.

Though all chat interfaces share basic communications features, they differ significantly in their capabilities and in the sizes of the populations their platforms can support. Some can be used to host both a myriad of small group

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interactions and a limited schedule of moderated events with large audiences. At least one service leases its proprietary interface and server space to organizations and groups that require all of the presentation capabilities you'd normally encounter in real-life business meetings and conferences: the whiteboard, the slide show, even the audience's show of hands.

For those unable or unprepared to support the chat staff and technology needed to provide a high-quality product on a successful commercial site, there are major chat traffic *hubs* on the Web that basically rent out the full service, providing the interface, the system management and development, room hosting, and even a custom-planned program of focused events and open chat spaces. These companies are currently partnering with large commercial content sites to host special rooms and events for them. But you don't have to be big and commercially successful to make use of what they offer.

Chat is not the best solution for every group that wants to communicate. That's why the next chapter concentrates on asynchronous solutions. As cartoon character Mr. Natural used to advise, "Use the right tool for the right job." Chat only works for populations whose needs, habits, schedules, and personalities are compatible with its strengths and capabilities, but that's an awful lot of people. Chat is powerful enough to support whole communities all by itself or in complement with content and other communications components on a Web site. Some chat design firms, recognizing the diverse needs of communities, have begun bundling asynchronous message boards to provide integrated platform solutions for communities whose members have use for both formats of discussion.

In this chapter I'll expand on the summary description I offered in Chapter 6, "Tools That Enhance Group Interaction," showing more examples and going into more detail about the specific hosting skills and techniques that go with various chat environments. First, though, I'll run through some of the key factors that will help you narrow your choices and identify the appropriate platform for your situation.

Choosing Your Chat Platform

Knowing the needs and personality of your community, you should base your choice on the platform's features, ease of management, and affordability, in that order. Even the most affordable product won't be worth the price if its fea-

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tures don't meet your needs and those of your users. And if it takes more technical skills and resources to operate than you have available or can afford, the original cost of licensing the software may prove trivial by comparison with the costs of actually setting it up and maintaining it. Part of the relatively high initial cost of some chat solutions is in the elaborate support services that are provided to the licensee or service partner.

Features determine what the user population can do within the interface and how many users can participate simultaneously. Most people are content to use only the most basic communications features of the interface once they've found a community of chatters they're comfortable with, but people who become accustomed to certain features on one platform will tend to miss them if they're not present on another (see Figure 7.1). So similarities in interface design across different brands and sites facilitate the flow of users from one chat venue to the next. Where the interface languages are familiar, they don't impede adoption by people migrating to them.

But not all real-time applications aim for the same generic chat-happy audience. Events, for example, attract people not so much for their chat activity as for the content of their presentations. Platforms that support live events on the Web have a variety of different features. Where you intend to produce events that require an intentional communications discontinuity separating *performers* from *audience*, you need special moderation tools to provide the virtual equivalents of a stage and the seating area of an auditorium.

As with these chat auditoriums, other platforms emphasize certain real-time features over others. The graphical interface features of avatar-based chat and virtual worlds environments enhance individual personalities and role playing with the result that the visual aspects often take precedence over the verbal. They illustrate very well our first criterion for choosing your real-time platform: the feature set that delivers what your users are looking for.

Compatibility with the Audience

Since all group chat platforms share certain basic features—a window where participants' postings can be seen, a window into which they type their postings, and a list of people present in the chat room—you can use the simplest, cheapest product as long as those features are sufficient for what your users need to do. But over the past few years, platform developers have responded

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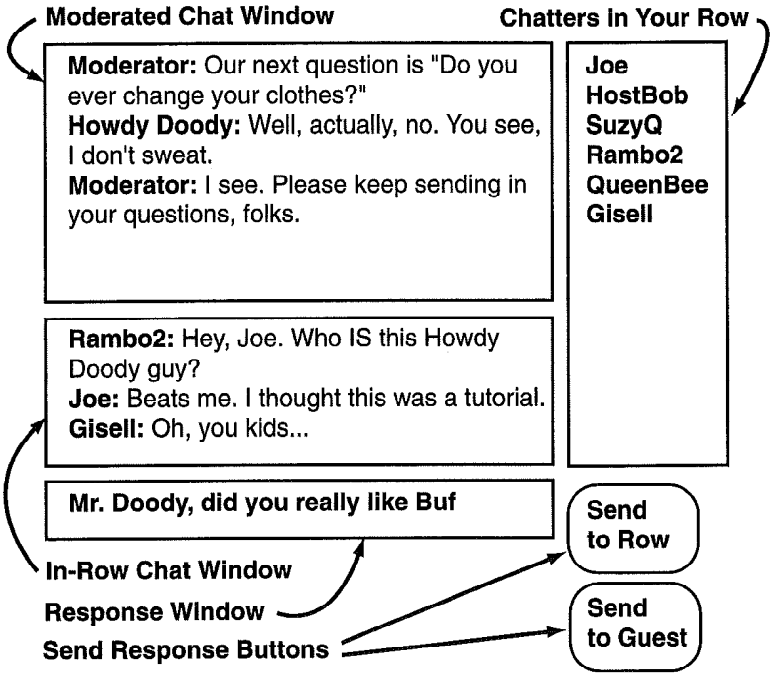
Figure 7.1 The basic features of the chat interface. For many people, these are all they need, but most modern interfaces provide other capabilities for personalizing the experience.



to the wish lists and technical possibilities of the modern Web, and chat interface designs have evolved in many different directions. With the resulting variety, you have to consider who your users will be and what they will be able to handle in terms of the technologies required for some platforms to work. You not only have to ask if the features fit the needs of your users, but if the users will be able to access the features at all. Questions like the following have become very relevant:

- Will the chat run on the PCs and terminals being used by your community?
- Will it require specific computers and operating systems on the user end?

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- Will it operate through a company's firewall?
- Will it be worth using on Net connections no faster than 14.4Kbps?

Some chat interfaces are designed for optimal viewing through the larger, high-resolution color monitors. The standard 15-inch screen barely fits all of their frames, menus, toolbars, and windows. And though today's most popular commercial chat interfaces provide versions to accommodate both the technical elite and those without Windows 95 and the latest standard browsers, some platforms serve only what are currently the Web's niche audiences who have access to the most high-end systems and high-bandwidth connectivity. But we know that it's always niche markets that point the way to the future mainstream, and so it will be with many of today's bleeding-edge applications. Within a few years, we can expect to see far more people chatting through fully graphical chat interfaces than do now.

Preserving Interaction As Content

Where the discussion content of a chat has intrinsic value, the ability to save transcripts or *logs* is handy and important. The capture of chat responses is a pretty standard feature, and some platforms permit any user present in the chat to log the proceedings. Two situations where you commonly see chat logging used are:

Where special-interest groups meet regularly in specific chat rooms. Transcripts are often saved as a record of their meetings for later reference or for distribution to group members who are unable to attend.

Where interviews are conducted through a chat platform with celebrities or special guests. Transcripts in these cases are saved and often displayed for the public audience after the interview. Some communities find that as many as 10 times the number of people who attend the actual chat events read transcripts of them.

Programs of special chats for entertainment or educational purposes produce good content that can be reused. Especially where the chats are moderated by a skilled person, the dialog between moderator and guest can result in as much valuable and readable text as any article written from an in-person, over-the-phone, or email interview. Using transcripts, one high-quality chat can serve you (and your sponsors) in three ways:

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- First, as a real-time attraction where users are involved and contributing.
- Second, after the actual chat, as a valuable piece of content that can be referenced by users searching for information on the interviewee or on the subject of the interview or discussion.
- Finally, where the transcript is featured as content on your site, as promotion and incentive for people to attend your future chat events.

Convenience of Access and Use

Chat, being based in immediacy, should be as simple and quick for users to activate as possible. Once you've confirmed that a platform is usable by your community in the technical sense, you must make sure it meets their needs in terms of convenience. When you point your users from one of the regular Web pages on your site to a particular chat, how long will they take from clicking that first link to being in active chat mode? Thirty seconds? Sixty seconds? Two minutes? If some of them are forced—because of their computers and modems—to use an installed client while others can activate a Java applet, will both groups find the loading time acceptable, or will the client users become frustrated? I ask these questions based on my personal experiences test-driving chat programs and seeing what the home user with a Windows 95 PC and 28.8Kbps modem has to go through.

The only way to know which of your audience is likely to adopt and continue using the chat platform you choose is to test all of the alternative access configurations yourself using various setups and connect speeds, and from there to define where you think the acceptable performance boundaries will be drawn. You may have to accept that users of older Macintoshes with 14.4Kbps modems will not be participating in your chats. You may have to get used to the idea that, because of the interface's design and performance, most of the people participating will be Windows 95 users with 33.3Kbps modems or better.

Whatever you discover about who will have the best chat experience on your site, it's considerate to inform your potential users in as much detail as possible of any alternative interface setups you offer, and to suggest solutions for those without optimum configurations. At least tell them which configurations of hardware, operating system, and connect speed will provide the best performance when they activate your chat interface. You don't want to lead them to expect that all setups will deliver equal or even acceptable performance

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if that's not the case. You might save them from wasting some time, and users appreciate that.

Another convenience feature is the ability, once the chat application has been loaded, to move between the different chats on the site without having to reload or restart the application. Users have different habits. Some become members of only one chat community, visiting a specific room every day with no interest in exploring the other selections available on the site. Others like to spend time touring the chat selections, sampling and looking for interesting conversation wherever they discover action. And some leave the chat area intermittently to view content on your site and then return for more conversation. Chat clients that recognize their users by means of *certificates* or *cookies* can maintain their users' connections to the server even when they're not actively engaged in a chat, and thus spare them from having to reload their clients as they roam about during their online sessions.

For user convenience, the chat platform should keep the connection alive even if the user quits one chat room to look for another. Most platforms generate lists of their currently available rooms so that users can easily go directly from one to another, or even be present in more than one room at the same time. These are good features for the avid user and they're good for you, too, because they keep users engaged on your site. Some *platforms* (I'm not referring to Web site providers here) have servers installed in more than one location on the Net, allowing users of their clients to move between entire communities once their clients are activated. It's an arrangement that mainly benefits the platform vendor rather than the individual site provider whose users are then tempted to roam, but you can look at it this way: If your site uses a chat client that can be used elsewhere on the Web, saving the user from having to download yet another different client, that can be a selling point for users looking for a versatile, multiuse interface.

Private Conversation Features

People often prefer to connect privately with the individuals they meet and get to know in chat rooms. It's a very important dimension of social life on the Web, one that your platform should offer. Private one-to-one chat is a feature that many users will demand if they haven't got it, and appreciate if you give it to them. The easier you make it for people to establish and develop personal

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The Clients-Server Relationship

Since chat happens in real time, it must display new postings to users as they are sent to the chat window. Somehow all of the words being sent by participants to each other must be coordinated and made to appear automatically and in the right order on each participant's screen. This can't happen unless each user has a *client* running on his PC that is connected and interacting with a *server* running at the chat provider's end. The client sends the posting to the server, which then *pushes* it to all of the clients currently connected to the same chat room address.

The nature of the server is of little interest to the user, but the nature of the client is important because certain types of clients are required to work on certain personal computers. Whether the client is downloaded all at once and installed on the user's PC in advance of the chat, or the client is downloaded to the user's PC *temporarily* only for the duration of a chat session, the *clients-server* relationship is what keeps the chat scrolling across the user's screen.

In this book, I reserve the term *clients* for persistent programs that are downloaded and installed on the user's PC. These include not only the full-featured software programs that run *independently* of the browser, but also plug-ins for Netscape and ActiveX clients for MSIE. I use the term *applets* for small Java programs that are downloaded and remain on the PC only while the user is chatting, though they too are, in a technical sense, clients working in tandem with the chat server.

relationships that are bound to your site, the more people will return and spend time using your chat tools.

Some platforms allow users to instantly create their own multipurpose chat rooms to which they can invite other users. Because these don't appear on your public chat room menu, they are, for all practical purposes, private meeting places. Once users encounter each other and discover compatibility, it's natural

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that groups will form wanting to converse privately from time to time or even regularly. As I've mentioned before, some sites claim to have business-centered reasons for not allowing such a feature to be used. Their lawyers may be telling them, for example, that the content of private chats on their site could present liability risks to their company. Or they may not want to encourage users to spend more time on their site where they have less control over their exposure to advertising. But the private chat room is just the kind of user-empowerment feature that will attract and hold a large category of users.

Room to Grow

You don't want to find yourself paying a high price for your success, so if you plan on growing the population of your chat community, be sure the platform will expand gracefully to accommodate it. This can be a tricky thing to predict since user populations have been observed growing into the thousands, ten thousands and even millions within the space of a year on the Web. But there are now products that have proven their capacity to handle such spectacular growth.

If you plan to grow large and fast, you'll need a platform that will handle the traffic, not only in terms of the number of simultaneous users, but in the number of chat rooms they will occupy and volume of postings they will generate. For every user who registers for your site, you should calculate for the maximum number who might be chatting during the same peak time period, then add another 20 percent. If you permit users to open their own chat rooms, you'll have to figure in those created-on-the-fly rooms along with the number of permanent rooms you provide. Commercial platform providers will help you figure out the right capacity to begin with and how to anticipate and expand with your growth. Luckily, if you have plans for a huge chat community, much of the guinea pig work has been done in testing for what will break under high-traffic situations.

Moderation Capabilities and Controlling the Interaction

You may want to stage real-time presentations in your community where the chat platform takes the form of a stage with an audience. What this looks like to the event attendees—your users—is a main chat window where all of the input comes from the people on the stage. The audience can number just a few people or, conceivably, thousands, and audience members send their postings to the stage, where they are sorted through and selectively responded to in the

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public window. Moderated events can be entertainment oriented or training oriented. They can be used in consumer and business environments. Many platforms include various levels of these capabilities but some, as I mentioned in the last chapter, specialize in providing them. The basic features of an auditorium-type chat interface are illustrated in Figure 7.2.

Moderation, according to my dictionary, also means "making less violent, severe, or extreme," and under that definition I would put the technical capabilities provided by the platform for dealing with unruly participants. Platforms deal with these situations in various ways. Some allow chat room hosts to *gag* participants, removing their ability to post for a selected amount of time. Some allow hosts to *boot* disruptive people, knocking them out of the chat room and not allowing them to reenter for a set period. And most allow hosts to *expel* the most hard-core rip-offs from the entire chat community, removing their ability to log in. Of course, unless the registration process for your community requires some kind of email authentication, a problem user may be back again soon under a new username. And with the proliferation of free email services that allow new accounts to be set up almost at will, the effectiveness of email verification has been reduced. Chapter 9, "The Practice of Hosting Discussion," gets deeper concerning the social hosting aspects of moderation and community regulation.

Advertising Integration

If advertising is how you plan to support your chat activities—and odds are, it will be at least part of your revenue source—then the platform should provide the means for you to display ads in your chat space in the most effective way. By effective, I mean making the ads both conspicuous and inobtrusive to the users, enough out of the way of the chat interaction to not be a distraction, but close enough to be noticed. Advertising shouldn't inhibit or disrupt people's participation in the midst of their group interaction. If it disrupts their experience, they're likely to avoid your service or make the ads the subjects of ridicule in the chat room; a reaction that your sponsors won't appreciate if they find out about it. Platform providers and sites using chat are constantly searching for just the right way to make advertising work in company with interaction, and they'll no doubt still be searching as you read this.

Should you be hosting your chats through the facilities of a major chat hub, you'll have to make arrangements for advertising splits with the hub

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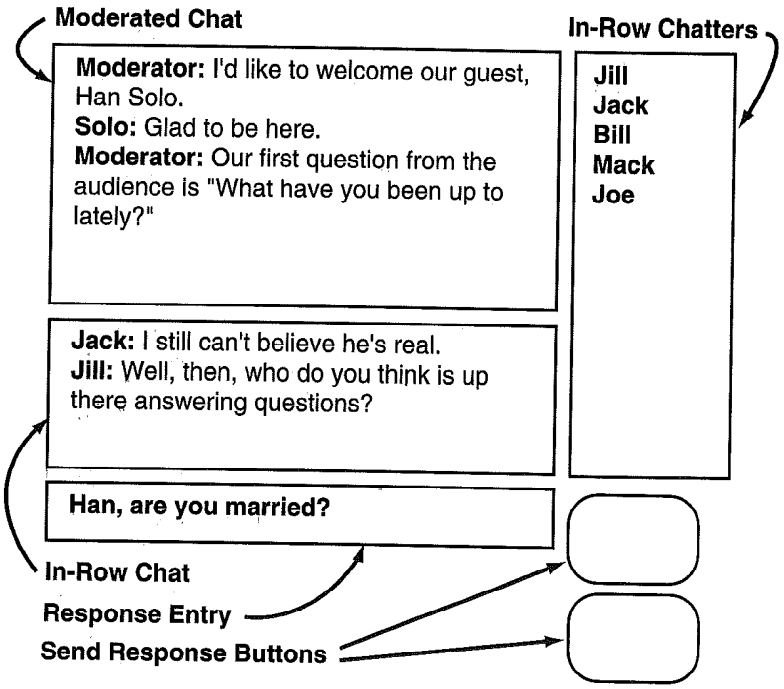
Figure 7.2 Interfaces designed for moderated chats permit audience members to send messages to the stage where the moderator selects which of them will be displayed to the entire audience or presented to the guest. Meanwhile, segments of the audience can converse about the event privately among themselves.



owner, for the owners design the ad placement technology for their site. Advertising banners can also be used to alert users to chat events and to educate them about the use of the platform. In Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," I devote several pages to describing the various ways that advertising is used in community settings.

Hosting Hints and Helpers

Hosting a large chat community requires a lot of staff presence and participation. Just hosting one busy chat for an hour or two can wear out the fingers of even the most nimble keyboardist. *Macros* and *robots* can take a huge load

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off of the humans charged with responding to interaction when the traffic flow is intense.

Macros are simply commands or text strings that are preassembled to be sent quickly with key combinations you assign to them. They require a special program to store them and send them to their chosen destination on the chat window. Easier to come by and even simpler to use are the frequently used text strings that you copy and paste from a text document into the chat response window. Busy chat hosts use these to send greetings to people entering their room or to send warnings to users who violate the room's local rules. Some platforms provide tools for building macros, but in most cases, the host is on her own in coming up with solutions for cutting down on keystrokes.

Robots are programs that follow scripts and deliver text strings to users. The messages sent are usually of a promotional nature ("Don't forget to come back next week for an interview with the winning Superbowl quarterback!"), or are explanations and instructions for the chat room audience ("The Gestures button allows you to attach a graphic expression to your responses"). In Chapter 9, I describe Nanny, a robot who roams the chat rooms of an ichat community looking out for prohibited behaviors while masquerading as a real (i.e., nonrobotic) person. Robots can do a lot of social housekeeping in a busy chat community. They can also be used to transform a regular chat room into a repeatable presentation by delivering a series of scripted responses to the audience.

User Expression

Because chat conversation moves so fast, there's little opportunity for people to post long responses that include more than the most basic of ideas. It's often through those longer responses that people express their more subtle feelings and emotions, but typing long responses in a chat room simply invites others to interrupt. So shortcuts for expressing tone and mood are useful. Thus the development of primitive *emoticons*, the combinations of typed characters and punctuation that have come to symbolize interpersonal interaction on the Net. A graphic or a symbol is worth, if not a thousand words, at least a dozen, and that can be very useful in the heat of real-time repartee. Some chat platforms provide features and commands that allow users to enhance the ways they express themselves and their ideas. The old convention where :) can mean "I'm smiling" or "I'm just kidding" is being replaced by easy click-on graphics

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that appear in the chat window accompanying responses to inform the room more about the poster's mood and feelings.

Graphical *avatars* that represent the users as they chat similarly expand the bandwidth of expression in what would otherwise be purely textual communication. In well over a decade of practice with text-based chat interaction, users have become about as sophisticated as they can be without the use of graphic tools. We're just beginning to see the first efforts at moving from the word and the symbol toward the kinds of expressions we use with each other in face-to-face communication.

Options for Creating Your Chat Venue

There are several viable approaches to establishing your community on a real-time platform. The tradeoffs between them come in the amount of work you'll have to put into setting up the platform, and the amount of control you'll have over the platform once it's being used. Implied in these tradeoffs are considerable differences in their initial and ongoing expenses, and in their staffing needs.

Using Existing IRC Servers

The technology for chatting through Internet Relay Chat channels has been around since before the Web and does not require that you install anything on your site. You just need to establish your own channel and point users to a selection of clients that can be downloaded to give the interface a more user-friendly front end. The initial expenses are minimal for you, but the flexibility is limited in terms of expanding your chats into multiple rooms and offering your users the ability to create rooms of their own.

Building a Chat Community on a Hub Service

Services that provide their own chat interface and server space at such volume that they can accommodate new hosts and new chat communities won't cost you anything to use, but you may be limited to one chat room or to hosting events only when they fit into the hub coordinator's schedule. You may want to host a chat community of motorcycle owners, but the hub may already have such a chat in place. In effect, what you're doing when you locate your community on a hub site is trading your hosting services and the traffic you will attract for free use of a maintained chat environment. You won't earn any of the advertising

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revenue that comes in as a result of your traffic, but you won't be out any money either. Your chat community, being open to all other visitors to the hub site, will have to comply with the rules and regulations of the hub. You'll be able to have stricter rules, but you won't be able to host a more permissive community.

Install Your Own Chat Server

Should you want the maximum amount of control over the size of your community, the diversity of its chat rooms and events, the terms for access to the community, and the technical controls in place for regulating all of its aspects, running and managing your very own chat server with one of the commercially available chat platforms is the way to go. The costs are greater because you need the hardware, the bandwidth, the technical knowledge, and the maintenance staff to run your own system, but you get to claim all of the traffic and keep its associated revenue while defining the community completely according to your values and priorities.

Partnering with a Hub Service

If you want to avoid the costs of installing and maintaining your own server and hiring, training, and organizing your own staff of chat hosts, you might want to arrange a partnership deal with a chat hub service. Under these arrangements, it's assumed that you will deliver a certain amount of traffic to their site through the chat rooms and events that they host for you. These chats will be accessible through your home site as well as through theirs, so you get exposure to traffic coming to both sites, and you get a cut of the advertising revenue raised by your chat rooms and events. You don't have as much control of the hosting or identification with the chats since they take place on pages whose branding is associated with the hub service as opposed to your site.

Join a Confederation

Some platforms are set up to offer users the ability to move easily from one server site to another using the same client. You install a server on your site, customize it to the needs of your particular community, and it becomes part of a selection of communities that users of the platform's client can visit. You incur the expenses of supporting the server and developing your own look and feel, but you can also expect that users from other systems will drop in to visit. I describe these distributed environments in more detail in Chapter 10, "Web Worlds."

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Major Chat Systems and Platforms on the Web

As new platforms for real-time group discussion appear—and they are now doing so at an unprecedented rate—the old ways don't necessarily disappear. In this section I'll describe the players who have so far pioneered new directions and features in this field and are still around, adapting to the Web's evolution.

Chat isn't new, at least not in the compressed timeframe of electronic networking. The multiuser Unix operating system has had real-time conversation tools such as *Talk* for two decades. CompuServe had its *CB Simulator* in the early 1980s. At the same time, the Source offered *CHAT* and Delphi offered *CONFERENCE*. One of the WELL's earliest members wrote a program called *Send* that allowed users of its asynchronous conferencing interface to converse one to one in real time. And America Online, born in 1985, grew huge due in large part to the popularity of its *People Connection* chat rooms. These were all proprietary systems, though, and the opening of the Internet to public use created a need for real-time group communications that could reach and be used by a huge global membership through the common TCP/IP protocol. The first tool to provide that capability made its appearance in 1988. It was written by a Finnish programmer, Jarkko Oikarinen, and was quickly adopted by Internet users in over 60 countries. Its perfectly descriptive name was Internet Relay Chat.

Internet Relay Chat: The Original

Many people have for years been happy with the simple utility of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which just requires a client program and makes use of channels not owned or controlled by any official entity. IRC remains one of the last unregulated mass uses of the Internet. It requires some learning on the parts of its users; it's not as foolproof as chat platforms run on proprietary servers. But many sites still make use of IRC channels. A good introduction is the FAQ located on the MIRC site at (www.mirc.co.uk/ircintro.html). Here's the definition of a channel that you'll find there:

> *A channel is a "place" on IRC where group conversations occur. People can join the same channel and see each other. Depending on its topic and time of the day a channel can be VERY crowded. Channels can also be quite chaotic, or calm. Channels can be open to everyone but also closed and private and only open to friends. On the large IRC networks (EFnet) as many as 2000 channels can exist, on smaller networks (corporate or*

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even one-node-nets) there will be fewer channels. Channels on IRC are dynamic in the sense that anyone can create a new channel, and a channel disappears when the last person on it leaves.

IRC networks are collaboratively run by groups of site administrators who all agree to provide server resources that, together, share the load of traffic over the network. These loose associations determine server-side configuration issues. There are three major networks of IRC servers and each can handle thousands of simultaneous users in their many channels—the IRC versions of chat *rooms*. There are many smaller networks of servers, too, so the possibilities of finding or establishing appropriate channels for a particular need are great. Figure 7.3 shows a description on the MIRC site of one IRC network, DALnet. Note that the servers listed provide their resources to IRC users voluntarily and for free.

Free clients for users of IRC are available. MIRC is probably the most widely used of them. It offers filtering capabilities to help you find channels of interest without having to wade through interminable listings, some of which may have names you find offensive. It also includes tools for managing lists of users and channels that you want to remember. The MIRC people provide a lot of support on their site including links to where other IRC clients can be found and downloaded.

The WebChat Broadcasting System

In 1990 a group of Internet users began using IRC to present live interviews with interesting authors, academics, technology pioneers, business leaders, philosophers, and activists. They called themselves the Internet Roundtable Society and kept transcripts of their interviews on an FTP server for Internet users to download and read (such as those shown in Figure 7.4). When the Web emerged as a better interface for the Net, they built a graphical front end for IRC using CGI scripts. The resulting interface—which required the user to refresh the Web page repeatedly to keep up with the dialog—was named WebChat. Soon the commercial possibilities of chat on the Web became plain and the Internet Roundtable Society went into hibernation as the WebChat Broadcasting System—WBS—was born.

A Self-Contained Community Toolkit

WBS, now owned by Infoseek, is a major chat hub system and today claims over 2.2 million registered users with free access. Several thousand members can be

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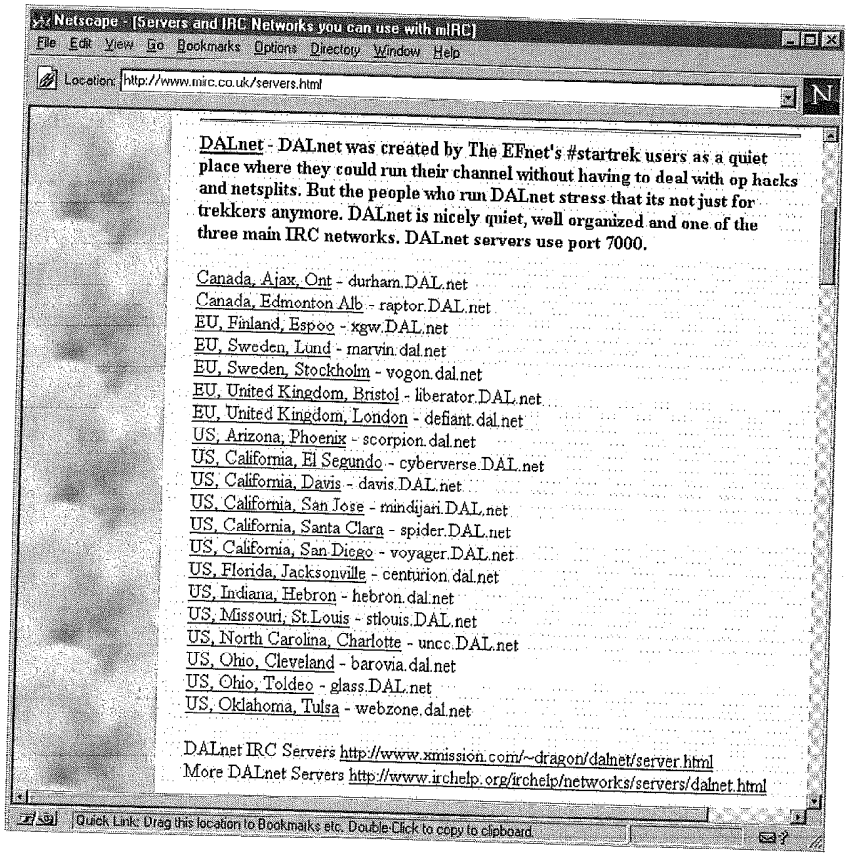
Figure 7.3 DALnet is one of the networks of servers that support users of Internet Relay Chat. To use IRC through their network, you first have to connect to one of these servers.



found logged on at almost every hour. WBS (which was recently purchased by major search site, Infoseek) is building a metacommunity similar to the AOL model of providing a complete kit of communications features: a self-contained system and home base for Web users. It has upgraded its chat interface to accommodate users running setups with different technical capabilities. It includes an internal mail system and features that encourage members to establish strong WBS community identities through free homepages, a simple homepage building kit, and personal profiles. Because of this comprehensive

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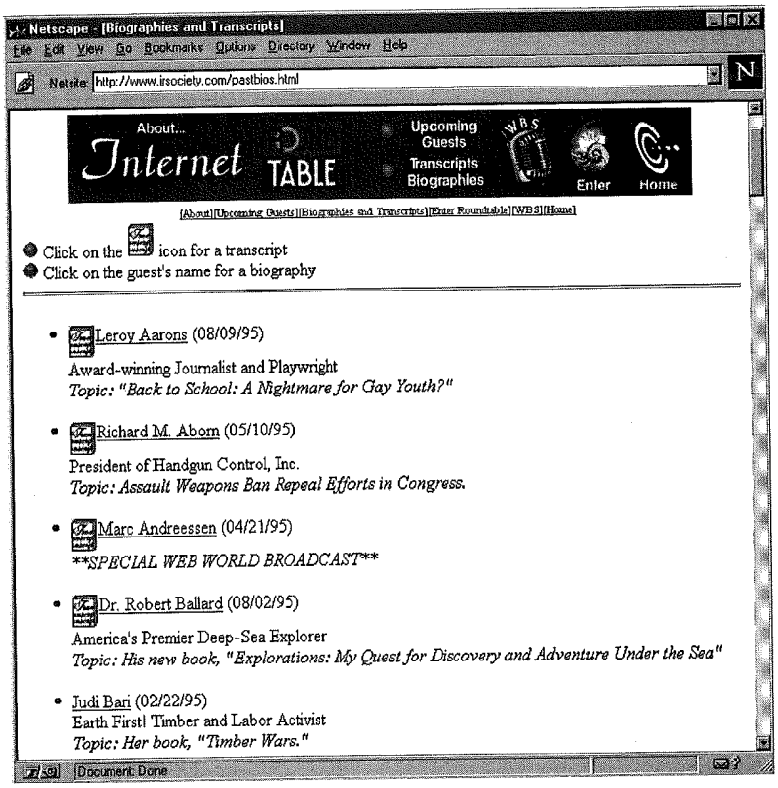
Figure 7.4 The Internet Roundtable Society conducted the interviews archived on this page using IRC in the years when the Web was just taking form. The IRS created one of the first Web chat interfaces—WebChat.



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approach to user services, WBS will also be described in Chapter 10, where I include it as one of the expanding selection of Web worlds.

Chat remains the center and main attraction of WBS culture. WebChat allows access to private chat rooms and permits users to initiate private one-to-ones with each other. It includes an *ignore* feature and the ability for users to upload graphics into their responses. The included graphics often slow down the loading of chat windows, which I find impairs the immediacy of the experience, especially since many of the graphics do little to enhance the identity of the users.

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Buying Privileges with Points

Users can choose from three modes of chat that work for different browser versions: no-frames, frames, and *streaming*, which uses JavaScript. The first two require the screen to be refreshed to see the most recent incoming chat responses. The streaming interface feeds new responses directly into a scrolling window the way chat is *supposed* to work. Regularly, in all three modes, a banner-style advertisement scrolls by, nested amidst the responses. (WBS is the only chat provider I've found that presents advertising this way.) Another feature is the Shoutbox through which users can send announcements to a chat room (see Figure 7.5). Employing the Shoutbox uses up some of the WBS member's original allotment of 300 points. We'll describe more of the WBS point system in Chapter 11, but it provides members with access to certain premium features that cost points to use. Once the initial allotment is used up, members must pay to purchase additional points from WBS.

Because you must be a WBS member to use WebChat, it's not a platform you can use on or from other sites. And because the company only has to develop its platform for a community that it defines, WBS can incorporate tools in its interface that work seamlessly with the rest of the tools accessible by registered members. Again, this follows the AOL scheme of providing tools custom fitted to a member-based environment located entirely on one set of servers. In terms of our community taxonomy, WBS is a flexible environment in which structure and tools are provided to help users find and create the shops, cafés, and families of their choice. If you have an idea for a community, don't have the money or facilities to build it from scratch, and there isn't one like it already established on WBS, you could find a home there.

ichat: Commercial Clients and Servers

In 1995, as the Web was building momentum and ramping up its commercial activity, ichat was founded to provide an easy-to-use interface for chatting on the Web. More than that, they set out to become the most widely used interface—to become as close to a chat standard of look, feel, and operation on the Web as they could get. ichat started out distributing free chat clients to users who could connect to each other through either the central ichat server or through IRC channels. Now they also provide software for running your own servers. They continue to distribute clients for free, but users don't have to run

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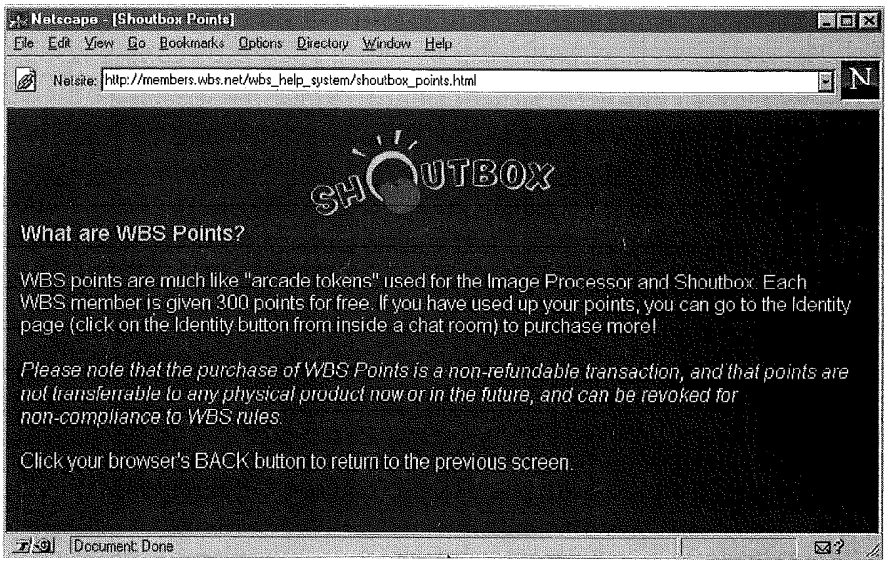
Figure 7.5 Participants in WebChat on WBS can make use of the Shoutbox to broadcast messages to the chat room in the margin. Using the Shoutbox costs points. This page explains how the WBS points are used and renewed.



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the client now to use ichat-powered systems. They've diversified their product so that few users of the Web have a technical excuse for not being able to join an ichat session.

All You Need to Build a Standalone Community

Today ichat (which just changed its corporate identity to Acuity Corporation) offers a commercial server called Rooms that site providers can either install themselves or run on a collocated host computer provided by ichat partner Signet. Running your own server gives you control over the design of your pages, the privileges granted to users in your chats, and the ability to set up a closed membership community like that of WBS. From the server side, you can set size limits for chat rooms and create a list of taboo words that will not appear in your chat windows. The ichat Rooms server also includes asynchronous message boards and paging, giving your community an integrated suite

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of communications tools. The interface solutions include a plug-in, an ActiveX application, a Java client, and an HTML-only interface. The download of the application takes place automatically when users of the latest Netscape and MSIE browsers first join a chat using ichat. The ichat server can tailor itself to the needs of the user by detecting whether or not the user has already installed one of its plug-ins. Where a plug-in is detected, its server knows how to connect the user.

The ichat interface allows its users to integrate Web pages into the chat experience and to move from URL to URL as chatting groups. Figure 7.6 shows the ichat chat windows bordering a page from my Web site. Note the correspondingly smaller chat windows (compared to that of WebChat, for example) and the list of commands. Knowing who's online—logged in to the same chat server as you at the same time—is important for any chat-based community. Users of ichat can select graphic avatars from a stock collection to accompany their responses. They can create their own, too, but these may be subject to the administrator's approval. Private rooms can be set up by users for inviting any number of participants. And as you see in the left margin of the screen, ichat has auditorium capabilities.

Three Kinds of Chat Rooms

The Rooms server allows for what ichat calls Normal Rooms, Stage Rooms, and Auditorium Rooms. This allows a lot of flexibility in programming of events, community support, and specific applications of the group meeting capabilities.

Normal Rooms function like standard chat rooms in which users can interact with each other through the main chat window. These are usually the most popular and abundant in any community and can be created as persistent venues for specific populations to meet and hang out.

Stage Rooms serve the needs of more structured discussion topics and events where moderated interaction is required. The stage metaphor applies because the actual event is conducted in a separate communications environment from the one occupied by audience. On the stage, where access is limited to a prearranged list of users, are the speakers, moderators, and screeners of incoming comments from the audience. Stages are joined to Auditoriums where the audiences are located.

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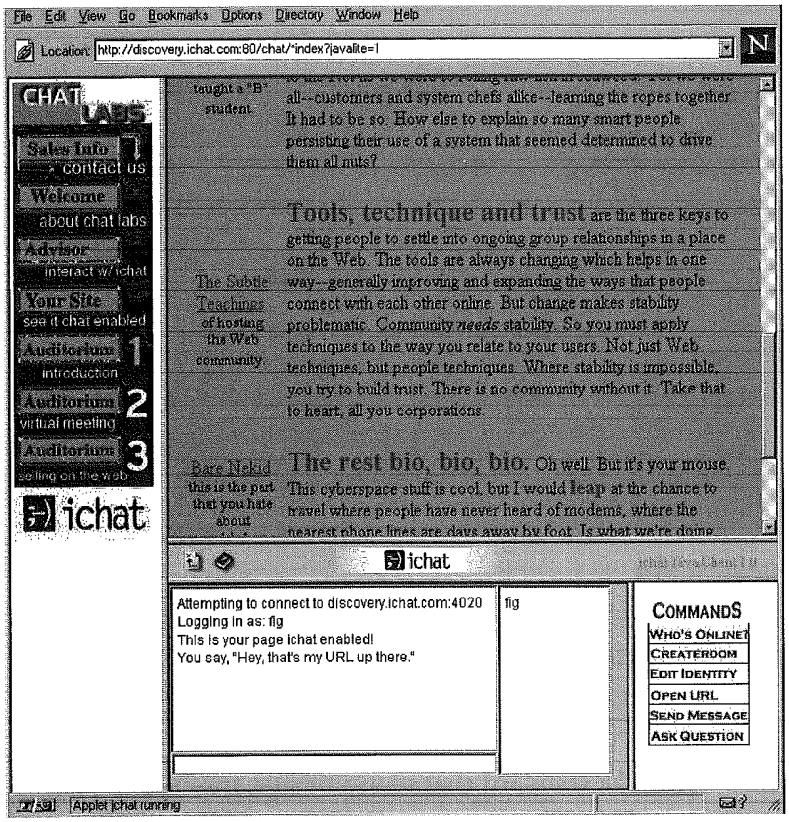
Figure 7.6 Bringing the ability to browse the Web into a chat room adds the presence of external and changeable content while providing aspects of visual entertainment to spice up the conversation, or a compatible backdrop to add atmosphere.



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In the *Auditorium*, the audience of the event being presented in the Stage Room has the ability to send questions to the stage through a special window as shown in Figure 7.7. The screener or moderator selects from these questions or comments and, with the speakers, addresses them or sends answers to them back to the audience.

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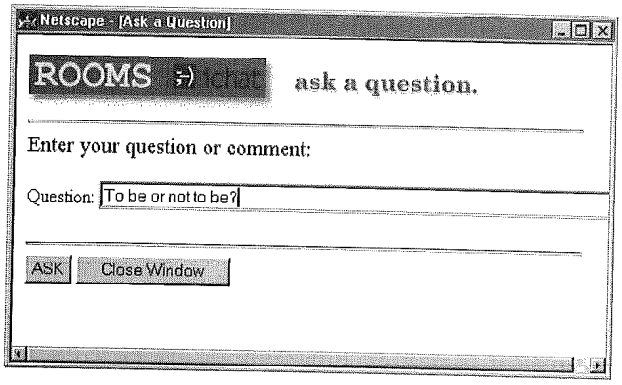
Figure 7.7 Audience members in an Ichat Auditorium send questions to the stage through a popup window like this. Meanwhile, they can chat with other members of their rows using a more conventional response window.



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Just Plug In the Ads

The ichat interface design defines three frames, one of which is designated for advertisements. Of course you don't have to put commercial information there if it's not appropriate for your purposes. You can use it for announcements to the community or to display helpful information. But if advertising is one of your money-makers, it's nice to have the facilities built in to the platform.

The content of the ads, which rooms they appear in, and how they are to rotate are all programmed through what ichat calls its Design Center. By simply assembling a list of files and using the facilities of the Design Center, you can put together a program of advertisements and announcements within your Rooms community with minimum technical confusion.

Talk City: A Quality Chat Aggregator

Talk City calls itself "the Internet's #1 community site, based on civilized chat and innovative chat-based programming," and along with WBS is one of the two main chat hubs on the Web. The "civilized" aspect of their service is the

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direct result of the high-standards hosting that they provide for chats throughout their site. They are the only chat service to put such an emphasis on the quality of the discussion that goes on under their name. And if you've spent much time in unhosted chat rooms around the Web, you've probably experienced just how low the quality can sink.

Talk City provides a proprietary chat interface and, like WBS, it offers alternative versions of its chat interface to fit various browser and connection configurations. In Figure 6.1 we showed its EZ Talk *Lite* mode. Figure 7.8 shows the EZ Talk *Pro* mode with its additional feature buttons along the top and lower left of the chat window. With its greater feature set, the *Pro* interface has a considerably longer loading time, so the folks at Talk City have included some entertainment for you as you wait for the chat window to appear. Along the bottom of the blank applet window, whimsical pseudo-technical messages continually replace each other as the program downloads: tidbits like "Enforcing tactile units...uplinking entropy stacks...charging piston-beams... ." The *Pro* version also tells you whenever a participant has joined or left the room. For reinforcing the illusion of a room occupied by people, that's a nice touch.

Comprehensive Chat Directory Services

There's more to Talk City than just access to a chat platform. They group their chats according to subject *channels* (not to be confused with IRC channels) and produce a guide to real-time programming all over the Web *and* America Online. And for those groups and meetings that require asynchronous conversation, they provide a Discussion Boards area. The Infoseek search engine is directly accessible from their pages to keep you on the site as you search. They have even developed a chat-adapted style of advertising called *Click 'n Stick* that I'll say more about in Chapter 11.

Talk City's greatest strength may be in the variety of hosted rooms that it offers. In that respect it's like WBS, and it has recently begun to offer other community amenities provided by WBS such as homepages and members' newsletters. But more than WBS, Talk City is like an open, nonmembership-based chat center for the Web where people can come to use a nicely designed interface to chat about any subject in an "atmosphere of etiquette and respect" as they say in their welcome message. The presence of conscientious hosting is what truly sets Talk City apart on the Web as a place for conducting chat.

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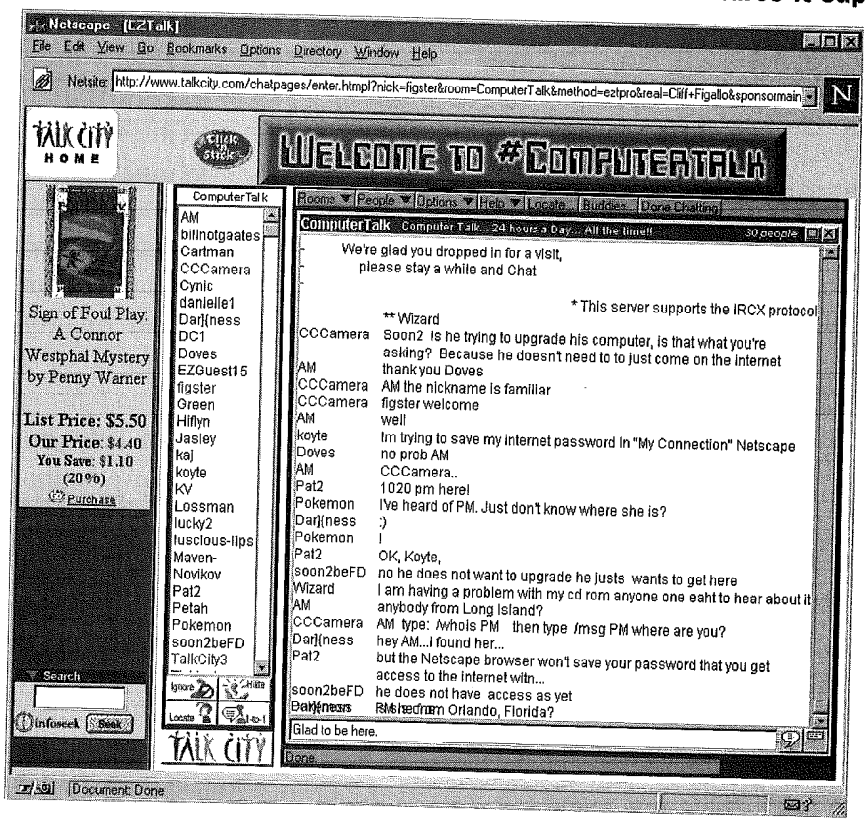
Figure 7.8 Talk City offers two different Java-enabled chat interfaces. This is EZ Talk Pro, the more powerful tool but one that works best through faster Net connections because of all the features it supports.



Talk City is a property of LiveWorld Productions, Inc.

Full Chat Services for Rent

Talk City doesn't limit its chat rooms and scheduled chat programs to self-produced content. They also host chats for other sites and communities. Omni Magazine's chats are hosted there as are NetNoir's, CBS SportsLine, and IDG Publishing. The chats are accessible from both the home sites and Talk City, thus increasing their exposure to traffic. They not only get the people coming for their content (theater-goers) but people coming to Talk City specifically because they want to chat (café-seekers). Through such an arrangement, their

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partner sites are spared having to develop their own hosts and host management staffs because the professionals at Talk City cover those duties. Talk City's founders brought many experienced hosts with them from the now-defunct eWorld system at Apple. Advertising, too, is taken care of by Talk City while the *tenants* benefit from the good will of visitors to their home sites because they've provided a well-managed community meeting place.

The downside of having a separate service, even one like Talk City, host and manage your chat rooms is that they are not as seamlessly incorporated into the rest of your Web sites as home-built rooms would be. But once you get to the actual chat room from NetNoir (www.netnoir.com), for example, its brand identification wraps around the chat window and it looks more like the NetNoir site than just another Talk City chat room.

Virtual Places: Chat Rooms That Roam the Web

An Israeli company called Ubique developed a chat client that not only provides the standard interface tools for conducting real time group conversation, but also allows its users to move about on the Web while chatting. The company was bought by America Online in 1995 and bought itself back from them in 1997. It was just acquired by Lotus, a division of IBM. The platform is currently used by both Excite and ZDnet as their community chat platforms.

Like ichat, Virtual Places (VP) can be used in client-based, plug-in—enabled, and Java versions. It was VP who pioneered the interface design—now also used by ichat—that allows chats rooms to be defined by URL locations, thus giving the illusion that chats can travel through the Web. As with ichat, the chat text window sits below a Web page window, but unlike ichat, VP permits its users to display small thumbnail graphic avatars of themselves that can be moved about on the Web page. Cartoon balloons pop up next to avatars when the users post responses, and users can lead tours from URL to URL, basically moving the chat activity around on the Web. It's a brilliant concept that truly lends a sense of place to the entire Web.

Great Features That Gobble RAM and Bandwidth

Unfortunately, at this stage in mainstream technology and Net access, incorporating graphics and the ability to connect to both the chat server and separate URLs into any Web presentation has a real cost in terms of loading time and

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performance. You can't get around the fact that the features and graphics in VP use a lot of bandwidth as they transfer from the server to the user's PC. The VP interface is slow to respond when a room full of avatars is being loaded to the screen. If the community using VP is blessed with plenty of computer power and fast Net connections, the graphic enhancements and Web page integration add a dimension of fun to the interaction that makes it a very different experience from regular chat rooms where scrolling text is the only thing to watch.

Perhaps VP in its full-blown implementation is a glimpse into a not-too-distant future when avatars will roam the Web in full chat mode, using pages from anywhere as excuses to chat with a mobile group of buddies. Until there are more communities of users with the technical capabilities that allow them to share the best features of VP, the majority will go on without them in what is today considered normal chat. VP can be used through its Java mode as a normal chat room. It's not as much fun or pleasing to look at, but it works as well in that mode as any other basic chat interface.

The Palace: Custom Cartoon Environments

A very different approach to chat is taken by The Palace (www.thepalace.com) which uses detailed graphics, animated avatars, and sound to create unique environments around each of its installations. On first look, you might think this to be an interface designed strictly for fun and recreation rather than one with the potential for use in conducting business, but Egghead Software—which has taken its business out of brick and mortar stores and into virtual storefronts—uses the Palace as the way that customers shop and ask questions of virtual store clerks. FORE Systems uses it internally for keeping its sales-people up to date with the technology they sell. And Talk City has its own Palace locale to add variety to its mostly text-based environment.

The Palace is what I had in mind earlier in the chapter when I mentioned confederations. Any user who has the Palace client installed can visit any site where the Palace server is running, provided they don't have restrictive access requirements. Palace servers require that the site provider design rooms with graphic backgrounds—not actual Web pages—that incorporate links to other rooms in them. Clicking on a door, for example, might take the user into another room or environment. Thus each Palace site is a virtual world unto itself, but one in which any Palace client can function with the same tools and conventions.

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Palace users must install a client which, in its basic form, is free. A more powerful client that allows the user to create a custom graphic avatar must be purchased (currently listed at $39.95). Most Palace sites have the look and feel of CD-ROM-based role-playing and adventure games except that most of their inhabitants are being operated by live people (see Figure 7.9). Palace sites don't fit seamlessly into a Web site. They are a separate experience entirely, but they do serve well for communities that like to play and innovate. A lot of accumulated thought and user suggestions have been incorporated into the design of both the client and server, and Palace servers are reasonably easy to install and configure.

ICQ: Building Ephemeral Chat Rooms

Getting a brief mention in Chapter 6 as one of the Web-wide pagers, ICQ has lately become a new means for drawing groups of friends together on the Web without anyone having to go to a particular URL. Since ICQ and other buddy lists or paging programs all connect with central servers just as chat clients do, they enable real time connections between their users as long as they have a live connection to the Internet. ICQ permits multiple users to converse without even opening their browsers. They just have to be online simultaneously and know each others' ICQ user names. What began as a person-to-person messaging tool has expanded to become a free-floating collection of chat communities and interest groups.

Of course, this doesn't answer your question, as a Web host, of how you're going to get people to visit your site. In fact, the use of ICQ—a freely distributed piece of software—circumvents all revenue-making possibilities except for those of its home site host and creator, Mirabilis, which doesn't make any money from it yet, either. But it has built a huge userbase that can be depended on to use its tool regularly. Currently, ICQ is out there as another example of the Internet's gift economy and another reinforcement of the Internet tradition of free and unfettered services.

Chatting in Virtual Environments

Of course all environments online are virtual, but the ones I refer to here are those that intentionally provide graphical backgrounds or three-dimensional-looking surroundings that the user's avatar moves through as part of the experience. I

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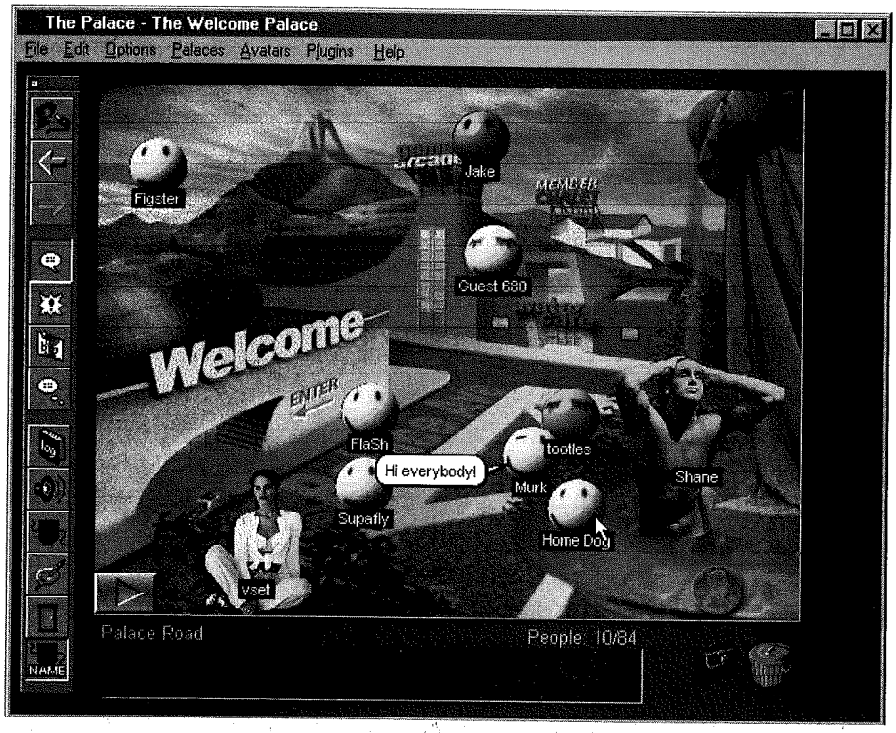
Figure 7.9 The Palace operates in its own environments, which are not Web pages. This is the Welcome Palace, where new users using the free client and its smiley-face avatars get the hang of the platform. The human-looking avatars belong to users who have purchased the full-featured client.



mention them here because for most of them, communication between avatars takes place in real time using keyboards and text. The Palace qualifies as one of these, but compared to the more advanced of these platforms, it is a two-dimensional toy. Of course it doesn't require quite the bandwidth that three-dimensional worlds do, and thus fits into the *widely usable* chat category. I'll address virtual environments in greater detail in Chapter 10 on Web worlds, the self-contained environments that provide all the amenities that an online community seeker needs.

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Summary

If your idea of community includes a place where your members can converse in real time, you have several alternative approaches to choose from for providing an interface where that can happen. You can:

- Hire the programmers to build the chat interface from scratch on your site.
- Make use of channels on an Internet Relay Chat server network and point your users to a freeware client.
- Host chat rooms on a chat hub site where there's room for your particular focus community.
- Install a commercial chat server on your site or run it on a collocated server elsewhere.
- Have your chat activities hosted in a partnering arrangement on a chat hub site.

Choosing between these is a matter of evaluating your community's needs and personality and your company's capabilities—financial, technical, and manpower. The cheapest alternatives—IRC channels and free client software or hosting chats on a site that provides the server and interface—don't allow much room for expansion and, in the case of IRC, limit the audience to those who understand its peculiar commands. The most powerful alternative—licensing and configuring your own server and distributing client software to your users—gives you plenty of control over every aspect of the community, but requires a lot of traffic to justify its great initial expense. Partnering with a chat hub service that specializes in hosting interaction and maintaining the interface is a possibility if you can deliver sufficient traffic to the hub service through your own content site.

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COMMUNITY FORUM ENVIRONMENTS

8

The population of conversational Netizens has historically been divided neatly between the real-time chatters and the asynchronous crowd who interacted outside of real time. There are signs now that what has long been a strict division of loyalties and preferences is becoming less rigid as more people on either side of the synchronicity fence are attracted to events and communities on the side they had hitherto avoided. It would be a mistake, though, to say that there is a monolithic approach to conversation on the nonchat side. In the world of asynchronous discussion there are many very different modes of interaction, sometimes determined by the interface design, sometimes by the hosting, and often simply demonstrating the varying moods of a group in which one conversation can differ from another like night from day.

You find even more variation in the designs of asynchronous discussion platforms than you do in those that support chat because asynch systems require more components. They require facilities for storing, organizing, displaying, and keeping track of the written conversations that make up their content. Every platform has its own method of naming the pieces and layers of its discussion database and putting them together for the user. They all have strengths and weaknesses, but comparisons must be made in the context of the specific application for which the platform is being evaluated. While Platform X may be a lousy choice for Community A, it may be the perfect one for Community B.

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Using this chapter, you should concentrate on identifying your evaluation criteria and recognizing relevant platform features rather than allow yourself to get sold on any one product. Though the products I'm describing are among the best designs and most-used platforms on the Web today, I use them here as examples only, for they will surely be changing and the selection will be growing continually from the time that I write this. In order to compare them at all in their current configurations, I'm going to focus on some basic design elements and declare a working terminology. In Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," I introduced the two families of forum conversation structures—linear and threaded, but in doing so I only touched on the most basic of differentiators between the many products that now populate this field.

Comparing Forum Platforms

The ever-increasing competition for design of the best forum platform is bringing a lot of change and innovation into the marketplace. This is a great thing because needs are being addressed that never were before. There can really be no one *best* platform for there are many different discussion situations requiring very different designs. The ultimate aim of most platform design companies is to meet the specific needs of markets that will pay them good money to use their products. Some of them intend to sell many low-cost systems and some aim to sell fewer systems but at much higher prices. There are choices available now for Web site builders with lots of money to spend and millions of important customers to support, and there are powerful choices also for the Web hobbyist who just needs a place for an organization, interest group, or club to carry on discussions. Forums, message boards, conferencing systems, bulletin boards, and discussion areas—they're known by many names—exist today all over the Web, where as recently as early in 1997 they were a rarity. Vendors have responded to the market for new and better tools, but the proliferation of new platforms makes shopping for the best one for your particular situation a more complicated undertaking.

Labeling the Conversational Hierarchy

One of the complicating factors in comparing forum platforms is the confusion caused by lack of a standard terminology for the component parts of the

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discussion structure. The users' contributions to an asynchronous system remain on the site for others to read and answer, so forums must have a way to organize the resulting interactions: to name them, separate them, and determine a basis for distinguishing one conversation from another. Because there are so many different names used to describe the elements under different platform designs, I'm winnowing them down to the following, which will be used throughout this chapter:

Response or Posting. A comment written by a participant in an online conversation. These terms are pretty standard, though some products call them *messages*. In threaded systems, a direct response to another response is called a *reply*. This is the basic unit of user-created content in the forum.

Topic or Conversation. A series of Responses started with a title and introductory statement called the *topic header*. On most threaded systems, the term *article* defines the topic header and *threads* branch from the topic. See *threads* at the end of this list.

Conference or Folder. A collection of topics, usually relevant to a general interest or subject. Sometimes an entire community is defined by such a collection.

Forum. The area on a Web site where a collection of conferences is located. A forum may support one community or many.

Thread. Like a topic in that it is a series of responses, but rather than begin from the topic header or article, it begins as a direct reply to a response within the topic. A thread splits off from the original topic like a branch from a tree trunk.

The Depiction of the Conversation

I'll say more about linear and threaded models and how they look to the user soon, but there are other differences between platforms that are just as visible and important to the user. It's important to the new user to understand what constitutes a conversation in a community. In fact, all the questions a new user is likely to ask have to do with the basic depiction of conversation on your site.

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What does a conversation look like? Where does a given conversation fit within the greater collection of conversations? How do you get from one conversation to another? How are the people participating in the conversation introduced to the community? How can you keep track of what you've seen so you don't have to see it again? How do you find a posting or a discussion subject you've already seen if you've forgotten where you saw it? Depending on the platform, you may find any of the following features addressing these questions:

- Conversation that appears to the reader as a scrolling sequence of responses
- Conversation that pops up on the reader's screen one response at a time
- Graphical navigation trees showing the overall hierarchy of the forum's conferences, topics, and responses
- The navigation tree displayed in one frame while the selected conversation scrolls by in another
- Easy-to-get-to user profiles
- Information accompanying each response detailing the user who posted it, when it was posted, the name of the topic, and its order in the conversation
- Bookmark buttons for marking specific responses or topics for later reference by the reader
- Keyword searching tools for the conversational database
- Options for posting a response in a topic with the response also going to the respondee via email
- User preference options for making selected content and users disappear from view

The form in which one views a conversation directly affects one's participation and the resulting interaction. Some platforms make it easy for participants to use the accumulated conversations as a searchable database of content. Some make it simple to ask technical questions and know just where to find the answer. Some foster the growth of dense jungles of lengthy conversations, and some work

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well as places to leave solitary messages for public viewing. The differences lie in basic architecture as well as in feature attributes. Platform designers usually develop their basic structures to serve an initial client or to solve problems and shortcomings they've encountered while using other platforms. Thus, each platform begins with certain assumptions about users' needs, but immediately begins to evolve as other groups approach the designers with additional needs.

Choices Based on Cost and Room for Expansion

If you don't have much (or any) money to spend and you don't have plans to grow beyond a few dozen participants, you will be shopping for a very different product from the one being sought by a company that can't afford to provide less than the most reliable and fully supported industrial-strength platform for hundreds of thousands of users. Fortunately, though, there are inexpensive products available today that scale quite nicely so that you can begin with a relatively cheap installation and grow, using the same platform, by upgrading incrementally as your traffic and revenues allow.

The number of people who can comfortably take part in conversation on a platform depends on many factors, the basic design of its interface being only one of them. But the style of conversation preferred and required by the community must be considered carefully when choosing a platform that you anticipate will eventually have to support many people. The character of the community will change as it grows, and its needs will also. Your platform will need to have the flexibility to adapt built in to it. I'll address those considerations throughout the chapter.

The Effect of Forum Structure on Group Interaction

I refer to asynchronous discussion areas as *forums* to distinguish them from *chats* because the term carries with it an image of a place where people can go at any time to find conversation in which they can participate. Admittedly it's a fairly arbitrary distinction since there are many chat rooms that stay open for participation around the clock. But in chat rooms, if you want to converse with a specific group of people, you must all be online simultaneously. In

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forums, you can follow varied schedules and still take part, leaving responses for each other when you have the time, or when you're particularly inspired.

There is a qualitatively different tone to forum topics than there is to chat conversations because in forums there's no time pressure to read and then post responses while they're still relevant to what's temporarily on the screen. Forum conversations generally put more emphasis on developing ideas, telling stories, explaining concepts, and following themes over time. Rather than support conversations that must begin and end within a limited time frame, asynchronous conversations may extend for days, months, or even years. A chat room may follow the same theme for a long time, but it's impossible to continue the same conversation for that long, and to develop ideas as deeply on a constantly scrolling window as you can where each response in the conversation can be thought about and composed carefully by its writer.

Also, in the forum environment members have the opportunity to interact with each other in a variety of different conference venues. During a typical session, a member might encounter the same people in a conversation about child-raising, in one about problems on the job, in one about favorite music, and in one about buying a new car. The result, for the forum member, can be a more well-rounded view of the people who post in the community. And in forums, newcomers can read postings and whole conversations that took place in the past, getting historical perspective on the members of the community and what they've experienced together.

But it's a mistake to lump all asynchronous platforms together just because they don't demand that their users be logged in at the same time. The styles of interaction they support may be as different as those between some forums and some chats. Even among the small selection that I describe in this chapter, there are features that make for dramatically different styles and tones in the communities that use them. But the very basic structural differences between linear and threaded systems should be considered first as you begin sorting through the features you'll require to support your community's discussions.

Linear and Threaded Conversation

In comparing chat to asynchronous discussion, I don't mean to say that every forum conversation is a model of orderliness and focus, for *topic drift* is a definite

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reality in the asynchronous world. Unless the host or moderator of the conversation exerts strict control over what can be added to the series of postings, the natural tendency of humans is to do a bit of free association around the words and ideas they encounter, and to move the original topic in different directions, regardless of the intended goal of the person who initiated it. Topic drift can be a major frustration in some situations and a brainstorming asset in others, and the platform being used makes a big difference in how the branching off of new ideas is handled.

Topic Integrity and Ease of Participation

It's especially difficult to stay on topic in many threaded systems whose structure seems to encourage the fragmentation of discussion. When users can comment specifically on points made in individual responses, they will do so regardless of the topic's title. Threaded discussion structures are built to enable that, in fact. The philosophy behind the threaded format is that since any idea will spawn new ideas, each new idea deserves to have its own independent existence, attached to but separate from the original one. If topic drift is inevitable, say the proponents of threading, why not make it more orderly?

It's difficult to project how one idea, starting out at the same time in both a threaded and linear system, will produce different results, but I can describe how such a test is likely to turn out. In the threaded system, you would have a collection of short conversations branching from a main series of responses. In the linear system, you would have a much longer main series of responses and a couple of new and independent topics inspired by the original. Which is better? It depends a lot on the topic and on the preferences of the population.

Since most people on the Web are still not experts in any particular group discussion interface, you will find different types of confusion showing up among new users in linear and threaded environments. Linear systems are usually more difficult for new arrivals to penetrate. Because each topic only has one place to respond—at the very end of the series of postings—new users have to look harder and read more carefully to find the places in the ongoing discussions where they can leave their comments and to find the ideas within each discussion to which they can respond. I call these *conversation hooks*. Threaded systems provide more places to comment—more hooks—since every individual

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response can be considered the beginning of a thread. But new and inattentive users are more likely to create new threads or to follow duplicate threads that branch unnecessarily from the main trunk of the conversation. Thus you often find, in a threaded topic, two almost identical conversations running in parallel or perpendicular to each other. It's almost as difficult to describe here as it is to figure out when you're reading it.

So, in these two related conversational structures, you've got different assets for experienced users and different sources of confusion for inexperienced ones. Wisely applying the assets and wisely avoiding the liabilities is the key to deciding which structure is most appropriate for your community.

Who and What Linear Structures Are Best For

Linear systems are better for groups that are likely to form lasting interactive communities, and that like to follow the serendipitous rambling of long, unbroken conversations. The conversation itself is considered a social adventure for these groups, and if a brand-new conversation is just begging to have its own thread, a brand-new topic can easily be created and pointed to from its parent topic.

Topic integrity is not guaranteed by choosing a linear interface. It's the humans who drift from the original topic after all, not the technology. Good hosting, focused communities, and judicious use of the platform's organizing features are the surest solutions to the problem of chronic topic drift. But linear systems do allow users just joining the conversation to follow one topic from beginning to end without having to navigate from trunk to branch, back to trunk, out to the next branch, then to a subbranch, back to trunk, and so on. It's harder to get lost in the middle of a linear conversation. You might find the rambling uninteresting or maddening, but you'll know what topic you're in.

Communities that have become successful using linear conversation platforms usually have strong cores of people who enjoy reading and writing. Most of these platforms display conversations in a scrolling format, so they can be read almost like reading the script of a play. The act of reading them in this manner is also an attraction to the same kind of population. Even if the content of the topic meanders, its structure has integrity. And because their hierarchical layers of conferences and topics are difficult to penetrate for the new

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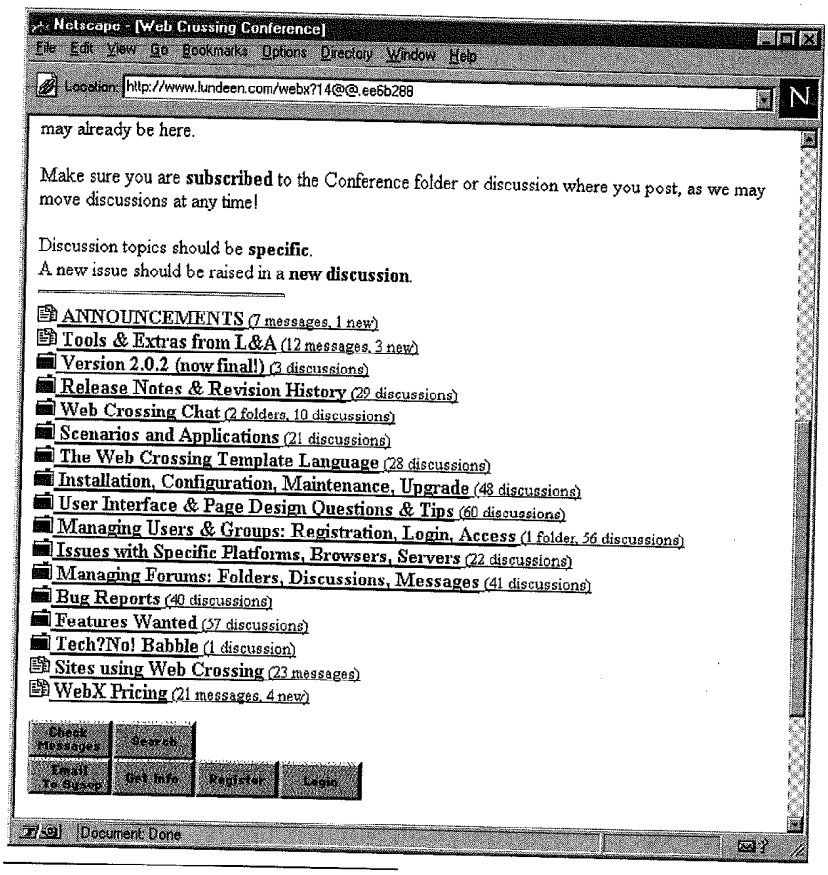
user, their populations usually have stable cores of users who worked to get past the initial difficulty and established routines for using the platform efficiently.

You can see what the new user is confronted with in a typical linear system's entry screen as shown in Figure 8.1. The entry to the Web Crossing Forum (www.webcrossing.com) on the home site of Lundeen and Associates, its

Figure 8.1 The Web Crossing Conference on its own home site. You don't see individual responses here, only the titles of its folders which, in turn, contain linear discussions made up of messages. To find content to respond to, you have to click deeper.



© *Lundeen & Associates.*

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designer, displays a list of folders within which are groupings of linear format discussion topics. Until you've entered all of them and explored, you can't know all of what you'll find on the site. Threaded systems are usually more revealing of their content, not so much because of design as because of how and where their topics are placed and displayed on Web sites. As I'll describe later in the chapter, Web Crossing can also be configured to present its discussions in a threaded format.

Who and What Threaded Structures Are Best For

If you want to encourage visitors to post opinions and react to each other, but don't expect them to spend a lot of time on your site participating in lengthy conversations, then threaded systems may be your most effective choice. Their interfaces bring users most quickly to a convenient place where they can participate. Each thread may be only two or three responses long. New threads are easy to start, and the fact that each response is identified by its own subject line makes it simple for people just dropping by for a look to identify what they want to read and comment on. Threaded systems present more hooks for audience participation.

Figure 8.2 shows a collection of threaded responses on the ForumOne site (www.forumone.com) that were made using the HyperNews interface, one of the original discussion interfaces for the Web. A new user, just dropping in to the forum, can read all of the responses in the order in which they were contributed, or he can choose individual responses to read by themselves. The user can respond directly either to the topic or to a response. By the indented outline form, you can recognize the main topic threads and the subthreads that follow specific responses. I'll say more about HyperNews specifically later in the chapter.

Though the outline structure of the threaded system makes it clear where specific conversations begin and lead, it doesn't take much imagination to see how a larger and more active discussion community could create an overwhelming mass of outlined branches and trunks. Most threaded interfaces allow the user to collapse the structure so that only top-level or second-level subjects are visible, but the new user must deal with the volume of content one way or another, so whether collapsed or not, you have to ask whether keeping a large collection of topics available is the best use of such a platform.

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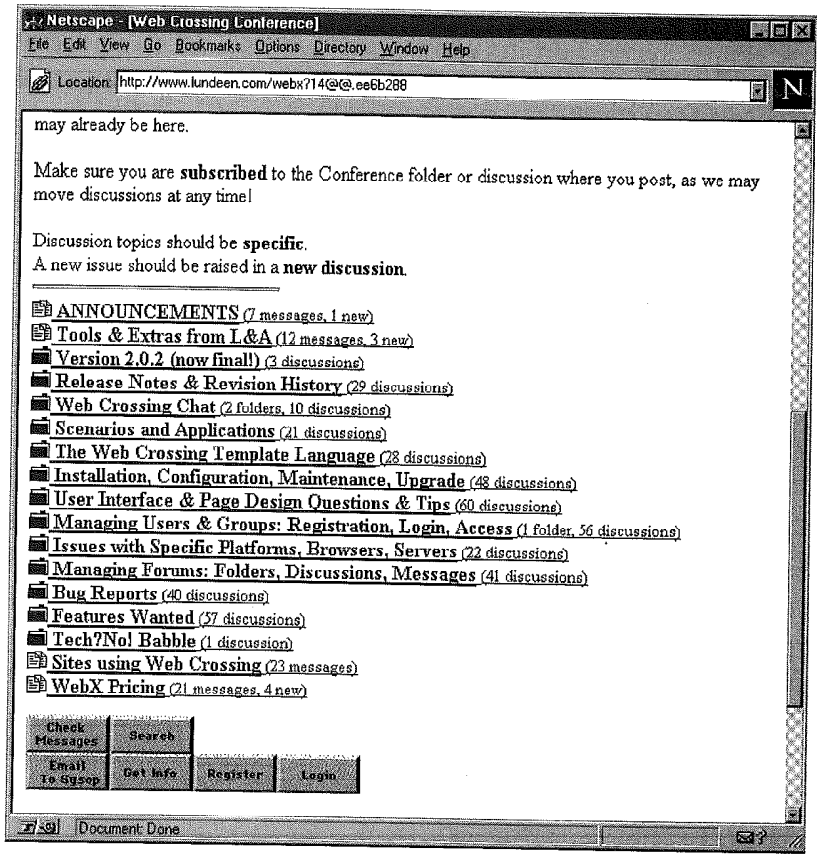
Figure 8.2 On the ForumOne site, you see several discussion threads and subthreads as displayed on the HyperNews interface. Since every response is displayed and titled, it's easy for someone new to drop in and recognize a place in which to participate and reply.



The most successful applications I've seen of threaded systems have been in short-term discussion events, as in the ForumOne discussions in Figure 8.2, and in customer support applications where the object is not to carry on long continuous conversations but to post specific suggestions and opinions and to ask questions.

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Adaptation: The New Hybrids and Community Hosting Sites

Now that I've used HyperNews and Web Crossing as examples of threaded and linear interfaces, respectively, I'm going to confuse things a bit by revealing that neither of these is a pure example of the category I've associated them with. HyperNews allows users to view responses in a more linear mode, and Web Crossing provides an option for allowing users to use its interface as a threaded conversation system. In fact, there are fewer pure examples of any platform format these days. As more users gain experience with the many varieties of chat and forums, they are finding features that they like on one system and are asking to have them incorporated into others. Platform designers are taking note.

What have been, until recently, almost religious preferences for interface configurations are beginning to hybridize into systems that bring the user a bit of everything. Web Crossing now includes an integrated chat platform that runs from a Java applet, and ichat's Rooms server now includes a message board component. Classifying these platforms is no longer a black-and-white issue. The grays and checkerboards are taking over.

Nevertheless, I will continue in this chapter to describe platforms in terms of what they were designed to do best, beginning with the most basic messaging systems and moving through the most elaborate conferencing systems. I'll try to describe them in ways that make it clear which types of communities would be best served by their features, costs, and technical requirements. The complexity of installing these systems varies. Some plug in fairly easily to a Web site while others require a lot of customization. Some have well-designed, form-driven configuration tools for the site manager and others require concentrated and continued involvement by your system administrator or Community Manager.

You may decide (or you may have already decided) to locate your community within an existing Web site or service that provides a forum platform. You may not be able to afford to provide your own forum-based system with all the hardware, connectivity, and design work that it entails. If that's the case, you may have few options for customizing what you're using, and no options at all for replacing it with something you think would be more appropriate to your needs. I'll be describing two of these custom forum sites

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later in this chapter. My advice, should you choose to go that route, is to choose your forum provider carefully, adapt your community activities to what is provided in the way of an interface, and be thankful that it's a relatively inexpensive solution. You can make almost any platform serve the majority of your needs, as long as your community is also willing to adapt. It may not be the perfect tool for you, but with good hosting and use of other community support tools such as email lists, you can make the best of a less-than-ideal discussion interface. Chapter 10, "Web Worlds," is devoted to the self-contained Web worlds, where not only are chat and forum facilities made available to community builders, but where entire modest-sized Web sites can be built and maintained at minimum cost.

Features to Look For

There's little need to get a bare-bones system for supporting your forum these days. Even the freeware has many convenience features. But for the convenience and security of the system's management and users alike, there are some capabilities that you should seek out as you shop for a place or a platform to host your community's asynchronous discussion. I list and explain the features most relevant to the forum administrator or Community Manager in Table 8.1. You may not need a platform with all of these, but you can see how they all would be useful, depending, of course, on the situation and the community.

There are other features that influence users in deciding whether or not to become regular users of the interface. They provide users with conveniences, helping them to find their way around the forum area and to customize their *itineraries* for more efficient use of the system. They help the user keep track of his participation and of the activity in the community as a whole. They combine to give the user a greater sense of being part of a living social entity. Table 8.2 lists some of these features and how they affect the user experience.

Qualities of System and Interface Design to Look For

Less simple to name and describe than the features listed in the preceding tables are the inherent design elements that make forum interfaces pleasant and convenient to use for both the participant and the system provider.

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Table 8.1 Features of Asynchronous Discussion Platforms That Allow the Administrator to Configure the Interface to Fit the Community's Needs

Platform Feature	What the Feature Does
Online registration system	Built in to the platform, it allows you to restrict access to the forum to people who register as users. Valuable for upholding standards of behavior and for knowing more about your user population. Registration options can include manual check and approval by administrator, email verification, and automatic approval where security is not an issue.
Guest access	Permits visitors to enter a forum without going through registration. Should allow administrator to control whether guests can contribute postings or just see contents of discussion. Good for giving visitors a risk-free impression of the forum.
Convenient administration	Allows nontechnical Community Managers to setup tools control configuration variables of the forum environment. Good for putting control in the hands of the people who best understand the needs of the users and the community as a whole.
Forum host permissions	Simple means for assigning limited control powers to users who host areas within the forum environment. These powers may permit them to create new discussions, remove unwanted discussions, remove postings, and edit titles and headers within their area. Distributing control helps expand the community.
Delete registered user accounts	If the platform allows users to register, it should also allow the manager to remove access permissions from users. Good for upholding standards and for cleaning out accounts that aren't being used.

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Table 8.1 *(Continued)*

Platform Feature	What the Feature Does
Delete and edit postings	These powers should be owned both by the system manager on a system-wide level and by the individual user for his contributions alone. Not all postings are worth keeping around and some require editing after the fact.
Pruning messages past a certain age	You may not want to keep every posting around forever. Old user-created content takes up disk space, can slow performance, and may not be valued by the community. With this feature, postings past X days old are automatically deleted.
HTML-enabled posts	Users are able to include HTML code in their posts, which opens the possibilities for displaying images, tables, and links. On some platforms, this may cause compatibility problems with certain users' browsers.
Forum-wide searching	For users to search through contents of conversations for subjects of interest. Think of user-created content as a growing database. New users, especially, will need this capability to find discussions that meet their interests.
Moderated discussion	A format in which the host decides which postings, of those submitted, will appear publicly. These are useful when the quality of the publicly visible content is especially important. The host/moderator acts as a content editor.
Read-only areas	The ability for the administrator to set up discussions that can be read but not contributed to by the community audience. These may be conversations that have accomplished their

Continues

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Table 8.1 Features of Asynchronous Discussion Platforms That Allow the Administrator to Configure the Interface to Fit the Community's Needs *(Continued)*

Platform Feature	What the Feature Does
	"purpose" and are then "frozen" to new responses, or conversations that deliberately limit their participants to members of a "panel" or interview format.
Private forums	The ability for the administrator to create private forums open to restricted member lists. These are necessary for business applications and for users who want to form "clubs" where they select the members who are permitted entrance. Private areas are valuable to communities.
Customizable look and feel	Options for the site provider to match the look of the forum interface with that of the rest of the site. Helpful for maintaining brand identity as users move between content area and discussion.
System compatibility	If you're going to install the software on your site, it must have a version compatible with your operating system and Web server.

Table 8.2 Features That Aid the User in Custom-Configuring the Forum Content and Interface for Optimum Experience

Feature	How It Helps the User
User traffic tracking	The system keeps track of which folders, topics, and responses each registered user has seen in order to show the user only new material each time she visits the forum. Important for time-saving and sense of continuity for the user.

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Table 8.2 *(Continued)*

Feature	How It Helps the User
User-selected content filtering	Sometimes called "subscription lists" or "my view," this feature allows users to choose which conferences they want to be shown, at the exclusion of all others, each time they visit the forum. Helps users budget limited time and reduce information overload.
Forget-topics filtering	The user can "forget" topics he does not wish to see, thus removing them from the list of new material shown to him on subsequent visits. Another time-budgeting and personal taste control on the user's view of the forum.
Time-defined topic selection	The user can choose to see only topics and responses created since a chosen date or within a chosen number of days. Allows users to bite off only as much recent content as they can chew.
Ubiquitous navigation tools	Wherever the user is in the forum, there are links designating his current location and how to move to other locations in the discussion structure.
Email linking to users	Usernames that appear with their postings can be clicked on as links to reach them through email. Facilitates backchannel communications between community members and allows users to reply directly to the author of a posting.
User profiles	Allows users to describe themselves and include links to homepages so that other members of the forum can learn more about them. Also may be reached through linked usernames within discussion areas.

Continues

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Table 8.2 Features That Aid the User in Custom-Configuring the Forum Content and Interface for Optimum Experience *(Continued)*

Feature	How It Helps the User
User-initiated topics	Ability for any user with permission to post to also start new topics at will. This encourages the community to view content as part of its own responsibility and creation. It also takes part of the load for content creation from paid staff and volunteer discussion hosts.
Profanity filter	Depending on the community you plan to serve, this can be a more efficient way to deal with the problem than constant vigilance and after-the-fact deletions.
Searching	Allows users to find topics and postings containing chosen keywords. Aids users in finding discussions of interest and remembered postings that have been lost in the accumulating conversations.

No matter what format of discussion you find is most appropriate, you should give consideration to the following:

Ease of installation. Does it take a rocket scientist to install the software on your server? Does it require an expert in Unix or Windows/NT? If you don't have such expertise, can someone with good understanding of software installation on a PC do it?

Performance. Is the code for the software written for maximum responsiveness? Will it bog down when the contents of its forums, or the number of registered users, or the number of separate conversations reach a certain level?

Simplicity of command structure. Will users be confused by the way it presents its setup and configuration options? Are there too

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many options or too few? Will the interface be considered more usable by newcomers or by veterans?

Command display design. Are the appropriate user options displayed where they should be when the user needs them, or are they difficult to find and remember as the user navigates through the system?

Complete online user support documentation. Is there a FAQ that explains all of the user options? Are there readily available Help facilities matched to the context of where the user is and what he's doing on the system?

Test Drive before You Buy

Considerations like these make it important that you experience the platform thoroughly and under different circumstances, if at all possible, before making your decision to use it. Visit sites where the interface is being used by different-sized communities and with different volumes of content. Visit during peak traffic hours and during quiet times to see how it performs. Ask yourself, as you use it, what you wish it did better or where you wish certain option buttons were located when you need them. Put yourself, as well as you can, in the place of a new user (which you'll probably be) and one who's been on the system for a while (which will take more imagination), and look for the tools and user support facilities that would help you adapt the system to fit your needs in both situations. Contact people who use the platform, both as site providers and members of the community supported by it, and ask them their impressions. If the platform has its own Web site where discussion is taking place between the vendor and customers, read what others have said and ask your own questions. Especially look for conversations where problems and bugs are discussed. The existence of an open discussion involving users and platform designers is a good sign as well as a helpful resource.

These suggestions apply whether you're considering installing a platform on your own server or you're thinking of starting a community within an already established Web environment. You should know what you're getting into and what capabilities you'll have when you begin hosting actual group interaction in a forum environment since it will have such a powerful impact on your relationship with your community.

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Having described what to look for in a platform, I'll now describe some of the most popular of them and the communities they support. I won't go into detail about their features but will refer you, instead, to their homepages on the Web where the most up-to-date information about their latest versions will be found. After a look at these commercially available platforms, I'll describe some of the forum locations on the Web where you might consider becoming a host of a special-interest discussion as a way of providing the interactive piece of your community.

Representative Forum Interfaces

The number of alternatives to choose from for asynchronous discussion hosting products is growing fast. Just as the concept of community has caught on all across the Web, so has the need for appropriate and affordable discussion platforms to serve the broad diversity of organizations, businesses, interest groups, and Web site developers. In this chapter, I'll only be able to describe a few, but hope to illustrate through my descriptions how you might approach evaluating platforms for your particular application. Where I've included prices, these are quoted from the products' homepages as of May 1998. The platforms I'm describing, their home URLs, and what distinguishes them are shown in Table 8.3

Online Sources of Information about Asynchronous Interfaces

There are several sites that have taken on the role of tracking the expansion of asynchronous forums and forum platforms. I recommend that you visit them for the most current information on selection, features, and other information pertaining to the use of these platforms. They not only link to the home sites for the different software packages and hosting services, but also offer links to other relevant information that you will find helpful.

David Wooley's *Conferencing on the Web* Site

Dr. David Wooley was a chief architect of the Plato discussion system in the 1960s, which must give him the world's deepest perspective on the development of this kind of software. He has stayed in touch with his field of interest and provides a comprehensive site where he reviews most of the platforms being used

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Table 8.3 Representative Discussion Platforms

Platform	URL	Distinguishing Characteristic
HyperNews	www.HyperNews.org	Threaded format. Options for viewing structure in different formats. Free.
Ultimate Bulletin Board	www.prime-web.com	Linear format. Very good internal navigation features. Very inexpensive.
Web Crossing	www.webcrossing.com	Linear format with threading option. Highly customizable with proprietary template language. Scaled pricing. Integrated chat option.
Motet	www.motet.com	Linear format. Powerful user customization features. Especially good for habitual users.
WebBoard 3.0	www.webboard.com	Threaded format with flexible user interface. Inexpensive. Includes integrated chat and SQL database functionality.
Well Engaged 1.5	www.wellengaged.com	Linear format. Powerful customization and user options features, extended consulting and service bureau support.
eShare	www.eshare.com	Threaded, message-by-message display. Integrated chat. Quick and easy installation and administration.

on the Web. The reviews are brief and don't include current pricing in most cases, but they do reveal helpful facts about the platform's basic configuration.

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You'll also find some very insightful essays written by Dr. Wooley about the differences between platform designs and the practice of hosting communities within them. His site is located at:

thinkofit.com/webconf/webcon2.htm

David Strom's *Web Conferencing Software* Site

On this one-page site, you find a five-column table describing 56 (as of March 1998) platforms with their names, vendors, price ranges (where available), current version numbers, and the operating system platforms they run on (see Figure 8.3). Each is linked to the home site of its vendor.

Strom's site doesn't offer any review information, and some of the platforms listed do not actually support conferencing at all, but serve chat or Web paging instead. Still, the tabular presentation is helpful for comparison purposes and, cross-referenced with Wooley's site, gives you a good introduction to the selection. The URL of Strom's page is:

www.strom.com/ics/wc.html

ForumOne

When Jim Cashel and Dave Witzel noticed the proliferation of discussion venues on the Web, they decided to start a site devoted to searching for discussion forums on specific subjects, tracking the growth of the industry and providing support for people involved or wanting to become involved in it. Within their site, they point not only to sources of forum-hosting software, but to services that host asynchronous communities. You'll find their content and contacts very helpful and, since it is their business, you should find their information up to date.

ForumOne features a page listing forum software companies according to three categories: commercial products, integrated products (which they call "specific-purpose products with integrated-discussion capabilities"), and free products (see Figure 8.4). You'll also find on this page a list of reviews found elsewhere on the Web. You can visit ForumOne at www.forumone.com/products.htm.

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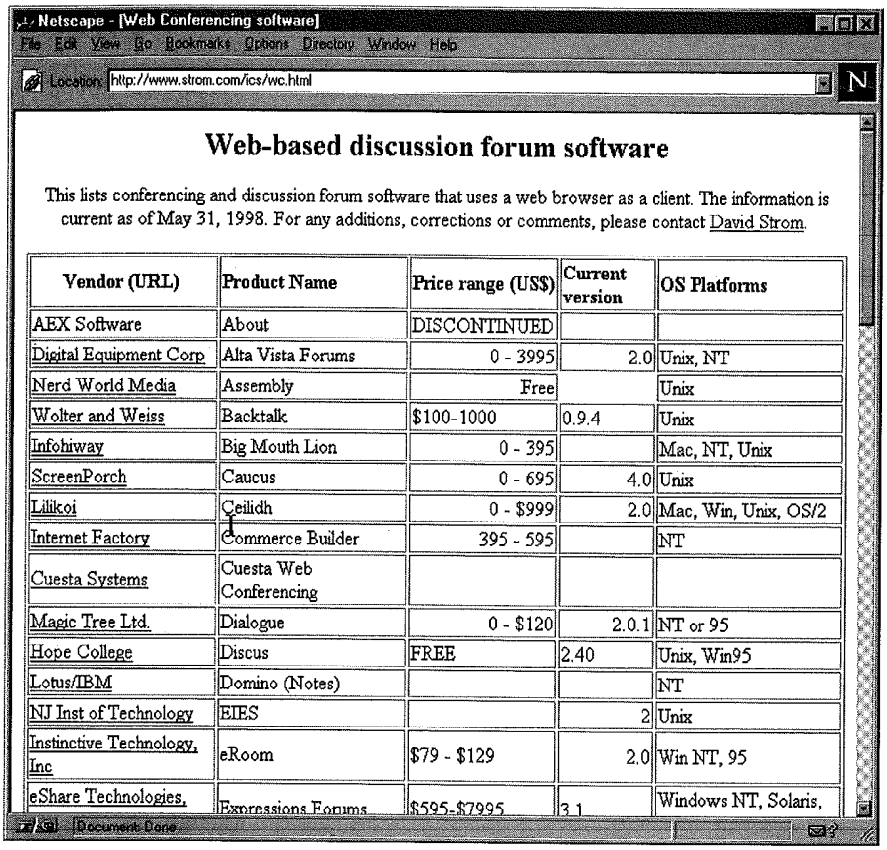
Figure 8.3 Part of David Strom's page of links to, and information about, discussion software for the Web. If the information is up to date, it's a great first stop for comparison shopping.



Netscape - [Web Conferencing software]

File Edit View Go Bookmarks Options Directory Window Help

Location: http://www.strom.com/ics/wc.html

Web-based discussion forum software

This lists conferencing and discussion forum software that uses a web browser as a client. The information is current as of May 31, 1998. For any additions, corrections or comments, please contact David Strom.

Vendor (URL)	Product Name	Price range (US$)	Current version	OS Platforms
AEX Software	About	DISCONTINUED		
Digital Equipment Corp	Alta Vista Forums	0 - 3995	2.0	Unix, NT
Nerd World Media	Assembly	Free		Unix
Wolter and Weiss	Backtalk	$100-1000	0.9.4	Unix
Infohiway	Big Mouth Lion	0 - 395		Mac, NT, Unix
ScreenPorch	Caucus	0 - 695	4.0	Unix
Lilikoi	Ceilidh	0 - $999	2.0	Mac, Win, Unix, OS/2
Internet Factory	Commerce Builder	395 - 595		NT
Cuesta Systems	Cuesta Web Conferencing			
Magic Tree Ltd.	Dialogue	0 - $120	2.0.1	NT or 95
Hope College	Discus	FREE	2.40	Unix, Win95
Lotus/IBM	Domino (Notes)			NT
NJ Inst of Technology	EIES		2	Unix
Instinctive Technology, Inc	eRoom	$79 - $129	2.0	Win NT, 95
eShare Technologies,	Expressions Forums	$595-$7995	3.1	Windows NT, Solaris,

Document Done

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A Selection of Discussion Interfaces

The following brief reviews describe some of the most popular and best-designed forum interfaces available for commercial and noncommercial use on the Web. Their prices range from absolutely free to over $10,000 including consulting services. They fit applications from business discussion to intimate social interaction to customer service. The market is getting more competitive

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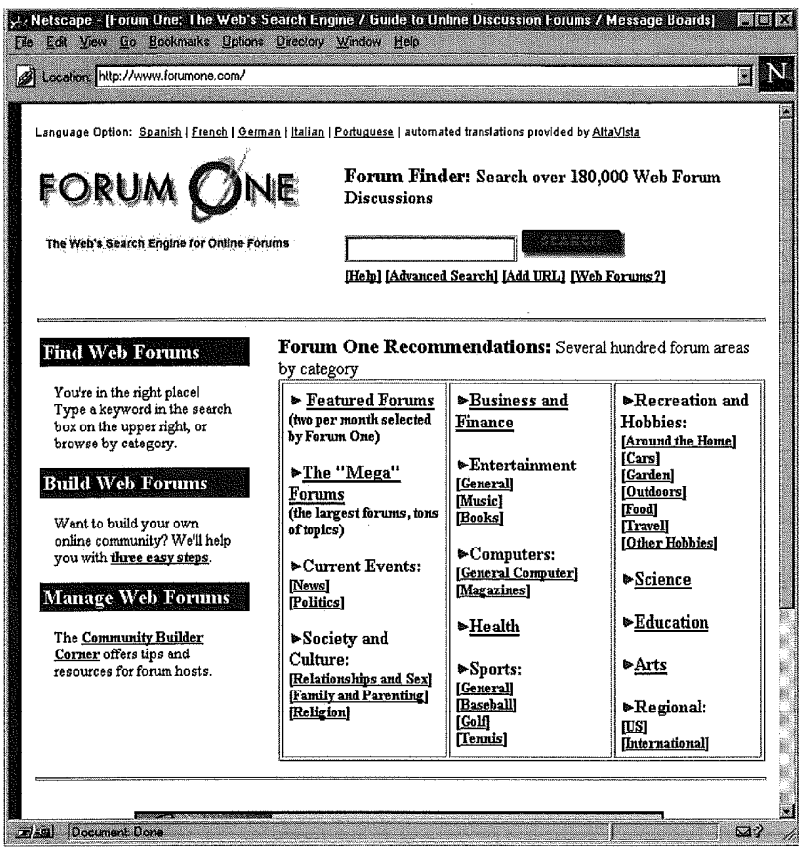
Figure 8.4 ForumOne indexes forum discussions throughout the Web and provides resources for those planning to build their own forums. Its monthly email newsletter keeps track of the latest news concerning asynchronous discussion systems.



all the time and some of these platforms provide an amazing array of features for not much money. But installing the software is only part of the job of making an interface work for a community. Having the right interface and configuring it appropriately for the community can make all the difference, so support before and after installation is important. You can buy the support as part of the purchase price or you can make use of the support communities

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that some of these products host on their own homepages. Remember, these are only seven products out of an ever-increasing list of candidates.

HyperNews

I used HyperNews as an example earlier in the chapter of the threaded format for asynchronous discussion. It was modeled in part on the threaded USENET newsgroup reader format, but was intended to be a system for archiving messages on the Web. The software is available for free through its homepage, pictured in Figure 8.5. In the tradition of the Net, the development of this widely distributed product goes on collaboratively and unabated four years after its introduction. Its author works on it in his spare time and accepts suggestions from those who have installed it on their sites. You'll see that many of these products work something like that, using their interfaces on their home sites to host communities of users, customers, and clients who come around regularly for three things:

- To get support for using the product from the developers
- To get support for using the product from each other
- To give suggestions and advice to the software developers

I've described what I think are the strengths and weaknesses of threading interfaces, but HyperNews has gone beyond the generic features to offer some truly helpful additions. One trick, taken from its USENET roots, is its ability to send replies to a posting as email messages to the author of the posting. In the example shown in Figure 8.2, a discussion about interface designs taking place on the ForumOne site, the participants who dropped in to offer their opinions weren't likely to be checking back very often to see if anyone had responded to their contributions. I was one of those participants, but HyperNews mailed me the messages that people posted in reaction to my stated opinions, and I was drawn back to the forum. I didn't have to return to reply. I could have simply replied to the email and my message would have been posted in the forum by that method, too. For that particular population and discussion, the *bidirectional email gateway* feature was a perfect tool.

Installing the HyperNews source code requires a Webmaster's familiarity with your server. The platform can be configured to require users to be registered

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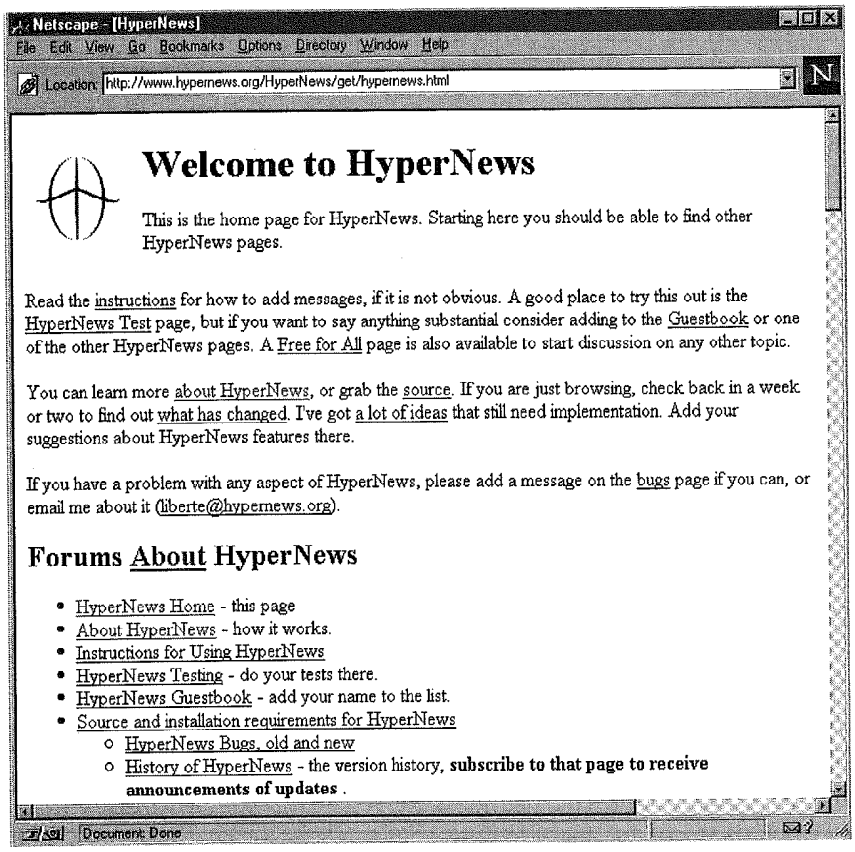
Figure 8.5 The homepage of HyperNews, a free, threaded-discussion platform constantly undergoing improvements as its users collaborate with the system's author, Daniel LaLiberte.



in order to post messages and replies to messages. It can be configured to allow bidirectional email participation or to require direct participation in the forum.

The interface calls what we would refer to as "conference descriptions," *base articles*, another reflection of its USENET forebears. And to alert users of new responses added since their last visit, it places a bright-yellow graphic reading *NEW* next to them, a very helpful gesture especially in a busy forum.

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Navigation is guided by buttons with the following labels and descriptions (as written in the online Help documents):

Next, meaning "Go to the next message that is replying to the same thing as this message."

Prev, meaning "Go to the previous message that is replying to the same thing."

Out, meaning "Go to the next message one level up."

More, meaning "Go to the first reply to the message you are currently reading."

Obviously, like many platforms, you have to use HyperNews a bit to understand its jargon. But once you do, getting around is not so hard. Just as many thousands of people have used USENET for years and still continue to do so in spite of its arcane structure, you can expect that many people will use HyperNews. It is, after all, quite an elegant implementation of the threading structure that has served USENET very well for many years.

The Ultimate Bulletin Board

It may not actually be the ultimate, but it's pretty darn good for the price. UBB is a young product and a good first example of a linear conferencing system with many unique design features that is looking to break into the commercial market. Until recently it was free to anyone who wanted to download and install the software, but the latest version of Ultimate Bulletin Board must be purchased on a yearly subscription basis. Its pricing alternatives are based on single-year licensing with no limits on the number of users who can participate on one installation of the software. As with all of the platforms I'm describing here, I recommend that you check the home Web site for current pricing since they are very subject to change as the vendors react to market conditions. I will, though, provide the latest pricing information that I have found on those home sites. In the case of UBB, it is as follows:

You can lease a license to use UBB for one year for $45. During that year, all upgrades are free, but there is no guarantee that the lease will be renewable. You may have to purchase a license from then on.

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You can purchase a license for $130 per year, which also includes the free upgrades. You can keep the software and use it for as long as you like even without continuing your license.

A discounted three-license package can be purchased for $260.

It's a good deal for a well-designed platform with many customizable options including the following (as listed on its homepage):

Up to 9 customizable forum names and descriptions (unlimited forums coming soon!)

Support for users with strict cgi-bin policies

Forum on/off switches

Support for HTML within messages and/or UBB Code

Forum moderators

Registration system

User permissions set by administrators

User profiles (can be updated by users)

Extensive administrative features (make changes through browser)

Classic design

Online FAQ

The UBB interface has an attractive and informative design. Figure 8.6 shows the top-level view that one sees when entering the forum area. The screen tells you when you last visited, and shows you the list of what it calls *forums* but we're referring to as *conferences*. The total number of posts and date of last post give the returning user an idea of the activity level in each conference, and the name of the moderator is listed also. At the top of every view of the discussion, regardless of the level, the *edit profile*, *user preferences*, *register*, and *help/faq* links are available. Figure 8.7 shows the interface at the *response* level, within a topic titled, "Great Install No Problems!!!" (It's always encouraging, of course, to find such testimonial postings on a product's user support site.)

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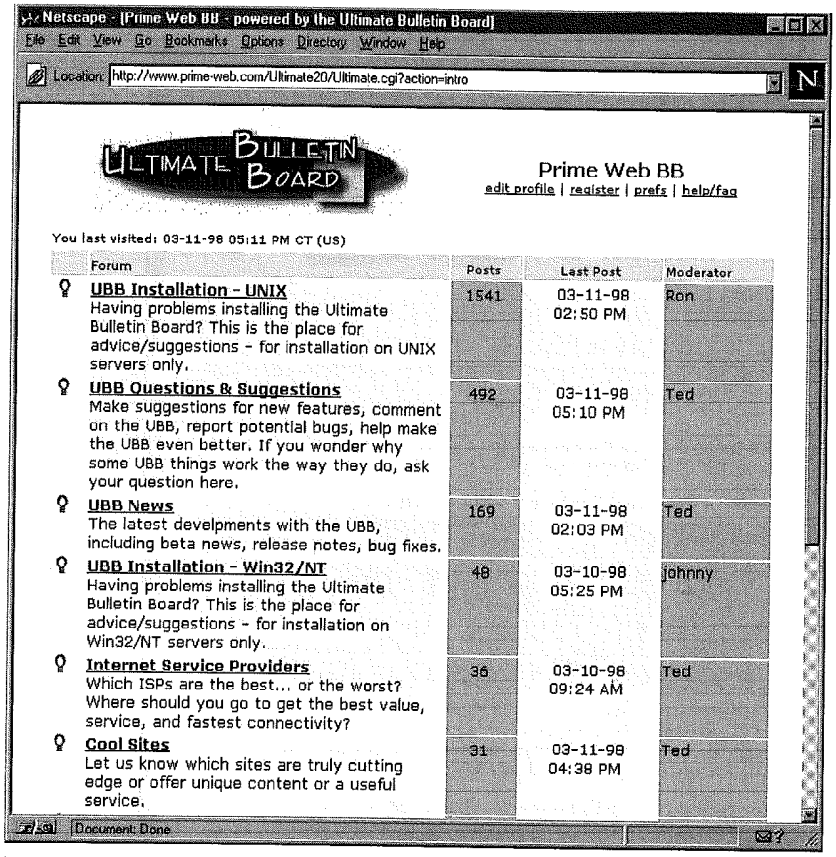
Figure 8.6 Entering the opening page of a UBB forum gives you an overview of what's inside. Handy links at the top of the page let users set up their accounts and seek help.



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The alternating colors of the posts help the reader to distinguish one from another. Some interfaces are much more difficult to follow because posts and their identifying headers tend to clutter the screen and run together. Note at the upper right of Figure 8.7 the navigation tree showing the user where he's located in the forum structure, and allowing him to move about by clicking on its hyperlinked branches. The Post New Topic and Post/Reply buttons at the top

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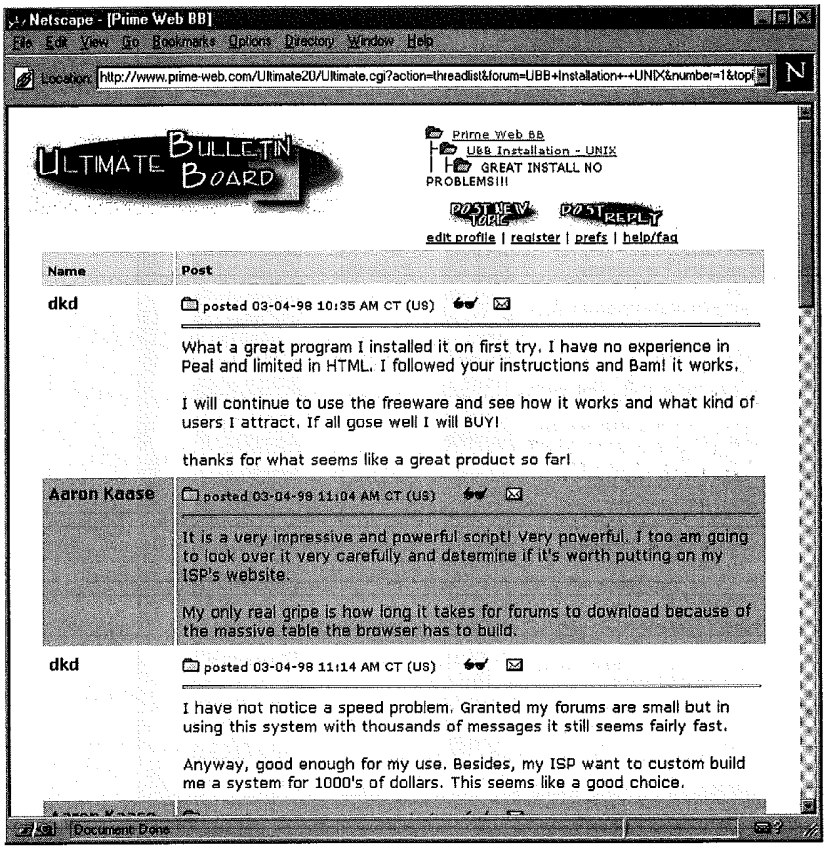
Figure 8.7 The view of a conversation within UBB shows how its responses are clearly demarcated. The navigation tree in the upper-right corner tells the user where he's located within the forum and can be clicked on to move to other locations.



Copyright, Prime-Web, 1998.

allow the user to initiate an action without scrolling to the bottom of the displayed topic. This can be a time-saver when the user only wants to respond to the topic's title, not to its subsequent postings, or when the user just wants to start a new discussion without reading the one on the screen. Above each post

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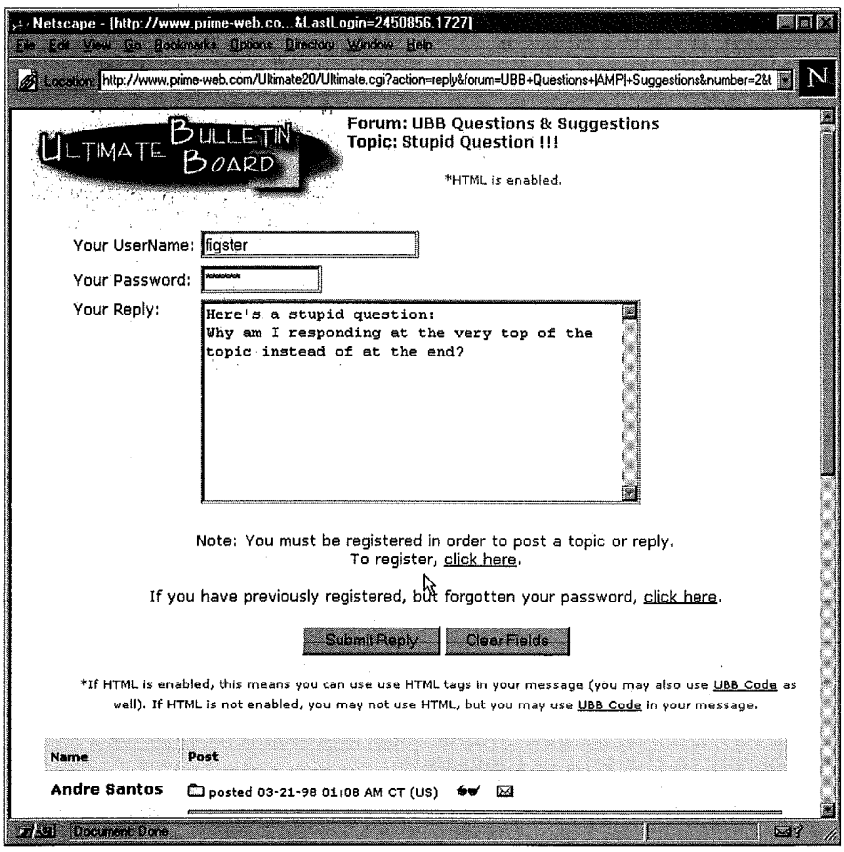
are two graphics: a pair of glasses that can be clicked on to see the poster's profile and an envelope that can be clicked on to send email directly to the poster.

UBB has an interesting method for posting. The user must click on the Post/Reply link and then wait for a new page to load where the UserName and Password must be entered (see Figure 8.8). The logic may be that with this

Figure 8.8 Ultimate Bulletin Board's approach to posting is to ask members to enter their usernames and passwords with each post. It works well for people mainly coming to read, but active posters may find it inconvenient. In this post, I'm questioning the placement of the response window.



Copyright, Prime-Web, 1998.

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method, the user is not required to log in to enter the forums, but must only do so when posting a response. But if the purpose of the platform is to support a population that posts a lot, this method may soon be a hindrance to growth and participation. Habitual and active users will prefer to log in once and post without being waylaid repeatedly.

Another minor shortcoming, in my opinion, is the lack of navigational links at the *end* of the response list in a topic. To get back to the *topic* view of the conference, you must scroll back up the screen to the navigation tree. But as I said in the beginning, this product is new and under rapid development, and its open developers' forum enthusiastically invites suggestions for improvements. I've posted mine there and I expect UBB to be much improved beyond what is already a good product by the time you read this.

Web Crossing

The first *commercially* successful interface reviewed in the chapter is Web Crossing by Lundeen and Associates, a *template-based* application that not only provides online conferencing that may be viewed in both linear and threaded formats, but also includes optional integrated chat rooms. Web Crossing has over 1000 licenses in place on both major Web sites and corporate intranets.

One reason Web Crossing has such great distribution is that it's very flexible. Using its template language, it can be configured to be intuitive and easy to use for first-timers and sporadic users and it can also be configured to facilitate conversation for habitual and veteran users. It is, as they say in their marketing creed, "highly productive" because it allows users to subscribe only to the discussions they want to see, and it shows them only the content they haven't seen yet. I describe it as a *clean* interface because, in its simplest configuration, it displays only what the user absolutely needs to see in order to use it. That clean structure goes deeper into its coding, too, which uses a proprietary database that allows it to run responsively even when carrying a large content load. CNN uses Web Crossing for its forum platform and it has numerous topics with responses numbering in the tens of thousands.

You can install WebX, as it's abbreviated, on Windows NT/95, multiple Unix systems, and Mac OS. It works with most Web servers, including

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Netscape, Microsoft, and Apache. There are no reliable figures or surveys around to prove it, but it wouldn't surprise me if it's the asynchronous discussion platform being used by the most people on the Web. Its prices reflect its success in the market, being considerably higher than newcomers like UBB, but not so high as to be out of reach of moderate-sized Web sites. For pricing, see www.webcrossing.com. As of May 1998, Lundeen sells its server for unlimited users for $995 and a version called Web Crossing/Pro for high throughput and redundant server applications for $4,995. The Chat option (pictured in Figure 8.9) is sold separately and prices depend on the number of simultaneous chatters supported, with the highest 1000-user version going for $1,995.

As your traffic expectations increase, the cost of supporting them follows, but Web Crossing has benefited as a platform by its use and experience in high-traffic markets. Tim Lundeen and his small crew have adjusted their product to fit the needs of serious commercial Web-based businesses and internal networks.

The Web Crossing interface is highly adaptable to different discussion situations and communities through use of its Web Crossing Template Language (WCTL). Interface functions and pages are assembled in *macros* that integrate HTML with WCTL-defined parameters and JavaScript. It takes some time to get the hang of configuring a system, but the Web Crossing Forum on Lundeen's home site can be used effectively to get answers from both Lundeen's staff and other WebX site administrators who might have already designed a macro to solve your problem. Web Crossing is used on very active discussion sites like CNN, *Salon*, Excite, and the *New York Times*.

Working as I do for *Salon*, I've had some firsthand experience learning to use WCTL and am still, after a month, climbing the learning curve. We currently contract experienced WebX site builders to do our most ambitious modifications and have found the platform to be quite adaptable as we go through redesigning our discussion site, *Table Talk*. Initially, I wished Web Crossing had a more form-driven configuration setup where easy choices could be made by the site administrator to change the interface. But after getting familiar with WCTL, I can see how much flexibility it offers and I've come to appreciate Lundeen's goal of providing a platform that can be changed, chameleonlike, to fit the needs of many different communities.

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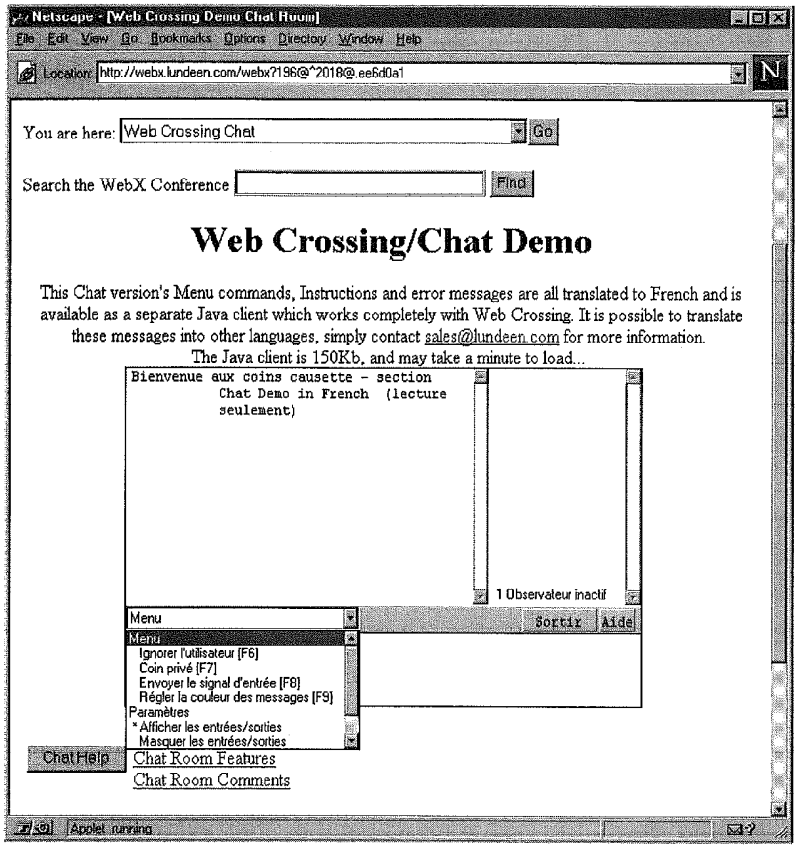
Figure 8.9 The Web Crossing Chat application fits into its forum structure as just another folder. On the Lundeen home site, this French language chat room is provided as a demo.



© *Lundeen & Associates.*

Motet

Motet's design was inspired by its author's extensive experience using the WELL, and thus includes many of the user convenience features found to be valuable to committed, long-term conferencing participants. It organizes discussions as *conferences*, *topics*, and *postings* and allows users to choose which

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conferences they want to visit during a regular session, which topics they want to read, which responses they want to be shown, even offering the user the option to be shown only topics where he has posted and someone has responded. It's the only platform I've found that includes such a personalized view of the proceedings.

For all its features, Motet is a very responsive platform. As described on its home site:

> *The Motet backend is a suite of CGI programs, written in C, which serves up Web pages on the fly. It runs on Unix platforms and works with most any Web server. The programs run only when a user requests a page—no processes run all the time, and nothing has to be started up when the operating system is rebooted. The load on the server is light, and Motet requires very little maintenance once installed.*
>
> *Motet stores its data in ordinary Unix files—there is no separate database management system involved. This makes Motet very fast, and means that conferencing data can be backed up along with ordinary system backups. There are no additional maintenance chores for the system operator.*

Café Utne, the most active nonsubscription-based forum on the Web at this time (as measured by ForumOne's discussion-counting search tool), uses Motet as does the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Web site, The Gate. It's a robust system that retains loyal user bases, but its plethora of options can be a bit intimidating to the first-time visitor. Figure 8.10 shows the entry page to a Motet conference. Once a user becomes familiar with what each of the choices do, their value becomes understandable and routines fall into place. It's the first exposure to the many buttons and pulldown menus that may boggle the new user.

Note that the user can choose to see postings made in the conference beginning from any time in the past. The user can choose to see all topics, only recently active topics, only topics in which the user has posted, only topics containing a keyword, or only the last few topics started in the conference. And to deal with a common occurrence in active conferencing communities,

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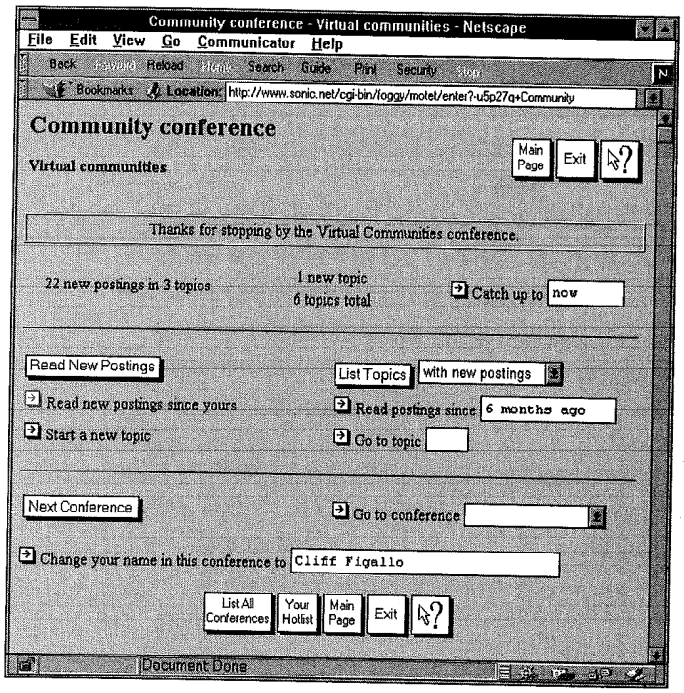
Figure 8.10 Motet caters to the needs of the active forum participant with a large selection of navigational and preference choices. To first-time users it may seem like a lot to deal with, but once users become involved with the community, the options come in handy.



Motet has what it calls *slipped-in handling*. When a user is posting a response in a topic, she may be responding to the last message posted to the topic while another user is doing the same. As Motet's Features page at (www.motet.com) explains it:

> *If you try to post your response and someone else has slipped in a posting while you were composing yours, Motet warns you and gives you the chance to view the slipped in posting before posting yours. This ensures that postings are consecutive and read like a conversation.*

Motet is the first of the platforms reviewed here that includes a user filter, which allows any user to selectively replace the postings of other users with the

FB00022212

word *<filtered>*. Another useful feature for dedicated conferencers is the ability to *hide* a posting rather than completely *deleting* it. Hidden postings can still be seen if readers click deliberately on the *<hidden>* link that replaces the posting. The hidden posting has two main uses: first, to allow long text documents to be included in a response without forcing readers to scroll through them, and second, to allow users the option of reading or not reading responses of questionable taste to the audience.

Two other handy features included in Motet are the *bookmark* and the *dog-ear*. These features, as well as examples of filtered and hidden postings, are shown in Figure 8.11, taken from Motet's home site. Frequently, participants in a forum will run out of time right in the middle of reading a topic. Ordinarily, the platform will consider that the user has caught up with the topic and has read all of the current responses even if that's not the case. The results are that the next time the user logs in, only the postings made since the last visit to the topic will be shown. Whatever postings the users didn't get around to reading will not be shown. To avoid missing content, the user can dog-ear a posting before logging out and Motet will remember to begin displaying the topic where the user left off. The bookmark option allows the user to select particular postings just as Web pages are bookmarked. Thus, Motet treats discussion with all the value of good Web content, which can be appropriate in quality conversation.

Motet is priced for commercial buyers according to the number of registered users. What it calls a Full License, for unlimited users, sells for $1,995. The 500-maximum user license is $1,495 and one for 50 users goes for $995. A special price of $500 is available for government institutions, nonprofits, and educational users.

WebBoard

O'Reilly Software has had WebBoard on the market for a couple of years and gained a reputation for delivering lots of bang for the buck. Their version 3.0, released in spring 1998, is a major upgrade and should be very popular not only because of its pricing, but because of its versatility.

For $699, buyers get a multithreading discussion system that runs on an SQL backend for high performance on the user end. Its IRC-based chat client

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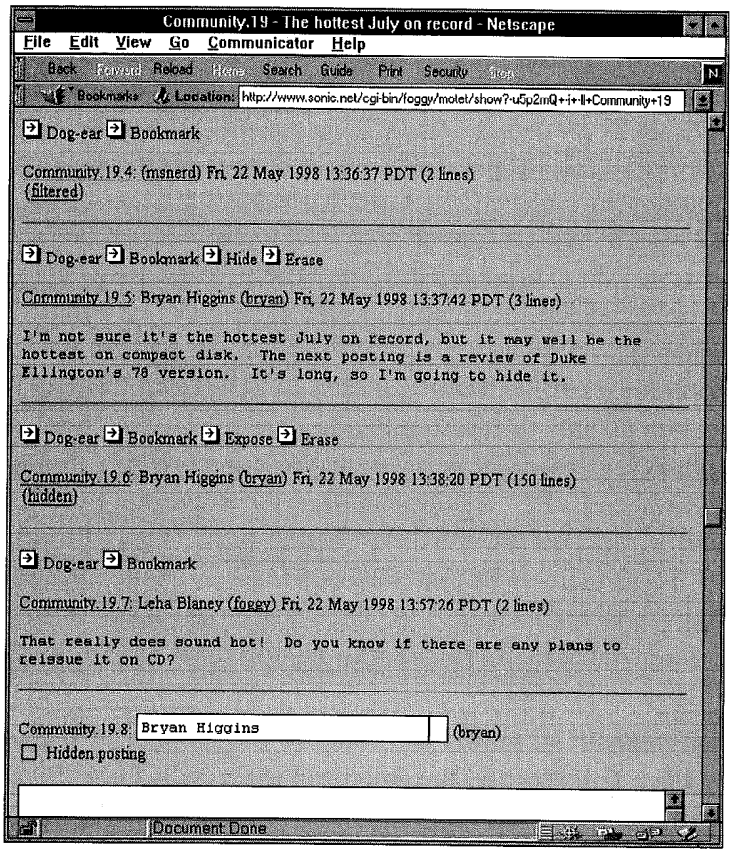
Figure 8.11 A Motet page illustrating features like the filtered response and the hidden response that readers can choose to see.



will handle up to 1000 simultaneous users, which is plenty for any but the most chat-intensive sites like WBS, Talk City, and the major search engines. It facilitates traffic analysis by the conference area visited and provides statistics in a format compatible with current analysis tools. It allows each community within the forum to have its own custom color scheme. It has administrative controls that can be manipulated remotely, so the Community

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Manager can operate from home if necessary. Users have the choice of participating in discussions via email and the platform can be configured to allow registration with or without authentication. These two features alone open the door to a category of users who might otherwise think participation too much trouble.

A WebBoard-based forum can have up to 255 different conferences that can be any combination of public, private, moderated, and read only. The platform supports advertisements within both its asynchronous and chat windows. Users can choose either framed or nonframed interfaces, and there's even an integrated spellchecker. And, coming from O'Reilly, a company most famous for publishing technical how-to manuals, you can expect that the documentation will be superb. In fact, a 300-page book titled *Building Your Own Web Conferences* is included with every WebBoard license.

If 700 bucks for all of this is still too great an outlay for you, WebBoard version 2.0 is still for sale as of this writing for $59.95 and contains most of the same features. These are both great deals. So what's the downside? It doesn't have as many user options for controlling navigation and filtering as Motet has. And some people might be turned off to the threaded structure, but WebBoard handles threading as elegantly as any interface I've seen.

In Figure 8.12 you can see how the topics in a conference are lined up in the left-hand window (whose width is adjustable by the user) and the selected thread appears as a scrolling topic in the right-hand window. Any posting in the conference window that has been responded to gets a plus sign. The user can navigate by selecting the topic from the conference window or by using the toolbar above each response. Or, to navigate within the forum as a whole, there's the toolbar at the very top of the browser window.

Some other nice features are the number accompanying each posting that tells how many times it has been read and the ability to *reply/quote*, which includes a copy of the posting being replied to. The user has the options to post in HTML, to attach a file to the posting, and to post anonymously if the administrator permits. When operating WebBoard's chat, the chat window can be floated off the page so that it runs independent of what you're doing with your browser.

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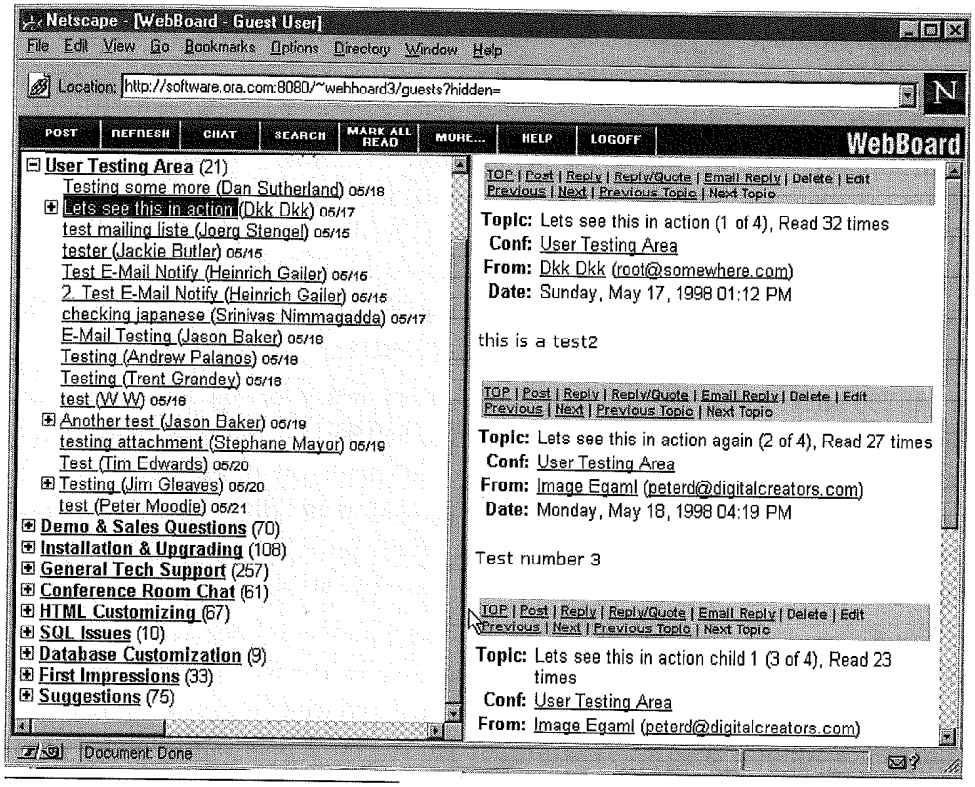
Figure 8.12 In WebBoard 3.0 your means for navigation are always with you. The user-sizable conference window lists the topics while the topic window scrolls the postings.



WebBoard 3.0 is a product of O'Reilly & Associates, Inc.

Well Engaged

Well Engaged calls its conferencing platform *Discussions* because that's what it's designed to support. Like Motet, Well Engaged Discussions has its roots in the WELL style of asynchronous interaction. Structured around conferences, topics, and responses but with a more graphically designed HTML interface than Motet's, Discussions has quite an impressive base of clients including the *Wall Street Journal*, Adobe, Playboy, Netscape, Kaiser Permanente, and CBS Sportsline.

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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.

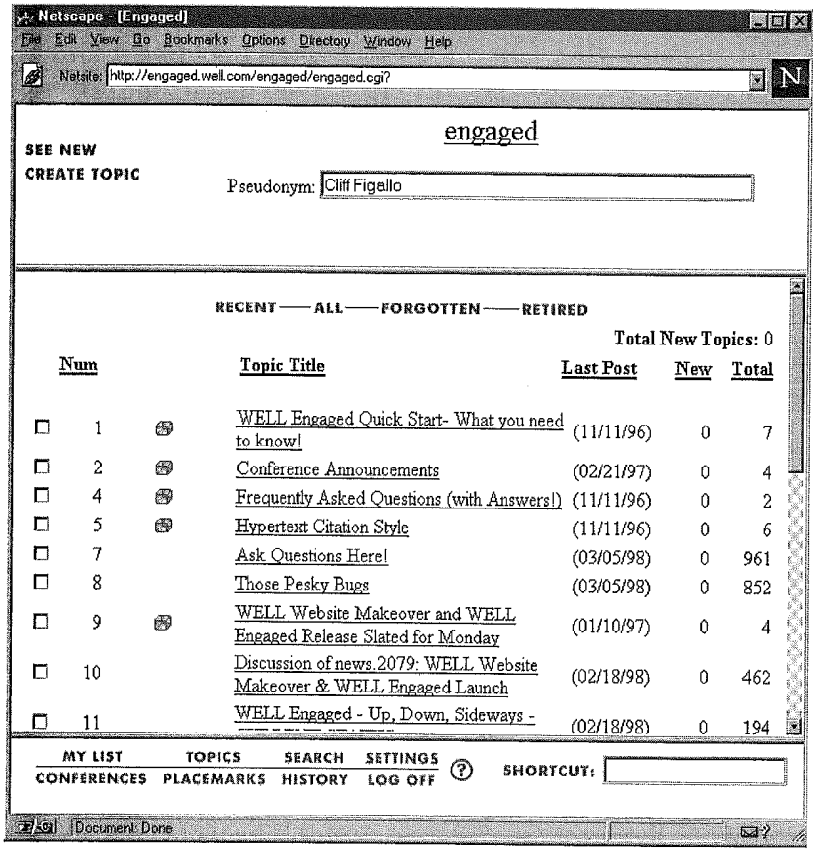
By the time you read this, a new version of Discussions will be in release, but Figure 8.13 shows some of the topic control features of the current version that help hosts and users manage the volume of topics presented to them in a busy forum.

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

FB00022217

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.

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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

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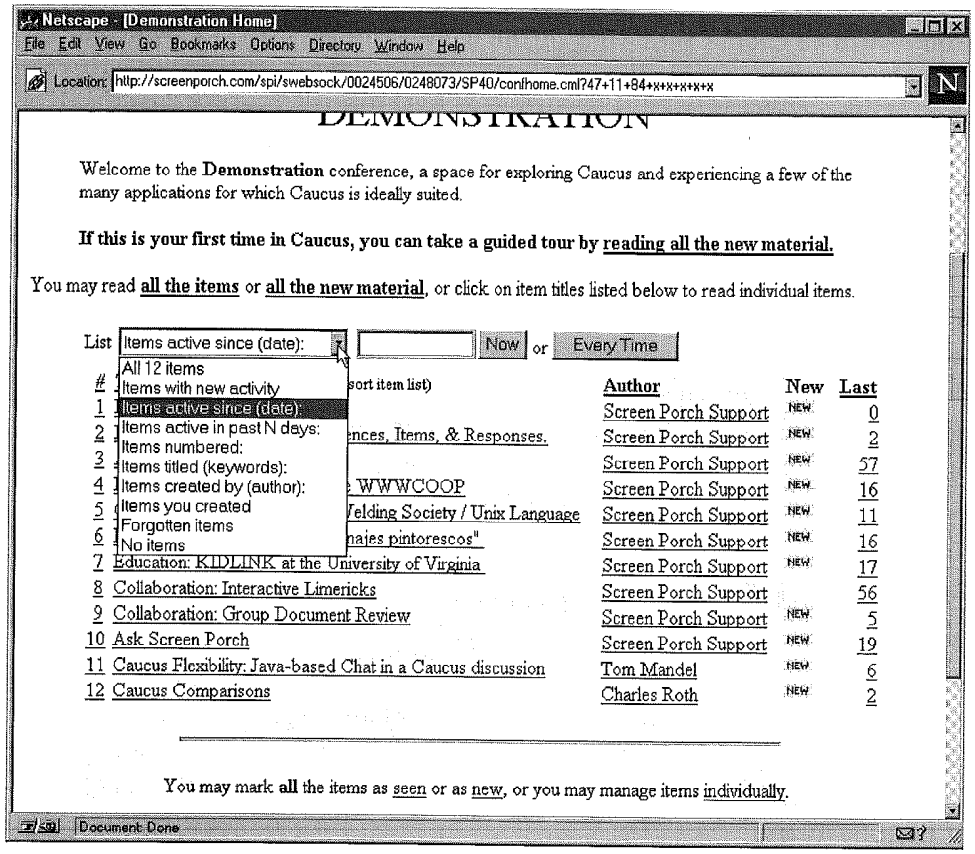
Figure 8.14 Different users at different times have needs for different views of a collection of discussions. Caucus provides a wide selection of perspectives through its drop-down menu.

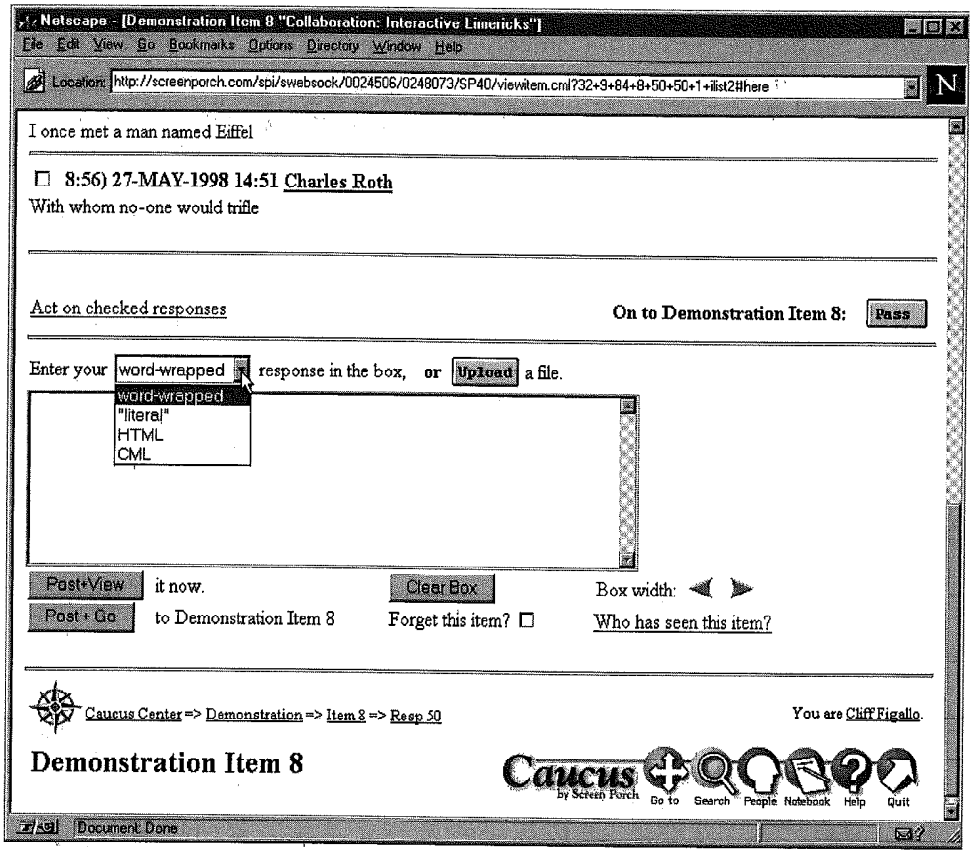


able to customize her own discussion site and have access to a given amount of discussion space on a shared platform.

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

FB00022220

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

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10, the Web worlds where self-sufficient and self-contained aggregations of communities are being supplied, nurtured, and encouraged to grow.

Delphi

Delphi used to be one of the major online subscription services, competing at one time before the Web with CompuServe, Prodigy, and AOL for the title of King of the Online Hill. Now Delphi (www.delphi.com) is a large discussion-based Web site that divides its content into interest areas as shown in Figure 8.16. Custom forums created on Delphi fit into these categories if they are intended to be public.

The community host has three options for creating a custom forum. Describing them feels almost like describing vacation cabins to prospective tenants, but nevertheless, here they are:

The Small Group package is free. It includes a message board with 16 categories for up to 100 participants. It can hold up to 500 messages at one time. The oldest messages are deleted once the limit has been reached. There is a chat room available at any time to the Small Group forum, and there are two possible templated Web pages the host can build: one open to the Web and the other subject to access controls (via either a password or an approved user list) that are set up by the host. Delphi displays ad banners on the Web pages and on message board and chat screens.

The Public CustomForum package, meant for interest groups or organizations, is also free. It includes a message board with 16 topic categories for an *unlimited* number of participants. It can hold up to 2000 messages at one time and includes one templated Web page with access to a chat room. Again, there are Delphi banner ads on all pages.

The Corporate CustomForum package is priced for charter subscribers at $49.95 per month or $399 annually. It's meant for business intranet or extranet applications and includes a message board with 16 topic categories for 100 participants. It also provides access to a chat room and holds up to 2000 messages at a time. No

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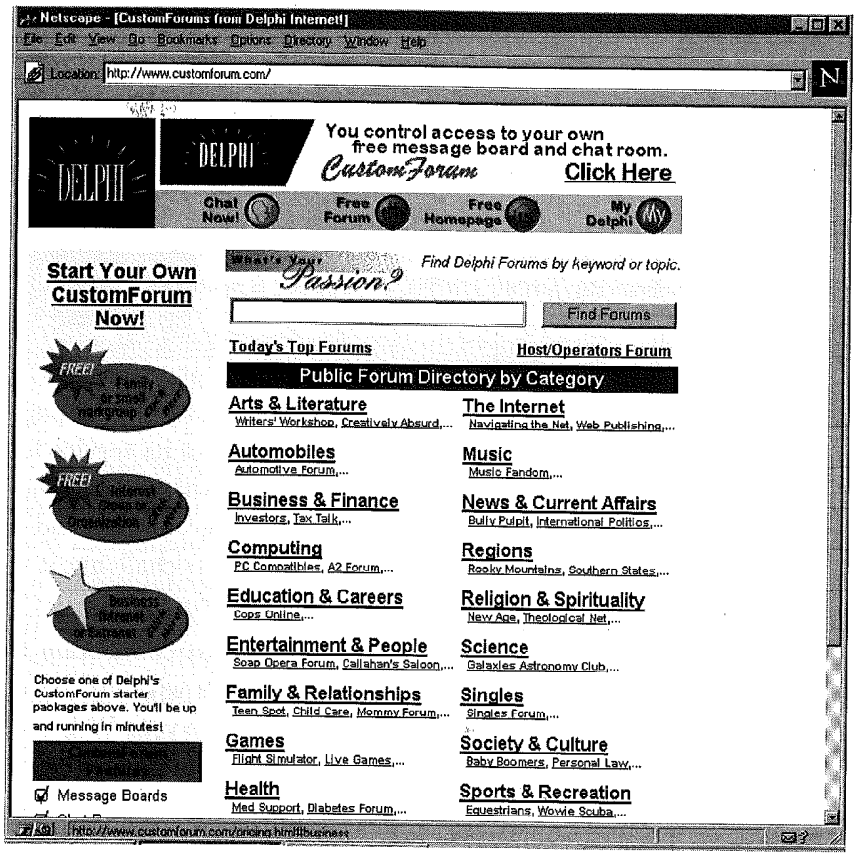
banner advertising is permitted, but the package includes a 50-megabyte Web site managed by the host with CustomForum tools and access control by use of passwords or a preapproved user list.

You choose which package you'd like to set up and are then led through several pages that allow you to give a name and URL tag to your forum. Then, if it is a public forum, you assign it a category from the Delphi menu as shown in Figure 8.16. If it's not a public forum, you publicize its existence to its intended membership in other ways, chiefly through email. Upon filling out your online

Figure 8.16 If you set up a public custom forum on the Delphi Web site, it will be found under one of the categories of the Public Forum Directory.



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forums, you immediately receive instructive email giving you URLs for setting up your forum and advising you on the process for managing it.

A typical public access Web page for a CustomForum is shown in Figure 8.17. It serves as the introduction to the community. The forum itself is pictured in Figure 8.18 with the conversations listed in the left-hand frame and the messages from the selected conversation scrolling in the right-hand frame.

Like The Mining Company, Delphi puts the tools for creating a custom community in the hands of whoever has the desire to create an interactive special-interest area, but Delphi does so without any arrangements for sharing ad revenue with the forum host that uses its template and resources. The trade is instead one of free forum and Web resources for new content and advertising space. This arrangement is like that at GeoCities, and also like GeoCities, which I'll describe in more detail in Chapter 10, Delphi provides structure and interest-focused exposure for the host's public forum through its main directory.

ForumHost.com

This service defines its purpose clearly on its homepage:

> *At ForumHost we do one thing and only one: Provide interactive fully flexible Internet conferencing/forums systems. ForumHost is dedicated to being the best Internet conference/forum provider you can find.*

ForumHost emphasizes the availability of its discussion platform as the element you *won't* get from your ISPs, many of which do provide homepage facilities for their subscribers. ForumHost doesn't provide any of its service for free as Delphi does, but then it's not beginning its business with a subscriber base in place as Delphi has. ForumHost is starting from the ground up and is banking on there being a fee-paying demand for what it offers. Its challenge is to offer more than you can get through a free Delphi CustomForum.

One of ForumHost's selling points is its central site's fast connection to the Internet that avoids the slowdowns found at many ISPs without direct Internet backbone connections. The forums are set up to link to your Web site, but if you haven't got a Web site, ForumHost will provide you will full facilities for creating one, including searching for and securing your own domain name for a reasonable fee.

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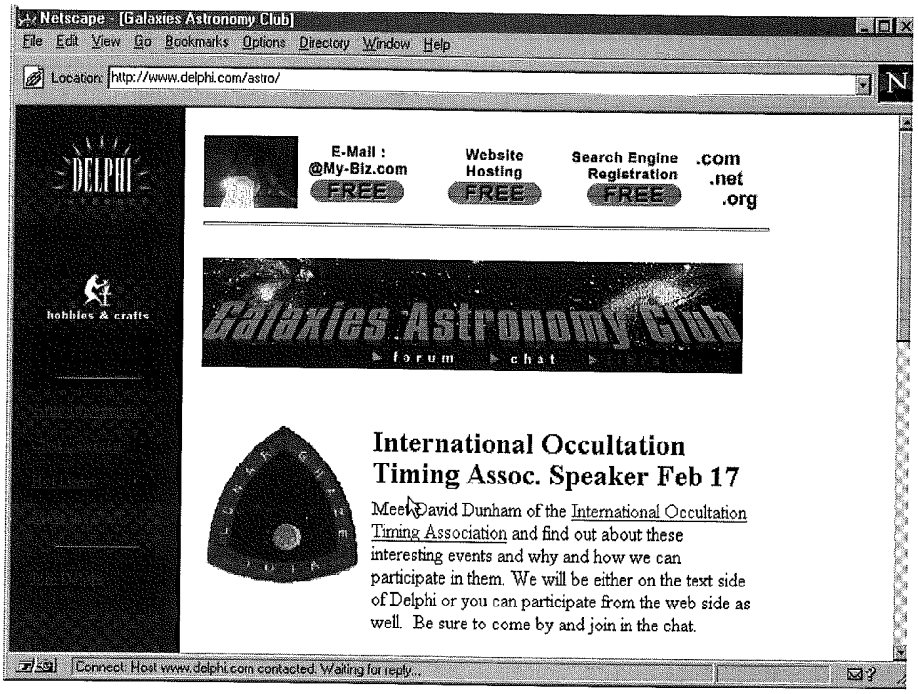
Figure 8.17 This is an example of a Delphi CustomForum page. Links within the page take you to the forum discussions. Notice that Delphi places banner ads on CustomForum pages that it provides for free.



Other Web site maintenance and enhancement services are also available through ForumHost for varying surcharges with additional initial setup fees and incremental storage and data transfer charges. You'll have to visit the site (www.forumhost.com) to see the full list of what it can provide. ForumHost explicitly does not host adults-only sites and reserves the right to refuse content that "advocates or engages in violence or hate speech, or promulgates obscene materials, or bulk-mails unsolicited email (spam)."

ForumHost offers two alternative conferencing setups, Standard and Deluxe, both of which use the threaded format. Both are displayed to the user with the conferences appearing in the left frame of the browser window and the content overview of the selected conference appearing at the top of the

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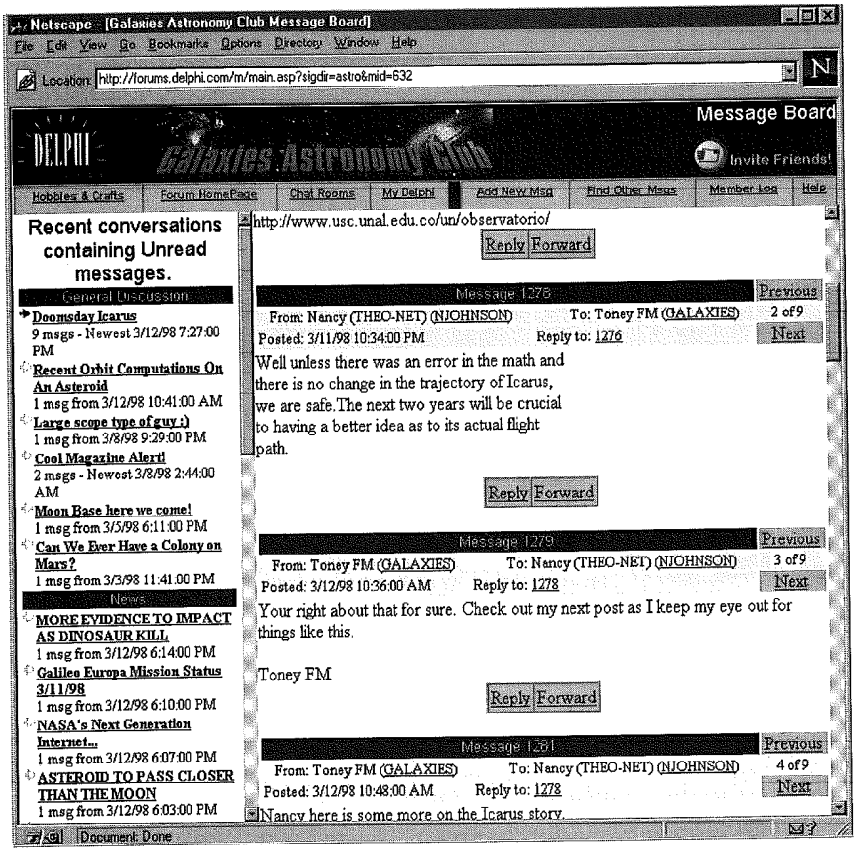
Figure 8.18 The structure of the CustomForum shows you material you haven't read yet and displays each conversation in linear form but with a threaded twist. Note that each post tells which post it replies to.



right frame as shown in Figure 8.19. The responses from the selected topic appear below the topic overview. It's not an optimum arrangement if you have many topics in a conference and many responses in a topic. In this particular case, you can see that only one topic has a response, but if every topic ignites discussion, the top of the window will get pretty crowded and your users will spend a lot of time scrolling up and down in the right-hand frame.

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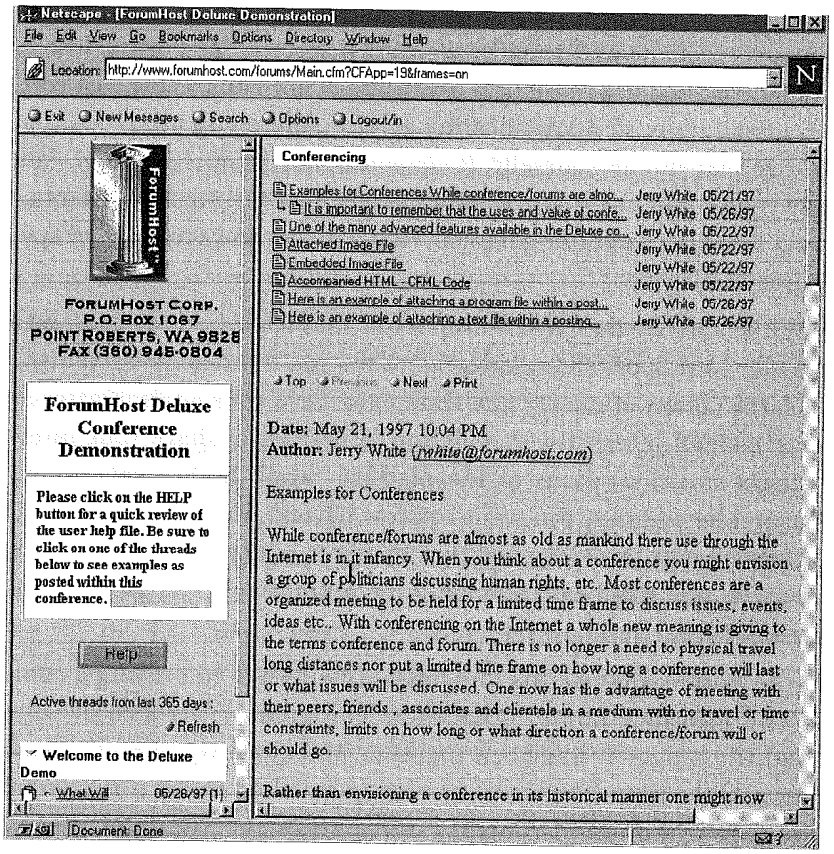
Figure 8.19 ForumHost provides a selection of configurations and features for setting up your own Web site including access to this forum platform, a threading interface that lists the postings at the top by their subject lines and opening words.



© *Copyright ForumHost Corp.*

The *Standard* conference costs $24.95 per month and offers limited administrative powers, host moderation options, up to five actual conferences, and automated email. The *Deluxe* setup costs $39.95 per month and adds flexible formatting of the appearance of your conferencing area (to match the look of

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the rest of your site) and flexible security arrangements for restricting access to your forum.

Trade-Offs of Forum-Hosting Services versus Installing and Managing Your Own

How do you weigh the costs and benefits of using a service like ForumHost or Delphi CustomForum against those of purchasing or licensing a low-cost software product, installing it on a Web-hosting service, and doing all of the configuration and management yourself? It depends mostly on how large you intend to grow your community and whether you're just testing the waters or are committed to making something happen that will last and serve a very specific and important purpose.

If it's more like a hobby than a serious pursuit that you expect to grow into a small business or to support an organization, then you'll probably be wanting to spend the least amount of money and time to achieve your goals of attracting and hosting a small interactive population of users who share your interests. The features and limitations of the platform won't be critical to your success. And if you decide that you want to grow beyond what the rented discussion space can support, or if you find that its features don't meet the needs of your community, you can begin shopping for a better alternative without having invested in actual purchases.

This is not to minimize the costs and hassle involved in migrating a community from one interface home to another. The greater the size of your community and the longer it has been together, the more you stand to lose by abandoning one platform home and moving to another. But if it's a hobby that starts growing at an out-of-control rate, chances are your community will gladly go along with whatever it takes for you to expand to serve them.

If you have (and can justify) the time and money to spend on building a community that will grow and expand its discussion topics indefinitely, you'll be better served by shopping carefully for the platform that will support your communities needs into the foreseeable future, whatever that is. Communities need time to establish themselves and develop their value. You don't want to truncate that development because you didn't plan well enough for what your

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community will require in the way of a discussion platform with the right features, the right format, and room to grow.

Summary

Choosing the appropriate asynchronous discussion platform for your community is first of all a matter of identifying the style of conversation that best fits your community. You must determine if your members need to converse in depth, with long discussions that go on for days at a time, or if they simply need a place to ask questions and come back later to see the answers. You must understand if your community is so diverse that it needs an ever-increasing variety of distinct interest-based conversation areas. If one ongoing conversation will be enough, then your choice is greatly simplified. You have to predict if most of your members will be returning daily or weekly, or if you expect your members to be temporary rather than long term. All of these considerations go into describing the kind of discussion platform you'll need.

The features being built in to the increasingly large selection of platforms address such differences in usage patterns. If you choose the wrong design for your community to talk to itself, the interface may severely limit its usefulness to them. It's hard to "try before you buy" because it takes a while for a community to settle into an interface even if it is just the right one. And once a community has adapted to an interface, it's difficult to change. If you expect your community to grow in numbers within the discussion environment, be sure to choose one that will expand with it both in terms of numbers of conversations supported and adaptation of its features. More veteran users will make use of more customizing options, while new users prefer the simplicity of few initial options to choose from.

Threaded interfaces support conversations that split off at a tangent from original discussions. This is a useful thing for short-term brainstorming meetings and for customer-support applications where engagement in lengthy interaction over time is not the object. Threaded interfaces excel where users need quick and clear access to all of the messages posted in order to find a place to respond. They are not so good for leading new users through the history of interaction in the community because the branching conversations can be difficult to follow in the right historical sequence.

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Linear conversation systems are better for supporting continuous discussion and for following the continuity of a discussion. With no branching, each topic has one beginning and one ending where new responses can be added. Good hosting helps conversantes in linear system stay on topic, initiating new topics when conversation strays too much in the current one. Good hosting helps make any interface more usable and adaptable to various applications.

The best way to evaluate interfaces is to visit sites where they are actively being used and spend some time trying out their features. As you test drive them, ask yourself how their reading and posting functions, their organization and navigation, and their user-preference options fit with the community in which you expect to be using them. Invite others who understand your community to join you in the evaluation. Contact the platform vendor and make sure you understand the extent of the platform's flexibility and the improvements being planned for subsequent versions. Because communities are likely to reveal new needs as they develop, you want to have a good relationship with the platform designer so that you can work together to evolve the interface along with your community.

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THE PRACTICE OF HOSTING DISCUSSION

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Up to this point in the book, I've been describing the various elements of design, technology, and staff descriptions that affect the relationship between users and the Web site. In this chapter, I deal with the more personal relationship between the people who lead and facilitate discussion and those who participate in discussion. The online discussion host is, in many cases, the most important link in the chain that connects a user to a site, for it is through the host that the user's experience can be most influenced.

Hosting group discussion on the Web is, perhaps, the most people-intensive activity there is in the electronic environment. The depth and meaningfulness of discussions may range from the silly to the sincere and from the seriously educational to the trivially disposable. Regardless of the topic, as the host you are there to raise the quality of the discussion to a higher level than it would achieve without you. And you are there to bring in more participation from more different voices than might happen without your encouragement and leadership.

The role of the discussion host differs across situations in much the same ways that communities do. *Cafés* require someone to maintain the very active and expanding discussion space, and involve himself in a variety of conversations, while in *theaters*, where focused content draws people to interact, a host must understand the context of the group's communication and coordinate it with the information being provided on the site. In *shrines*, group interaction

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may be so negligible that the services of a discussion host are superfluous. Hosts like Thom of the Vintage Bus site, whose responsibilities center around handling display content, won't be considered in this chapter. Instead, I will concentrate on sites where member interaction is central to the community's identity, and where host participation makes a significant difference in the quality of the member's experience.

Your involvement as host is essential to the building of relationships and user-created content, whether you're officially designated and titled by the provider of your site, or you're the self-proclaimed proprietor of a community of your own design and creation. You not only maintain the meeting place—arranging chat room schedules, starting and naming new discussion topics, and serving as librarian for online resources—but you act as a social adhesive between the people who meet there. You make your home inviting to newcomers and keep it a safe environment for participation and the open exchange of ideas.

In Chapter 4, "Involving Your Staff," I described the hosting role from the staffing perspective. I defined the need for hosts, told how to identify and hire for competency and effectiveness, touched on compensation issues, emphasized the importance of making clear agreements with them, and recommended that hosts selected and hired from within the user population be used by site management as advisory resources. I described them in terms of their working relation to the Community Manager. Through the rest of this chapter I will explain the specific duties that hosts fulfill in a variety of communities, and describe how the challenges of hosting can be handled using combinations of psychology and technology, even echoing a bit of Lao Tzu's philosophy of leadership where the ancient Chinese teacher advises:

> *If the sage would guide the people, he must serve with humility.*
>
> *If he would lead them, he must follow behind.*

To be an effective host, you must be an initiator and a leader who sets the stage for your guests to take their places as the real centers of attention in the community. You must also be an attentive follower of their suggestions and tendencies. Leadership in virtual groups is a delicate social position that requires a level of sensitivity that reaches across the threshold between the virtual and

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the real. You must try to understand your members' apprehensions about contributing publicly, in full view of an invisible audience of viewers that might number in the thousands. You should know human nature well enough to anticipate the reactions of your members even when they don't post them online, and you should understand how people's personae in the virtual world of the Net can differ dramatically from their personae in real life.

People experiment, sometimes wildly, with multiple versions of their real and imagined identities, and the host must be able to deal with behaviors that can range from the sincere to the truly bizarre. To be a good host, you must listen well and respond carefully, drawing out the best qualities of your guests and building a broad social *stage* on which they can feel free to perform. A good host is an emcee and presentation artist who exhibits mastery in use of the discussion platform on which the community lives.

And a good host must be a well of patience and tolerance with the courage to face public conflict and challenges. The Web is, to many people, a huge arena for the practice of behavior without rules and conventions. The exercise of authority, no matter what its justification, will be challenged wherever there's the opportunity to do so. As host, you are the personification of authority online and you must be willing to deal with the occasional and sometimes intense criticism that comes with serving in that role.

The Purposes of Hosting

In the most general sense, you host discussion to optimize your guests' experience in their group interaction. Effective hosting can transform visitors and guests into long-term residents. The host tries to make participation in online conversation a rewarding experience for as many users as possible. This is accomplished through invitation, encouragement, and praise, as well as through diplomacy and the judicious exercise of power. Protecting peoples' sense of ease and security in the electronic milieu can be just as important as inspiring their participation. There are three basic purposes of hosting:

Sharing enthusiasm. People who host discussion about subjects they love seem to have the best time and often have the happiest communities. For them, the purpose of hosting is to provide a place where

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people who share their interests and passions can meet and support each other. Infectious enthusiasm is a surefire stimulant to community, and a host who understands that often makes the difference between a lively and growing social gathering and a stagnant one. Hosting a community around a favorite interest intensifies its focus and attracts fellow enthusiasts and experts, making it a rewarding stop for anyone with an interest in the subject.

Facilitating productive conversation. Hosting is not just about building convivial communities among enthusiasts. Professional meetings on private business-oriented sites require hosts who understand how to moderate productive conversation in a technically mediated environment. They must know how to facilitate without stepping on the toes of the experts and authorities in attendance—the intended stars of the interaction. Their work is more formal, and success can be measured more by their efficiency and invisibility than by their ability to increase the users' time spent in the discussion area. Their primary goal may in fact be to accomplish the most in the least amount of time since the participants are often busy people.

Gail Williams of the WELL, when asked about facilitation techniques, points out that summarization is very important. Where participants must follow lengthy and often rambling conversations in either a chat or asynchronous discussion environment, they are likely to have missed key points, forgotten what has been proposed, or what reservations have not yet been addressed. Recap posts are invaluable for making progress in online meetings just as they are in traditional face-to-face meetings.

Linking users and management. As I said in Chapter 4, hosting is the most intimate way to relate to users and to learn what they need and expect from a Web site. Where the site is large enough that host and site manager are different people, hosts are granted their positions and their accompanying privileges by the site provider/manager. At least in some sense, they represent the provider in the community,

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serving as conduits through which information flows between users and site management. They establish relationships of trust with both users and those who grant them their powers, which puts them, at times, in positions of conflicting loyalties. Ideally, the Community Manager buffers such conflicts, serving as an intermediary to prevent the relationship between host and community from being compromised.

The techniques of hosting depend to a great extent on the format of the discussion. Groups that communicate through real-time chat interfaces differ greatly from those that interact asynchronously. People may react in the same ways to comments and responses regardless of the communications environment, but the nature of responses that appear instantly on the screen brings an immediacy to the host's duties in a chat world that does not exist in the world of the slower-paced conversation forum.

The Real-Time Host

Rule number one of hosting in a chat environment is: *Be there on time*. That's the nature of synchronous communications. Whether the chat room is set up as a scheduled daily meeting place for "Moms with two-year-olds," or as the perpetually active, always-open gabfest for "20-somethings," the presence and supervision of the host defines the chat as something different from an unhosted free-form gathering.

One very useful practice for chat hosts is, as I described previously, to *economize your keystrokes*. Depending on the format and level of activity, you're probably going to be typing a lot during a typical chat session. You should be welcoming users as they arrive, responding to questions, making helpful comments, and warning people who misbehave. Hosting by yourself in a busy chat room, you should have a collection of macros on hand that you can use for phrases that will be posted repeatedly, especially for greeting messages and frequently used warnings. You shouldn't have to type "Welcome!" or "you have just violated our Terms of Service" over and over again when a simple copy and paste will send the message to the screen more quickly. Keep a file of phrases on hand in a simple text editor like Notepad, or find a freeware program like TypeIt4Me (for Macs only) that can be downloaded from the Web and will post whole phrases or sentences with only a couple of keystrokes.

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Bringing Order to Chaos

Rule number two for chat hosts is: *Keep your eyes on the screen.* As host in a real-time discussion, you must be paying attention all the time. It can be taxing, watching words appear and scroll off the screen constantly for an hour or more while trying to follow what's being said in a busy room. Multiple conversations go on, usually interspersed with each other. People who seem to know who they're talking to and what they're talking about mingle with strangers who just dropped in knowing nothing about the context of the ongoing conversations or the people engaged in them.

Where the chat room or event has a name and a theme, the host is often relied on to keep discussion relevant to the theme in spite of people's tendency to make small talk. Keeping a real-time group conversation focused can be as difficult as dropping in to a cocktail party in full swing and asking everyone to please steer their conversations toward a single topic. For many people, every opportunity to chat is an invitation to a social mixer. Somehow, the host has to gently influence and guide discussion without being heavy-handed and overbearing about it. Reading the will and preferences of the audience and enlisting support from participants to steer conversation in the most rewarding direction in the midst of dynamic interaction requires skill and insight.

If you want your chats to follow their intended themes, the best advice I can offer is: *Be prepared.* Your presence is, in some sense, a performance that aims to draw enough of the audience's attention to the topic that the result will be a focused interchange. You should have plenty of knowledgeable stuff to say about the theme, with information and ideas that will hold people's interest on it. You should also have allies in your audience who support your efforts to stay on topic. Allies are crucial to successful hosting regardless of which platform is being used, but in chat, where distraction and tangential conversation can spring out of nowhere in a second, a few participants doggedly sticking to the topic set the example and direction for the rest and can provide a coherent thread of responses for others to follow.

Reacting Instantly to Problems

Problems must be dealt with promptly in a real-time environment. Things can quickly get out of hand if a user intentionally disrupts the room or overreacts

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to a comment. In a scheduled one-hour chat, 20 minutes spent dealing with one persistent person who insists on derailing the discussion sacrifices a big chunk of the collective attention and experience. So a host must have tools and human resources at the ready that can be used with varying degrees of finality to deal with pests or even well-meaning users who threaten the meeting. We described these tools, which work through the escalating imposition of gagging, booting, and expulsion, in Chapter 7, "Platform Alternatives for Chat."

Sue Boettcher is a veteran host of chats on America Online and on the Web. Here's her short list of suggestions for successful chat hosting:

> *1) Start out with software that gives you host tools to:*
>
> *a—boot or gag people if or when necessary*
>
> *b—engage in backchannel communication with people (instant messages or private messages within the chat room)*
>
> *2) If you're going to do a serious topic chat, especially one with a guest, you'll need to have a co-host (or even two) to deal with the backchannel interaction while you're out there handling the main room.*
>
> *3) Plan Ahead. Have intelligent questions lined up to ask when the pace lags or things start to get inane. I can't say that enough. Plan Ahead.*
>
> *4) Have your backchannel person fire an instant or private message to anyone the moment they happen into the room. The message should include the topic and any protocol (traffic control) rules you're using. Also, have your backchannel person deal politely (and privately) with anybody who transgresses in the main room (people are usually confused rather than malicious), so as not to further disrupt the main chat.*
>
> *5) If you have a guest lined up, practice with them beforehand so they know what to expect and you know what their interactive style is. Write a promo (a public announcement of the guest's presence) and questions ahead of time and clear them with the guest. You'll probably need to use some kind of protocol for the chat itself, so everyone gets to ask their questions and the guest isn't overwhelmed trying to answer sixteen questions at once.*
>
> *6) Keep a mailing list with the topic schedule to send to "regulars."*

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By *protocol* in suggestion number five, Sue means a combination of ground rules and typed signals that are recognized in the chat room to keep order in the discussion. If you're conducting a moderated chat without the use of a specially designed event facilitation platform such as we described in Chapter 7, your alternative technique is to instruct your guests not to post responses—and thus interrupt the interview process—unless recognized by the moderating host. To be recognized, users are instructed to post an exclamation mark (!) when they want to make a comment, and a question mark (?) when they want to ask a question. A co-host keeps a list—the *queue*—from which the moderator recognizes users in turn as the guest answers questions and responds to comments one by one.

The Asynchronous Host

If you host a conference or message board, you will probably have multiple conversations to follow, but since they're not happening in real time, you can visit them sequentially; you needn't follow them all at once. There's no rush or time pressure unless there are so many busy conversations that they require more time than you have available to keep up with them all. If that's the case, you must decide whether to trim the number of conversations you follow, which can mean closing down the discussions, or find a co-host to share your duties.

Managing the Pace of Conversations

If increased traffic and increased participation are the goals of your site, as they usually are, trimming back on the number of active conversations will not be an option. You should think in terms of keeping as many conversations active as possible to provide variety, while not keeping so many active that participation is diluted, resulting in a large selection of semi-idle topics. This pacing of topics is an important consideration for hosts since it maximizes the amount of interesting interaction and focuses the participation of the most interesting people in a more limited selection of discussions.

In deciding which asynchronous conversations are worth keeping alive and which should be trimmed, you must be able to distinguish between a conversation that has run itself out—where everything that can be said about the topic has been said—and one that still has life in it but needs to be revived.

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Perfectly good topics sometimes halt abruptly because of the wording of one response that doesn't invite or lead gracefully to a response. I call these *door slammers* for what they do to the continuity of a discussion. A good host can bring such topics back to life. Gail Williams suggests here that you "refer back to an earlier post with a substantive comment and a provocative question, perhaps sending private notes to people who might be interested in taking the discussion further. Or, if you can muster a good, lighthearted joke which will not start a fight, you may be able to use humor in pointing out that it's a hard post to follow."

Clarifying Topics

Like an editor or headline writer, you should keep topic titles clear and accurate so that people joining conversations will know what it is that they're supposed to be talking about. Cryptic and poorly worded topic titles—often meant to be clever—can confuse or dissuade people from reading and posting in them. Though (where allowed) it's often the users who start new topics and name them, most platforms allow hosts to edit topic names to make them reflect the actual content of the discussion.

Explain to your users, in your instructions for opening new discussions, the importance of good topic titling. It's best not to retitle topics after they've been started. It can lead to some confusion and conflict with the users who have their personal justifications for title selection no matter how off-the-wall they may seem. Your best appeal is to the users' role as a content provider whose creations will be more valued if made accessible through thoughtful titling.

Conflict Resolution

In terms of dealing with difficulty, the main difference between hosting in real time and in asynchronous environments is that in the latter, problems work themselves out more slowly. Disruptive comments and users can usually be dealt with through email. Individual postings that pose problems can be deleted or temporarily hidden—depending on the platform's features—while decisions are made as to how to handle them. Social conflict and dysfunction can be discussed in a more sedate manner than can be done in a chat room. But, like a chat host, an asynch host must pay attention on many levels, from the words posted on the screen to the personalities and relationships of the

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participants. And, like a chat host, a forum host should make good use of backchannels to resolve problems.

The most telling characteristic of asynchronous platforms, when considering problematical postings, is that the postings remain available for reading long after they've been entered. This fact can be treated by you or your site's management as either an asset or a liability. Conflict, in itself, is a reality in any community. There's no sense trying to hide the fact that people who interact with each other over time—which is what you want in a community—will have occasional strong disagreements. They may post things that reflect poorly on themselves and that are uncomfortable for others to read days or even years later. This fact should be emphasized to users joining the community, that whatever they post on the system may remain for public viewing long into the future. That, along with users identifying themselves by real names, is probably the strongest leverage your system has for regulating public behaviors in an asynchronous community. Deletion of postings, though completely within your rights as a host, brings its own problems, which I'll get into later in the chapter.

Relating with Users

Hosting is a people-centered activity, and hosts do best who have learned through experience how to relate effectively in an electronic environment. Grouches and misanthropes don't do well as hosts except in the rare cases where the community is somehow centered around their personalities and controversial expressions of opinion, and even in those situations they are more likely to be regarded as content providers than actual facilitators of interaction. A host must be able to influence people's behavior without being manipulative or coercive. Partaking in online conversation is a voluntary activity in all but the most business-focused situations, and people are quick to change loyalties if they feel subject to power trips or dishonesty. The host is in a position of power and leadership and must use those privileges in ways that benefit users while earning their trust over time.

The Host's Base of Trust

There's an essential difference between hosts who are on the staff of the site provider and hosts who originate from within the grassroots population of the

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community itself. Even when both staff hosts and grassroots hosts have the same responsibilities, human nature, on the part of the users, is more likely to ascribe ulterior motives to a host who works for the ultimate authority: system management. This syndrome is most likely to appear when conflict arises regarding an exercise of power by management that threatens the stability or perceived freedom of the community. Often, these are the result of sensible business decisions that force changes in the community's interface or policies. A staff host will attempt to explain the changes in an objective way, but in doing so risks losing whatever trust has been built with the community. Grassroots hosts, on the other hand, are more likely to be believed even when supporting management's position because of the perception that they are *of* the users rather than of the power structure.

The lesson here certainly isn't that staff hosts should not be used, but that the identification and mistrust of authority figures in online relationships is a common reaction. Hosts who begin as regular users and gain their positions through initiative or recognition of their talents don't carry the burden of having to disassociate themselves from what might be the bottom-line priorities of management in order to maintain the trust of their communities. They may be challenged for other things relating to their efforts to guide or control activity, but as long as they retain their "amateur standing," they have an easier time avoiding the loss of faith in their leadership.

Encouraging Relationships

As host, you are but one person in a community of many. As ringleader of what amounts to a relationship-building conspiracy, you should use creative means to introduce people to each other and stimulate meaningful personal connections. Trust should exist not just between you and your members, but between the members themselves. It takes a good host to lead interaction in ways that open people up to each other and create opportunities for familiarity to take hold.

No matter how much we try to tell about ourselves and learn about each other through the Web, nothing quite compares with meeting people in person. The WELL's monthly face-to-face parties were the idea of a host who wanted to express her appreciation to the WELL staff. With staff consent, she

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extended an open invitation to WELL members to visit our office on a Friday evening, thus beginning the tradition of monthly WELL office parties that has gone on without a break for 12 years. Many groups who formed through online means have found ways to meet, party, and collaborate in the real world. America Online has long been the planning environment for large regional community get-togethers. Multimedia workers in San Francisco have blended their online collaboration with regular real-world hangouts. Friendships validated through meeting in person take on a deeper significance in their online existence. Again, the reinforcement of trust and the presence of trusted personal relationships within the overall electronic community are often the strongest bases for the community's longevity.

True Confessions

Early in the WELL's history, when the registered community numbered less than 2000, two members opened a conference they named True Confessions. Its purpose was to be a place where people could post personal histories. Participation started slowly. People were shy and just getting used to a new medium that was far from mainstream. But as some took the first small steps and gave remarkable accounts of their pasts, others were emboldened and offered their own. WELLers discovered facts about each other that would have taken a long time to come to the surface through the usual conversations going on in the community. Today, many Web-based platforms provide room for users to post personal profiles and build homepages that can do what True Confessions did for the WELL by providing places where people can reveal what they would like others to know about them.

Working the Backchannels

The host works in two worlds simultaneously. The first is the public world in which conversations are led and moderated, users are greeted and encouraged, and announcements are made to the community. The second, and in some ways

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the more important world, is the private one in which individual users are contacted and conversed with. Backchannel communications take place through email, one-to-one chat and even, in the more cohesive communities, the telephone. A good host puts value into as many individual members as possible. Public acknowledgment is just a part of that. Many people, often the ones who prove most valuable to an interactive community, feel much better cared for when they are contacted privately.

But encouraging participation and feelings of belonging is only one reason for establishing personal relationships with members of your community. It's a good idea, politically, to find friends, allies, and supporters. By recognizing kindred spirits among the regular participants and making personal contact with them, you can nurture a core group of members who will help you through difficulties and take on some of your load as the community's traffic increases. Good hosts of highly interactive communities spend a significant part of their time building and maintaining circles of allies.

When social difficulties occur, as they will in most online group settings, private communications between you and the troublemaker (or the antagonists where the problems stem from a conflict) is often the quickest route to defusing the situation. Without calling individuals out in public discussion, you may be able to tactfully reason with the perpetrator(s) in a less incendiary atmosphere than the chat room or conferencing topic. Options and ultimatums can be given and deals can be struck without distracting the rest of the community or escalating the confrontation. Make the use of multiple private communications channels part of your normal practice.

Resource Providers and Custodians

You can operate as a host in either active or passive mode, depending on the nature and needs of your community. Actively bringing informational resources to the site is a way of feeding community interests and stimulating its interaction. Presenting links to relevant Web sites, facts, figures, entertaining activities, and background information on special guests can be an integral part of your role and may be expected of you by your members.

Not all hosts are expected to be so active, especially in arrangements in which the community defines itself solely by the variety of its interaction and not

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by a specific focus. If that describes your situation, your involvement may not extend much beyond maintaining the organizational aspects of the discussion environment and handling the occasional disruptive participant. Custodial hosts, though not nearly so involved with the social and content development aspects of the community, should still be plugged in to the personalities and trends of the interaction. The goal in either case remains to keep as many people engaged in the community as possible.

Relating with Management

You spend most of your time on the same side of the interface as the users. Yet unlike them, you have an ongoing relationship with the site's management and may even *be* the site's manager. At times you may find yourself questioning the decisions or judgment of management and taking the point of view of the users with whom you normally hang out. If you're both manager and host, you'll no doubt find yourself torn between the two viewpoints. Resolving such conflicts is crucial if you're going to feel secure in your role and if the site's management is going to feel comfortable having you represent them to the users.

Protecting the Host-User Bond

I didn't get too specific describing the contents of a contract between host and site management in Chapter 4 because there are just too many variations in hosted communities and their goals. But a clear definition of host responsibilities must go along with an accounting of the limitations to what a host can discuss publicly. Ironically, putting contractual boundaries around what you, as host, are permitted to say to users can actually protect you from compromising your relationship with them.

Should public controversy be raised by a management decision that affects the community, you are safe to declare, "I'm not contractually permitted to comment on that issue." This does not, of course, prevent you from representing the users' views to management, but it does allow you to preserve your relationship with users while not endangering your relationship with management. A host should not be forced into publicly supporting a management position that is unpopular with users.

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Occasionally, someone arrives on the scene whose presence is so disruptive to other participants that you must take action for the sake of the sense of community. These situations usually have obvious solutions, and the great majority of the community will have no problem with whatever discipline you impose. But in some communities, and with some troublemakers, the consensus is not so clear and you risk alienating part of the group no matter which way you choose to deal with the situation. This is a good reason for management rather than hosts taking responsibility for resolving serious conflicts. You can then continue to concentrate on the more positive aspects of your role in the community, deferring to management to make the disciplinary decisions. Again, if you are both manager and host, you must resolve your dual roles in a way that preserves your credibility with the community.

Voicing Users' Concerns

As an advisor to management on behalf of user concerns, you can be instrumental in bringing about interface improvements and service enhancements. You are an intermediary between the users—who are ultimately the guinea pigs for all interface "updates"—and the design staff. In this role, you also act as a buffer, filtering the raw and often emotionally tinged reactions of users from the helpful information they are trying to communicate. If the site where you host has a variety of interest communities, you and the other hosts can, as a group, provide management with a good cross section of opinions and evaluations. This is a good reason for the hosts who share duties in different discussion communities on a single Web site to have some communication with each other.

Initiating Interaction

First there is no community, then there is. Conversation has to begin somewhere, and how it begins instantly affects everything that follows. The secrets to a good start in a discussion area lie mainly in the choice of opening topics that should be well matched to the interests, personality, and temperament of the group you want and expect to attract. The first exchanges with users as they arrive also have tremendous influence on the resulting community identity. These initial activities should set the tone and build the founding core of active members.

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Seeding Conversation

Providing conversational activity that the first users can read and respond to in a new discussion space is guaranteed to draw more interest and participation than an uninhabited, empty discussion platform that puts the responsibility on the first arrivals to bootstrap their own conversations. Consider that in any online population, far fewer people will post in conversations than will read them, and far fewer still will be willing to initiate them. Those conditions narrow the number of potential conversation initiators and increase the chance that discussions will be started by people whose aims are not aligned with yours. It's your responsibility to kick off the interaction with items that address the community's focus and invite the user's involvement. How this is done can differ significantly between an asynchronous community and one based around chat.

Introduction and Orientation in Chat Communities

Because real-time communities don't operate on platforms that build written histories, as do many asynchronous communities, a new user dropping in to an established chat community won't have a way to reference the room's long history of interaction. It will take her a while to get a sense of who the regulars are and the roles they play. If the room is identified as being focused on a specific interest or demographic, the new visitor knows, at least, whether its users' focus matches one of her own. But she may have no idea going in which aspects of the chat's topic have been talked to death and which still have life left in them. One of the least appealing characteristics of chat rooms is the repetition of the same questions and topics over and over as new people enter the room. Starting new chat communities and getting new arrivals up to speed in existing communities both benefit from the host providing introductory and orientating content in a form that's readable by all visitors to the site.

Within WBS, the Gardening Community is reached through a *doorway* page as shown in Figure 9.1. Although there is no account of the community's history, there are convenient links to the profiles and homepages of regular Gardening participants and to related content on the Web. There is a sense that something has been going on for a while among a certain group of people. This preliminary introduction to the members and orientation of the community make it more

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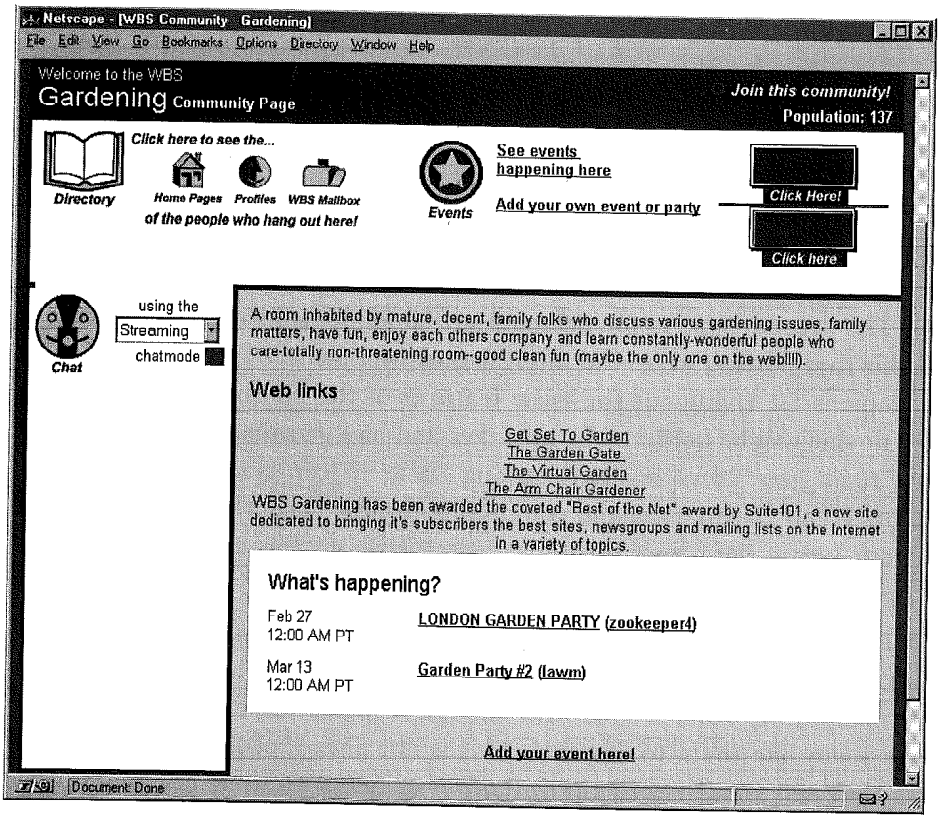
Figure 9.1 The entry page into a community can inform visitors and prospective members about its interests, members, and history. The Gardening Community on WBS points to the homepages and profiles of members.



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likely that people joining Gardening chats for the first time will observe the interaction for a while, watching how members converse before leaping in.

Unlike chat, asynchronous platforms allow the host to really set the discussion table before the guests arrive. A tasty and inviting selection of topics can be prepared and warmed up so that the first users to come upon them will find information that makes them feel at home, instructs them on using the system, and then invites them to post something of their own. If done right,

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users will be comfortable in participating immediately. And the topics that you create early in the community's life will serve as models of how to (or how *not* to) begin topics for people joining the community from then on.

Although it's imperative that an online users' manual and/or Help files be made accessible from everywhere within the discussion platform, we all know how difficult it is to get people to read manuals, so the essential How To should be incorporated into the conversation or messaging platform itself as one of the initial topics. A method that I've found to work well is illustrated in Figure 9.2, where my first topic takes the user step by step through the functions and jargon of the conferencing platform, describing first what the user is seeing on his screen. Through actual use of the platform, the user gets to learn about its features. The second topic is for personal introductions and invites the user to make his first posting while the interface instructions are fresh in mind. The third topic is for trying out the basic features of the platform in a playroom where no one will be bothered by mistakes and badly formatted postings. The fourth topic gets users involved, asking them to contribute their opening thoughts about the focus of the community. In this case, the conference was created to host a planning group for an entrepreneurs' forum. After my six initial topics, I invited the participants to start their own.

Following the orientation topics, I generally recommend that you start, or encourage users to start, a few conversations focused on the central interest of the community, each seeded with enough responses to clue the readers in to how you'd like them to respond. This is not always obvious to users, and topics that are started with the intention of being focused discussion may quickly degenerate into free-for-alls that drift far from the intended direction. Topic drift is not always bad; in fact, it can be both entertaining and enlightening in the right circumstances. However, it doesn't have to be so extreme that a topic's title ends up having nothing to do with the actual discussion contained within it.

It's always a good idea, when creating discussions in your role as host, to begin each topic with as clear a definition of its intention as possible. In its title and opening responses, you should define what I think of as the topic's *function*, *problem*, and *practice*. The *function* of a topic could be to deliver information to the community, support a focused discussion, or serve as place for

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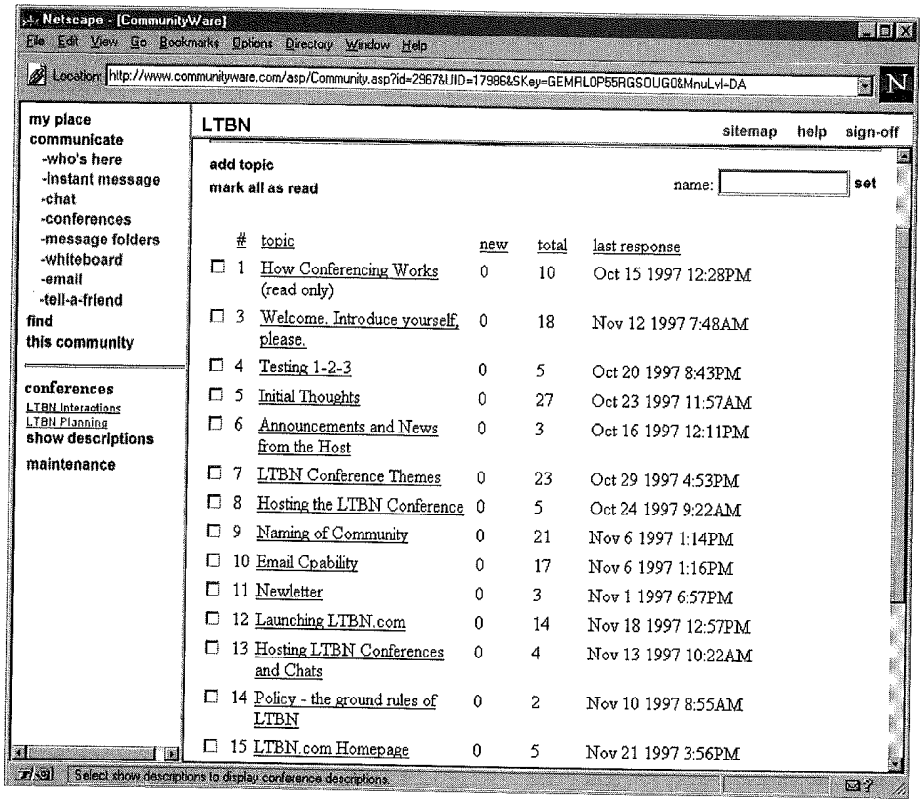
Figure 9.2 Beginning a conference with several topics that guide the new user through the conferencing interface by using the interface is one quick way to flatten the learning curve. This example took place in Durand Communications' CommunityWare site.



swapping opinions or stories. The *problem* is the subject of the discussion, which is often the only thing stated clearly in the title and its first posting. The *practice* is the style of interaction that the topic creator intends for it to have. The topic creator might want to serve as the *moderator* of interaction, or the practice could be for all participants to respond in turn, as in a classroom or formal meeting situation.

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The first few seeded responses in a topic should communicate to subsequent visitors the kinds of postings that would be most effective in furthering the conversation. This is not done explicitly, but through cues imbedded in the wording. Users look for social cues when they arrive new in a online conversation just as you look for them in real life when you arrive at a social gathering. The cues or hints telegraph to the attendees what is appropriate in the way of behavior at the gathering. Part of the online host's role is to make those essential social cues as obvious as possible, especially to people not familiar with the community's style of interaction.

Greeting New Arrivals

This duty of hosts is as essential and important as it is self-evident. A community should never be too large or too busy to give a personal greeting to its new users. In spite of this practice being almost synonymous with the traditional definition of the *host*, it tends to be de-emphasized once a community has become established. It's usually the newer members of the community who remind the rest how helpful the initial welcome was to them when they first logged in.

New people bring new ideas and fresh enthusiasm. The conscientious host lets them know that their presence has been noticed and appreciated, encouraging them to stay around long enough to sink in some roots. You should regard each new member as having the potential to be the one who will singlehandedly make your community a success. I have witnessed the effects of people like that and if you're lucky enough to attract such individuals, you don't want to miss the chance to have them around for a while by failing to acknowledge them when they first check in.

On systems whose users can create personal profiles or point to their homepages, the host should use these resources to learn about new users as they arrive. Knowing what a person is willing to reveal about his background, or seeing the style of his writing or homepage design, is valuable stuff, and finding it out should not be considered snooping. That is, after all, what homepages and personal profiles are for: to add depth and breadth to the Web user's online identity. Based on their volunteered personal information, you have a lead-in for engaging new users in conversation. You also have a basis for inviting them to participate or directing them to specific discussions that would fit their interests.

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Provide a Slow Lane

Once you've started hosting your community, don't be in such a hurry to grow that you, your early joiners, and the fastest learners speed off and forget that newbies are still arriving, encountering hurdles, and getting up to speed. Maintain the topics that serve the needs of new users, and encourage your more settled members to help you provide hand-holding for the people who are just getting to know your interface and culture.

The more topics and content that have accumulated in the discussion area, the more complex will be your community's navigation. New users must be shown how to find the most recent postings and explore the more historical ones. Keep in mind that as they arrive to discover announcements and listings of hundreds of topics and thousands of total responses, they are likely to be overwhelmed. Make sure they can find out easily how to catch up with your community's wealth of conversations and how to stay caught up with its ongoing interaction.

Maintaining Interaction

Once the community has reached the stage at which a core of regular users has settled in and there's steady activity, your priorities should migrate from getting the community started to keeping it going and growing. While still serving newcomers as they check in, you must spend more time learning about the population as a developing social group while performing the maintenance work that will insure that group interaction continues to be attractive to both new users and regulars. The key to keeping a community running on all cylinders once it's up to speed is in paying good attention.

Paying Attention to Community Elements

Here are the kinds of things you should be noticing and learning in your community that will help you to respond to it as a host:

- Who are the main contributors to the conversations?
- What do you know about them as individuals?
- What are their styles and usage habits?
- Do they appear every day at the same time?

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- Can you rely on them showing up like clockwork for a particular chat session or forum topic?
- Can you predict that they'll have something to say in certain topics?

You have to identify the people who will make up your ensemble cast, for online discussions are like performances. They do have audiences and the people who post are, for all practical purposes, the ones putting on the show. As host, you become like the director and coordinator and so should know as much as possible about your cast, its talents, and its tendencies.

The less ideal aspects of your community should also be familiar to you. The characters who rub each other the wrong way and butt heads repeatedly in the interactions under your watch are just as much a characteristic of your community as its smooth-running cooperative dialogs. Even if you can't get antagonists to shelve their differences or ignore each other, you can learn how to better predict the situations that trigger their conflicts and how to subtly warn others how to avoid entangling themselves.

Other things you should understand through observation are the pace and patterns of activity in the community. Do most people participate in the evenings? Do some show up only in the mornings? Are weekends especially busy? Knowing the usage habits of the most active and influential members can help you plan your own participation and anticipate how conversations will flow, especially in linear topics. I've hosted forum topics where, after posting my opinions about a hot issue and then logging off at 4 P.M., I could predict the nature of the replies I'd find in the morning because I knew certain users who logged in later in the evenings and how they would react to what I'd written. Having some knowledge of the personalities and usage habits of others often spared me from being surprised or even shocked the next morning.

Stimulating Discussion

You may have done enough advance work in designing your site and recruiting the early members of your community that a lack of conversational impetus won't be a problem for you. The right people show up, strike up friendships, find common ground, and conversations take off naturally. For a host, that's the best possible situation. But nothing should be taken for granted; activity

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can fade out quickly after the initial burst of enthusiasm. You have to fan the interactive flames—and here I don't use the term to stand for online invective—when and where you find them or you'll have to kindle the fires again from scratch.

Fanning the good flames of interaction can be as simple as publicly and privately acknowledging users' contributions and participation in ways that are likely to encourage them to continue. Don't let users' attempts to lead discussion go unnoticed and unrewarded. Don't allow well-meaning users to be left wondering if their contributions are worthwhile. Give helpful hints through backchannels when you see people using ineffective posting techniques. Build your base of consistent participators and keep working on it, but be sincere, not patronizing, in how you acknowledge your contributors.

In your own postings, try to leave *hooks* that invite others to respond. These can be as obvious as asking a question of the community or wording your posting to provoke some reaction. Avoid making statements that shut down conversation—the aforementioned *door-slammers*—because they are so plainly factual or declaratory and leave nothing more to be said. You want more things to be said, and you always want to set examples that will further your goals of stimulating continued conversation.

Whatever the focus of the community, continue to bring in outside resources of interest to the interaction. Look for ideas in the news, in the media, on the Web, in books, and in your experience around which you can base new discussion. Continue to add to the community's content and knowledge. Wherever possible, personalize new information by pointing it out to the specific members you know will be most interested. Hosting can be a lot like teaching a class except that you're not so much the teacher as you are a setter of examples for everyone who'd like to bring up new subjects and lead new conversations. Model productive behaviors for your members and invite emulation.

Housekeeping Chores

Interactive communities, especially those who store asynchronous discussion, accumulate information. The more populous and active they are, the more the

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information piles up. Like in my home office, information accumulation without regular culling of outdated and extraneous stuff can lead to a very messy environment. Notably in forums, topics and conversations are created constantly but don't disappear by themselves. Some platforms include the ability for hosts to set a maximum length to topics. A topic set to save 100 responses will begin scrolling the oldest of them into another file once the hundredth response is made. The file might be a preserved archive or it might be what some call the *bit bucket* where all deleted data ends up. This obviously prevents any topic from becoming too long, but if the community culture prefers to have topics retain all their responses regardless of length, other means must be used to prevent the overloading of both system disks and users' information-processing capacity.

Communities keep conversations in their active discussion areas because they are either of current interest or have value as historical records or collected data. But in any collection of recorded discussions there are liable to be some that no longer have value to the community. Removing them from the choices that users, especially newer users, must select from is a service that makes the system run faster both technically and socially. Communities committed to keeping their histories intact should make them available in specially designated areas of their active discussion or in read-only archived collections apart from the active discussions. Many communities are less concerned with historical record than with fresh content and simplified choices for users. If you and your community want to have a sense of existing and evolving over time, some selective archiving is a good way to honor that.

To again emphasize the behavioral modeling: You can minimize the amount of housekeeping you'll have to do as host by starting new topics wisely. Don't open a new conversation unless you feel confident that it will be adopted by others in the community, and take responsibility for maintaining topics you start. Don't let them lie idle or turn into dead-end discussions; wring the most participation that you can out of them. And, as with all good practices, encourage the rest of the users to do likewise.

Navigating the Social Rapids

People will be people no matter how foolproof your strategy for collecting them in your particular community. They enjoy exchanging ideas and some people

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do so in a rougher manner than others. You can and should post cautionary guidelines for online interaction in both the introduction to your system and in its interactive space. The following two paragraphs are taken from the WELL's Community Guidelines and state some truths and principles that have been passed down from the earliest pre-WELLian networking pioneers. Note that these are addressed specifically to users of asynchronous interfaces.

> *Remember that words you enter in a burst of inspired passion or indignant anger will be there for you (and everyone) to read long after your intense feelings are gone. This isn't meant to discourage spontaneity and the expression of feelings on the WELL, but merely to remind you of the long-term existence and effects of what you write.*
>
> *You may, from time to time, find yourself in disagreement with someone on the WELL. At times like this, keep in mind that it's safer, more polite, and more persuasive to take issue with that person's comments, rather than attacking them personally.*

Most people will go along with those sentiments, but some find personal confrontation to be the *sporting* way to use group communication tools. The more passionately involved your members, the more likely it is that strong feelings will emerge between them. You, as the authority figure, may be drawn into hassles, too. Rather than allow yourself to get emotionally involved, be the one who keeps the coolest head about the situation and tries to solve its cause rather than address its symptoms. You may be forced to make a decision that will be unpopular with some, but don't be arbitrary about it. If the problem becomes one that sucks more of your time than you think you can afford, escalate it to the Community Manager for resolution. If you're also the Community Manager, fall back on your policy and your site's purpose, and make your decision based on what is best for the future of the community as a whole.

Set the example for the rest of the community by handling interpersonal problems with maturity and grace. It will be learned by others and adopted as part of the standards that the community recognizes as its own. And after any public hassle reaches resolution, don't hesitate to acknowledge publicly the lessons that were learned. Just be careful not to ignite a new controversy in the process. Depersonalize problems and examine them objectively as the effects of human dynamics in a new virtual environment.

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Community Standards

This section is in the chapter on hosting because it is so closely tied to the values and practice of the host who initiates the content and discussion. Community standards generally differ from a site's *policy* in that they are the rules that the community itself recognizes as working to make the interaction most enjoyable and productive. They may be more strict than the overarching policies, or less so. In either case, they are the ones most respected and enforced by the community's members because they have been validated by the members' experience. But how do these standards come about? How are they recognized? What do you, the host, have to do with them?

Appropriate Behavior

Etiquette is what governs acceptable social behaviors in a culture or community. You don't get arrested for violating etiquette; you just don't get invited back. Or people cease responding to you. Sometimes etiquette gets in the way of communication between people who subscribe to different standards. Wearing the "wrong" clothes, eating with the "wrong" hand, or using the "wrong" language can get you in different kinds of trouble with different people. Communities are at least partly defined by their standards of behavior, but once the interaction comes online, the variables of virtual presence come into play. No matter how well you define your community to attract just the right kinds of participants, you're going to get a range of people, behaviors, and attitudes.

Assuming that the community you host has an identifiable focus, that focus should be the anchor to its standards. You, the host, can set certain rules in the beginning if you know they are needed for the community to achieve your purpose. You can, for instance, require members who want to express anger with another member in colorful terms to take their communication to email rather than posting insults and expletives in the midst of public conversation. You can prohibit members from harassing other members through using the discussion space that you host.

Whatever you do as host or in concert with your community, you must balance individual freedoms of expression with the realities of the group's needs.

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Public acrimony is okay in small doses, but you don't want it to become the overall tone of your community's conversation with itself. Too much invective upsets the balance and can send the community on a downhill ride into oblivion. The community will express itself about such matters and should be consulted about questions of standards and how they need to be defined to keep the sense of community healthy.

Standards Creep and Provincialism

Often when people have known each other for a while and have come to feel relaxed in each other's presence, they become less inhibited and more loose-mouthed around each other. It's an effect that happens not just between friends, but between any people who share a long enough history of interaction. Things they wouldn't have dared to say when they were new acquaintances, they don't think twice about saying once they've established a history together. In-jokes, good-natured wisecracks, and sarcasm work among people who know each other and are misunderstood by people who don't. These are signs of social bonding and community, but they can work against the processes of community growth by excluding and even offending people who are new to the neighborhood.

Community identity is what you strive for in the startup and initial growth stages. You do all you can as a host to facilitate people's getting to know each other and learning about each other's likes, dislikes, and habits. There comes a point, though, when the community defines itself socially and, usually unwittingly, begins to build exclusionary walls that inhibit new members from joining. Standards of behavior become more like membership differentiators, and new users find themselves being judged and evaluated according to what the local in-group has decided are the criteria for measuring up. The outspoken user who once would have been welcomed as a fresh new voice is instead chastised for being presumptuous or for not showing enough respect for established traditions. It's classic provincialism in action and it works just as it does in the real world where small towns circle the wagons to prevent new residents from ruining what they've worked so long to build. If you're a host of such a community, there are things you can do to deal with such isolationist tendencies.

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First of all, you should never cease emphasizing the value of new members to the community. There should never come a time, if and when the population is in growth mode, that you focus solely on the users who are already settled at the expense of those who are just arriving. Part of your program must always be devoted to welcoming and orienting new members.

Second, you have to point out to established members that their behaviors impact on those who are still deciding if they want to become members. Remind them tactfully through the occasional public comment that everyone was a new user at one time and that it's the constant influx of new users that keeps the community from becoming inbred and boring. New enthusiasm is good for the community overall; it should not be viewed as a threat.

Third, remind veteran members that, like it or not, they are regarded as role models by those who are still observing and learning how people treat each other in the community. If what they see is people treating each other insensitively, even if it's partially in fun, they may begin their participation thinking that rude dialog is the norm and the veterans will be stuck dealing with a new generation of users who don't know that the right to insult each other is best earned over time.

And finally, if established acquaintances find it difficult to interact comfortably under the conditions of being held up as role models, suggest to them that they move some of their interaction to private chat rooms or forums. I make this recommendation with mixed feelings because, although it's the logical and natural evolution of niche communities to narrow their focus to smaller and tighter circles of friends, private meeting places can remove the most dynamic individuals and relationships from the public community space, leaving waves of new users without veterans to model behavior and provide the foundation of the social structure.

And with that, we've come full circle from the beginning of the hosting experience—where every new user must be welcomed, introduced, and encouraged to form relationships and contribute to the whole—to the culmination of the hosting experience where established users feel compelled to retreat into private meeting places to protect the valued relationships they have built through the community. If, by this point in the evolution, you are still the host, you know you can't retreat with them.

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The host's role is to continue to greet the newcomers and present them with what previous waves of users have built in the way of community standards and history. Generations turn over fast in the online world, as fast as meaningful relationships can be built in cyberspace. You may host through a generation every year, watching the members arrive, coalesce into social scenes, and then withdraw into more private interaction one after the other. Or you may decide to just stick with one generational community and allow your role as host to fade out as a new generation of users comes along. It is, after all, the identification of the host with his community that makes his role most effective.

Host Compensation Revisited

In Chapter 4 I described the options for compensating discussion hosts from the viewpoint of the community site provider, reasoning that full monetary compensation was still a rarity given the amount of traffic that one host could facilitate. Hosting discussion is far from being a viable employment option. I also advanced the idea that most hosts serve in their roles because they enjoy doing so, not because it pays well. This will continue to be the case, but there will be more job openings for people with extensive online hosting experience.

Though the revenue models for online discussion are still being tested, the belief that online discussion will be of increasing value in the future appears to be strong if the expansion of discussion software development is any indication. I've personally seen dozens of acquaintances move from their online beginnings in unpaid hosting positions into well-paid host coordination, host management, and community management positions with online services like Yahoo!, Talk City, ZDNet, C/Net, AOL, MSN, and many others. I know people who have put their online hosting experience to work developing corporate discussion systems. I've seen an increasing number of advertisements for such positions on job sites such as MonsterBoard (www.monsterboard.com) and CareerBuilder (www.careerbuilder.com) as I've been writing this book.

How hosts will be compensated in the future is inextricably tied to the consideration of income that I present in Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models." Hosting is one of the most labor-intensive positions remain-

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ing in the online content industry, yet it's a necessary component to group discussion, one of the strongest offerings of the Net. There will always be a great many people willing to host conversation for no pay, simply for their own enjoyment and what meager complimentary services or stipends they are offered. I can't yet foresee services that would be able to pay living wages to a crew of full-time hosts, but as I described, I see an increasing demand for people who understand the role of the host in the online community.

Summary

As a discussion host, your presence and contributions should improve the quality of conversation and relationship-building in your community. Your role may range from that of a monitor, protecting participants from the effects of disruptive behaviors, to a much more comprehensive position: planning and leading discussions toward the growth of a stable and productive community identity. No matter where you sit on the continuum, it's important that you understand how people behave and react in the particular interactive environment in which you work. Your involvement should enhance the user's experience.

Hosting discussion involves bringing enthusiasm to the community, facilitating conversation, and providing an intermediary between users and management. Different skills and talents are involved in asynchronous hosting and chat hosting, but both require similar personal qualities of leadership and good example-setting. Good hosts are trust-builders who know how to work through personal contacts to resolve conflicts and recruit allies. And good hosts can maintain working relationships with both users and site management.

The host of an active and sustained online community will have to deal with many of the same kinds of group relationships and reactions that one might encounter providing public services in a small town. There will be strong personalities and stubborn conflicts as well as long-term friendships and associations. Hosting can require patience, tolerance, and the ability to put one's self above the fray, but as a job it may never pay enough to compensate for the care and involvement it requires. The rewards for hosting, except in management positions, are more likely to come from the satisfaction and gratification of helping people to connect with each other.

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WEB WORLDS

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Many people would like to host communities on the Web but don't have the technical knowledge, time, or money to set up a system of their own. If they're lucky, they may find an unclaimed niche on a large general-purpose discussion aggregator like Talk City, if they're into chat, or the WELL if they prefer asynchronous interaction. Even then, though, they won't be able to conveniently build community-serving content on Web pages that are closely tied to their discussion. And, assuming they are able to cobble together pages linked to an interactive platform, they must then attract the actual community from all over the Web where competition for attention is intense.

We ended Chapter 8, "Community Forum Environments," with visits to two services that offer solutions to this dilemma: Delphi's CustomForums and ForumHost.com. Both provide their users with more than just hostship over a chunk of discussion platform real estate. They also offer kits for putting together small Web sites, with pages that can be designed within the parameters of their proprietary templates. Their services are two small examples of one of the fastest-growing community phenomena on the Web: what I call Web *worlds*. The examples I present in this chapter enlarge upon those of CustomForums and ForumHost in that they claim huge populations that truly qualify them to be considered worlds unto themselves.

People arriving new to the Web today are less likely than the early pioneers to be willing to tackle the raw skills of HTML coding and the hunting-and-gathering work of assembling a custom list of favorite regular destinations from around the Web. Instead, they seek simpler access to the most important

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privileges of Web citizenship: a personal homepage that represents them to others, access to communities whose interests match their own, dependable customer support, and an environment that feels stable and familiar enough to win their loyalty. Web worlds are designed to provide all of these at zero or minimal cost to the new user while also enabling their members to advance their skills and expand their presence on the Web.

The Combined Community Toolkit and Environment

A Web world is like a self-contained community environment in which a variety of services and resources can be found along with the cultural trappings that define it as a special place. A world has its own local jargon and institutions to unify it, but it also puts an emphasis on diversity by defining special-interest groups and encouraging creative building by its members. A world is a one-stop shopping place for access to tools that help establish and facilitate human presence and interrelationship. I picture worlds as cultural resource centers and supply depots floating in Webspace where Web settlers can find the parts and interconnections to build homes and communities.

Worlds vary in their size, scope, and description. Some are more loosely held together than others. Some depend more on the initiative of a core of members, while others are the result of intentional planning and design by the platform provider. I'm focusing here on two major services whose intentions are specifically to encourage grassroots community and content building by their members, but worlds exist in different shapes and sizes with different combinations of services. What distinguishes them from plain vanilla homepage hosting services are:

- A registered membership structure
- Facilities for enabling simple homepage construction
- Open access to chat and forum platforms
- A way for members and homepage builders to declare and be associated with areas of special interest
- A means of internal content promotion to help distribute traffic within the world environment

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It's not just the toolkit that adds value to the settlers' efforts in a Web world; it's the services that the world itself provides for organizing its members' personal Web pages and discussions. Like a combination local government and public utility, the world provides the infrastructure that holds its colonies of homepages and users together. The Web world offers the member convenient means for becoming a true *resident* of the Web. The easy-to-build personal homepage, located in an appropriate neighborhood, is a familiar metaphor that people new to cyberspace can recognize and embrace. The skyrocketing membership numbers of the leading worlds certainly seem to support that though, as I report later in the chapter, those number bear some scrutiny.

Differences in Services, Tone, and Membership

Living within these environments are communities of users who don't assemble their sites from scratch on an ISP's server. Worlds are highly identifiable, with membership *walls*—requiring user registration and passwords—that must be passed through for entry and access to their services. Their members may choose to build homepages that are open to the Web at large or that host private memberships of their own definition. Web world communities exist across a range of descriptions, from the very friendly homepage that attracts a discussion community around its focus to the full-blown interactive village storefront that serves a community by selling its members products that they value.

The most complete worlds like GeoCities, The Mining Company, Delphi, The Globe, and Tripod provide the infrastructure, easy-to-assemble components, host support, enhanced member visibility, and, in the case of The Mining Company, arrangements for sharing advertising revenue. All four of these offer options for site builders with more commercial intentions. Newcomers to the Web world model—Talk City and WBS—are initially offering free homepages as adjuncts to membership in what were initially communities based around chat platforms.

In many respects, worlds serve the root interpretation of community by making it affordable for anyone with access to the Web to pursue the sharing of his or her passions amid more proximate Web-based populations. They offer a perception to the user of being part of something less vast and impersonal than

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the infinite expanse of the Web. The member of a world enjoys a sense that he or she will get more recognition from people who at least live on the same *planet* within the Web universe, if not in the same neighborhood.

Unlike the graphical virtual world environments I mentioned in Chapter 7, "Platform Alternatives for Chat," Web worlds require no special clients or high-performance computer setups for optimum use. Instead, they are designed for the most ubiquitous generic user populations. They differ from each other in the details of the services they offer, and in the style and tone of their sites and the members they attract.

Do-It-Yourself Niche Building

I'm spending most of this chapter exploring the services of GeoCities and Tripod, two world hosts who have, since their startups, continually adapted their products to serve ready and willing markets. Their twin successes in attracting large populations of subscribers to free homepage services brought them the attention of two major search and portal sites, Yahoo! and Lycos, who were each looking for existing community-building infrastructures in which to stick more of their visitors. Now they are partnering with GeoCities and Tripod, respectively. In fact, Lycos purchased Tripod outright.

You can expect that both of these worlds will grow significantly from their current million-plus memberships as their Web portal partners drive more traffic to them. How that growth will affect the sense of community that their members feel remains to be seen, but rapid growth has so far been a trademark of both GeoCities and Tripod. Their structures, which allow users to define their own niche communities rather than force them to take part in increasingly crowded group interaction, may provide the best solution to the problem of overpopulated community discussion areas. Putting the tools and resources in the hands of the users allows them to expand their interactive space organically and creatively as they feel the pressure to do so.

As we'll cover in Chapter 11, "Support Strategies and Revenue Models," the finely tuned and specifically described niches that exist within Web worlds offer near ideal conditions for focusing advertising. And to further please sponsors, members of worlds establish their presence and describe themselves in many ways:

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- By the domains of their email addresses
- By the information they provide when they register for services
- By the profiles they write to describe themselves to others
- By the contents of the homepages they build
- By the subjects of the homepages they visit
- By the forums and chats they frequent

The companies that provide these utility-rich environments have been successful so far in selling ads because of their populations' easily identifiable tastes and habits. The members of worlds are hardly anonymous even if they don't use their real names. In fact, the perception on the part of members that they are hanging out in familiar territory, among fellow residents, probably encourages them to be more forthcoming than they would in more impersonal regions of the Web. This, of course, brings up privacy issues, and I'll describe how each of these services deals with those later in the chapter.

If you're looking to build a home for a community among people who share your values for group identity, and if you want to begin with a solution that costs next to nothing besides your own time and attention, Web worlds are appropriate places to start. I'll describe the features, functions, and processes of GeoCities and Tripod first, since they now sport the highest profiles for the genre following their affiliations with the big search portals. But there are other providers of similar services besides the ones mentioned here so far, including two notable sites: The Globe (www.theglobe.com) and Angelfire (www.angelfire.com).

The Front Doors to Two Worlds

GeoCities and Tripod differentiate themselves from each other as soon as you arrive at their homepages. Although they provide many of the same services, you can see their roots in the content they provide at the thresholds of their sites.

GeoCities began as Beverly Hills Internet, providing what it called "geographic homepages" to convey a sense of place to users' creations. It began with locales familiar to Los Angeles residents—RodeoDrive, Hollywood, and

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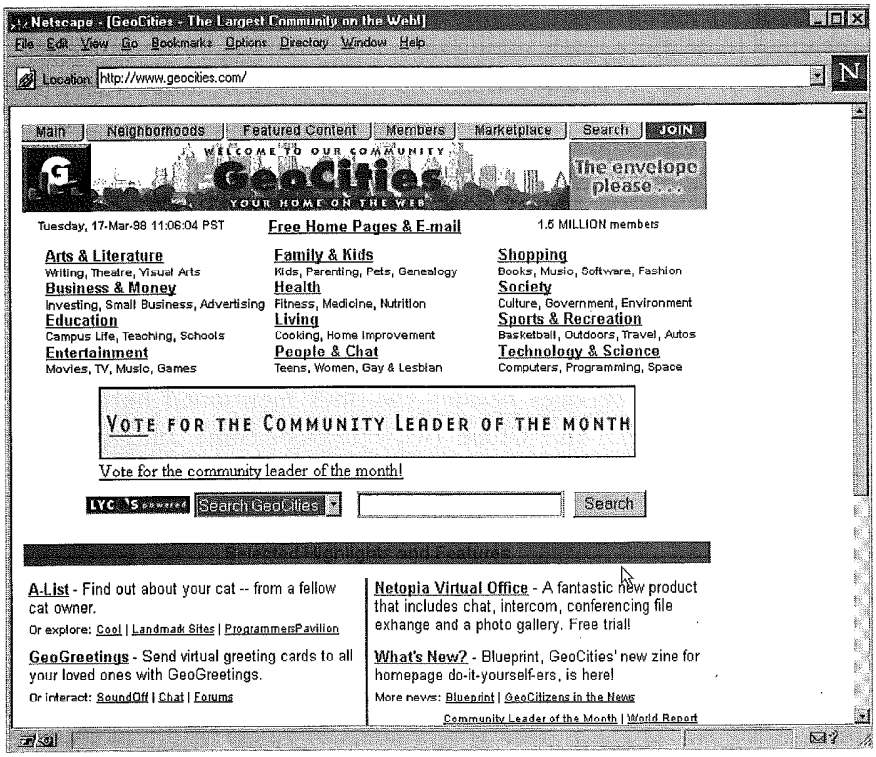
SunsetStrip—and later added more interest-based *neighborhood* themes. The current GeoCities homepage continues to emphasize its mission as a service for free homepage fabrication aimed at the general population of newcomers to the Web (see Figure 10.1).

Tripod, on the other hand, was founded to serve content to a specific age group, the adult population between the ages of 18 and 34. As of May 1998 it described itself as "the hip, homegrown Web community for adults 18 to 34."

Figure 10.1 GeoCities puts the directory to its members' homepages at the top of its own homepage. Developing user-created content is its central purpose.



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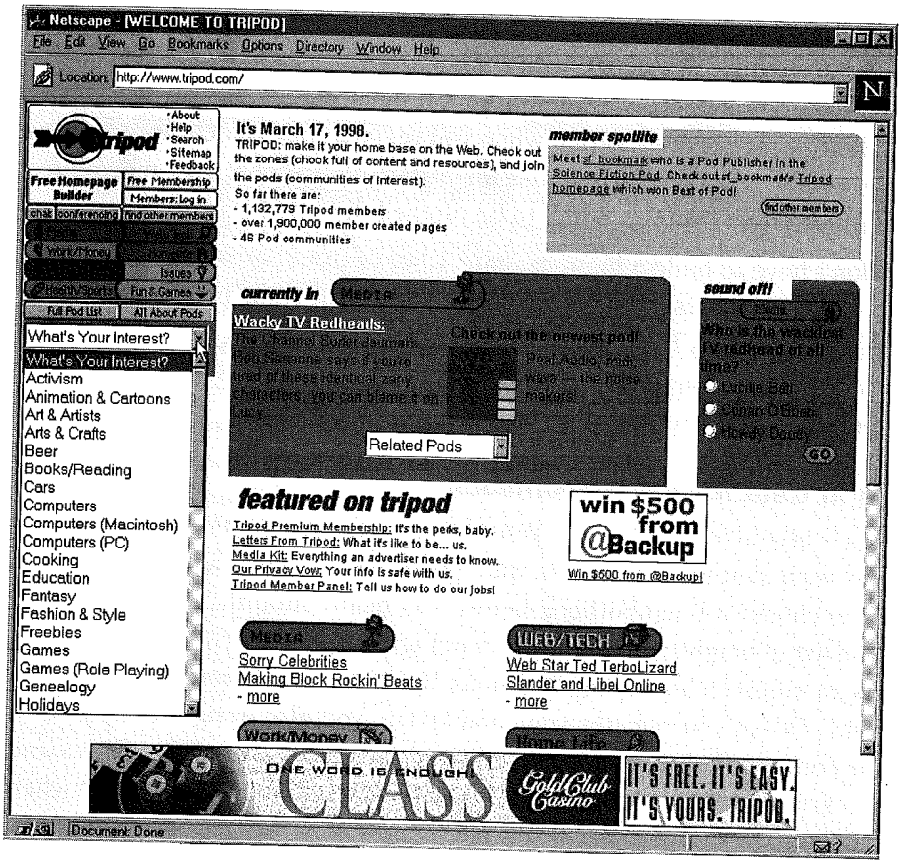
It still provides plenty of editorial content in addition to the utilities and *real estate* for homepage creation. Its own homepage, shown in Figure 10.2, is constantly updated and shows its combination of user-created content (the pulldown menu of interest-related *pods* on the left) and editorial content (the buttons named for its various *zones* in the body of the page).

Figure 10.2 The Tripod homepage shows its mix of user-created content in the pulldown menu on the left and the zones containing editorial content in the central part of the page.



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Looking at these homepages, it's hard to imagine that hundreds of thousands of personal and small business homepages and sites can be found behind them, all organized by the interests of their builders.

Joining the Leading Web Worlds

You must have an account with an ISP to join either GeoCities or Tripod; neither of them offer Internet access services. Joining costs nothing and qualifies you to build a basic homepage that you locate on their sites in an area appropriate to your interests or the purpose of your page. The two services define their interest areas differently, but the purpose of each is the same: to give users a sense of identification with a like-minded community while giving advertisers more specifically targeted populations for ad placement. Tripod asks for little personal information when you register, but GeoCities asks for a lot—your name, address, gender, and birth date—and then asks more questions relating to whether you'd like to be pitched directly by advertisers.

You don't have to build a homepage in either of these services to be a member, but GeoCities does take you through its registration process only *after* you've asked to build a homepage. Membership allows users to participate in chats and forums throughout their sites, receive newsletters, enter contests, and become volunteer community hosts.

Settling in GeoCities Neighborhoods

GeoCities is organized into 40 different communities, or *neighborhoods*, made up of people with common interests and pursuing common activities. You're required to choose a neighborhood before you begin building your homepage. Part of the list of neighborhoods appears in Figure 5.4, but GeoCities also leads members to suitable homepage locations by *themes* or interests, as shown in Figure 10.1. When you register your homepage, you also designate *topics* that match its content. This gets your page listed in other areas of GeoCities and provides a keyword that will bring your page to other members' attention when they perform searches.

The topic areas within each neighborhood further focus the homepages within them. The topics listed in the Education neighborhood are shown in

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Figure 10.3. Each topic has associated with it its own chats, forums, and homepages that match its focus. The contents of the College Sports topic appear in Figure 10.4. Note the targeted ads on the right. Figure 10.5 shows one member's homepage whose content fits the topic precisely.

Figure 10.3 You choose a neighborhood for locating your homepage that represents the interest you'd like to feature. The Education neighborhoods are also broken down into topics that focus interests for purposes of chat and forum discussion.

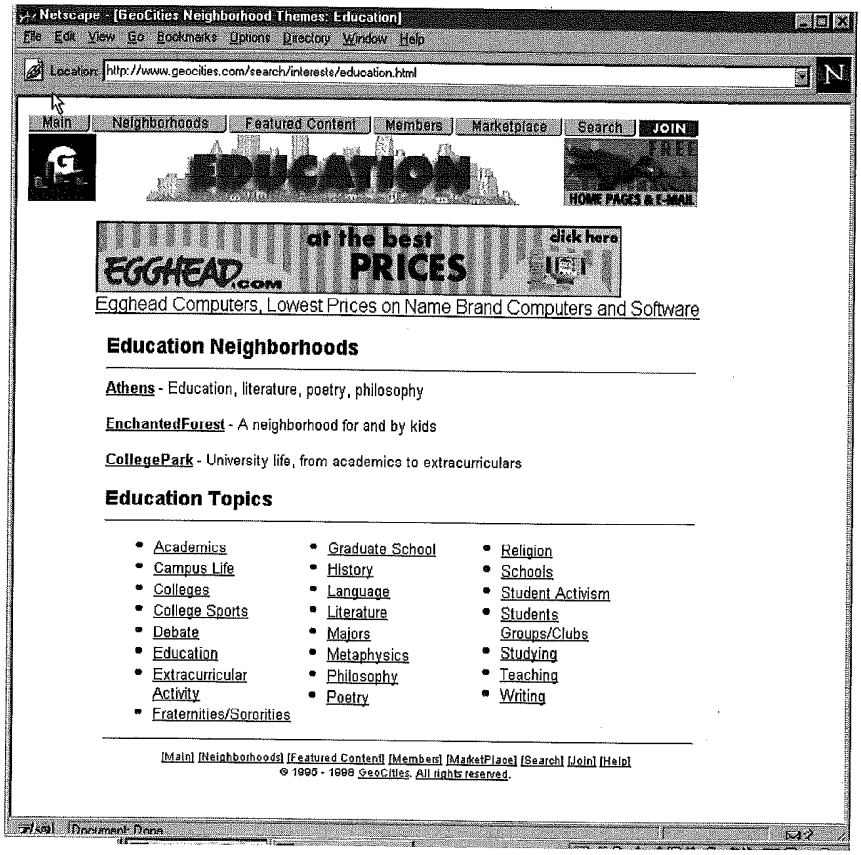

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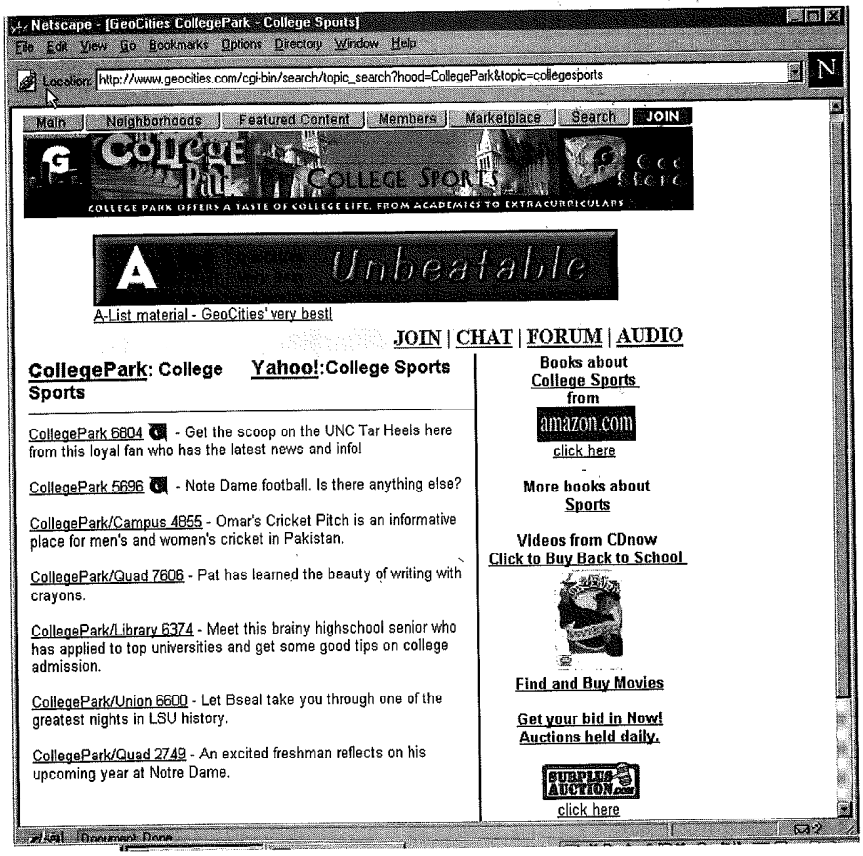
Figure 10.4 One of the topics under the Education neighborhoods is College Sports. Members who register their pages as fitting that topic show up here, as do advertisements targeting members interested in the subject.



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Each neighborhood has a list of community leaders whose homepages are located there and who have volunteered to watch over it, help new arrivals set up homepages, answer questions, and keep things running smoothly. Community leaders host the chat rooms and newsgroups, and perform outreach support for new members. Members of the community can vote for good leaders, making them eligible for recognition in the GeoCities world.

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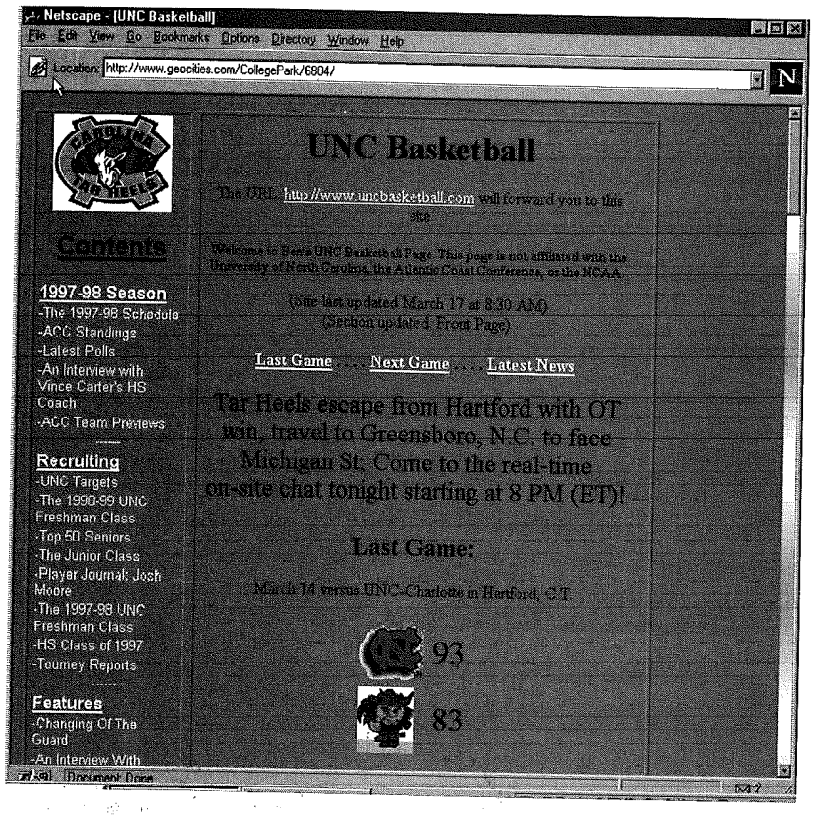
Figure 10.5 Included under the College Sports topic is this member's page touting the University of North Carolina basketball team.



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Choosing a Pod in the World of Tripod

Tripod calls its interest areas *pods*. There are currently 46 pods and the list is growing fast. Each pod includes a collection of member homepages sharing a similar theme, a biweekly newsletter from the *poderator*, and regularly scheduled chats and conferences. Part of the Pod list is shown in Figure 10.6.

A new pod is created when enough members suggest and support a new idea for one and the system managers agree with the idea. Tripod members

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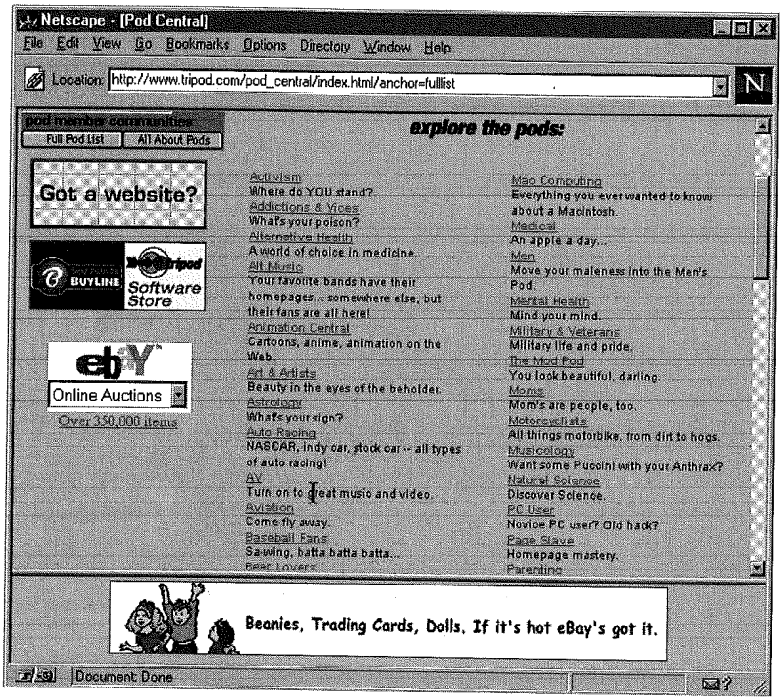
Figure 10.6 Tripod's interest communities are called *pods*. Here's part of their ever-growing list. New pods are added as users suggest and request them.



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can be *pod publishers* by offering their homepages for inclusion in the pod, or they can just be pod members, which gives them privileges to participate in pod activities. A Tripod member can join as many pods as she likes, but Web pages created using Tripod's facilities must be dedicated to a specific pod. Thus, joining a pod as a publisher is really like collaborating in a community Web publishing project. Each pod has its own guidelines for member-created content.

Until now, poderators have been Tripod staff members and former staff members working as volunteers, but the system is changing and accepting

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submissions from regular Tripod members to fill those roles. Their responsibilities are to keep the pod focused, lead chats, support members, and write and distribute pod newsletters. They present regular Best of Pod awards to their publishers as a way of recognizing good design, information, or writing, and link relevant pages from elsewhere on the Web to the pod's homepage. Poderators do not enforce Tripod's terms of service; those activities are currently handled by Tripod membership staff.

Other Services Provided in Web Worlds

Membership within these comprehensive systems offers a variety of basic free services and optional premium services that cost money. The arrangements allow you to grow in your use of the Web as you become comfortable and gain mastery with the medium and its possibilities. You can expect that more service options will be added as these businesses continue to grow. GeoCities offers its members a free email account, but Tripod does not at this time.

Building the Pages

The homepage building services in both GeoCities and Tripod are flexible and fairly powerful when you make use of all the tools they include, though you shouldn't expect to be able to include professional-level features such as custom frames, JavaScript, or cascading style sheets. Each provides easy step-by-step explanations and while Tripod offers templates for the first-time builder and HTML and editing tools for use of the more experienced, GeoCities expects its members to be more accomplished in Web page construction.

Using the templates, such as the two basic schemes shown on Tripod in Figure 10.7, the member can arrange different combinations of text, images, and links according to set layouts. The page builder can choose from local image libraries on the site or from anywhere else on the Web. Color schemes can be selected and blocks of text can be entered in a variety of fonts and styles. Other options, on Tripod, include a page-hit counter for tallying visits. More confident or adventurous members can use the Custom Page Builder and other facilities shown in Figure 10.8. Because pods have content guidelines, the Tripod member should first decide on which pod, if any, she wishes to publish for and then build the page appropriately.

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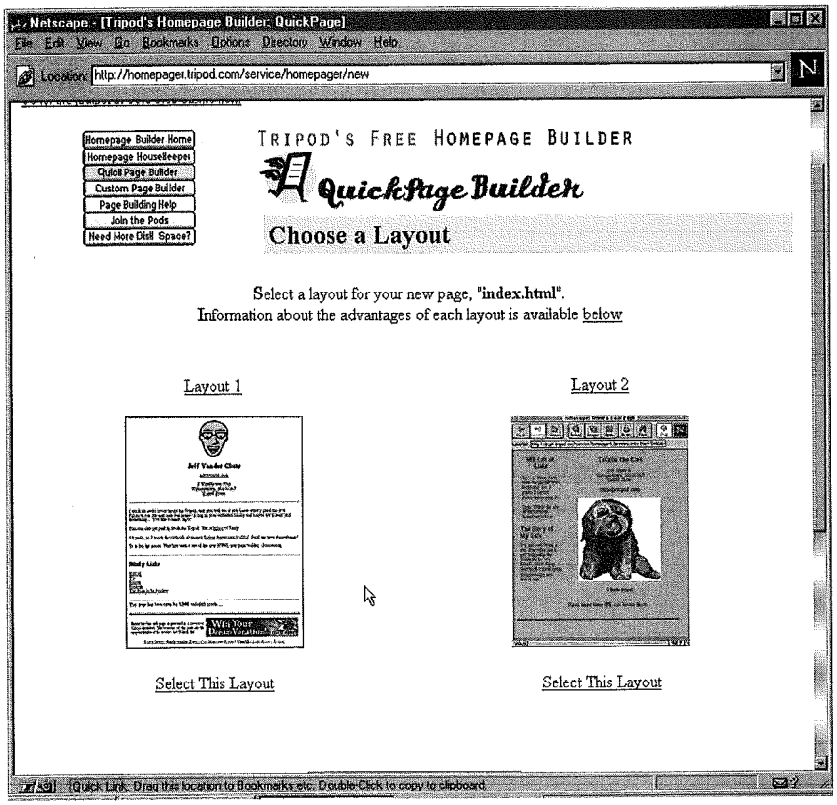
Figure 10.7 Building a homepage on Tripod can be a simple task if you use its templates. If you want something more original, choose the HTML alternative.



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When you create a homepage on GeoCities, you must first join a neighborhood. Not all neighborhoods have vacancies, so you may have to do a bit of site-hunting until you find the right place. Looking to build my homepage in the Rainforest neighborhood, I found it full, so I had to check out two adjacent neighborhoods that still had vacancies. As you can see in Figure 10.9, I found two possible sites in the Rainforest Canopy section. I chose homestead number

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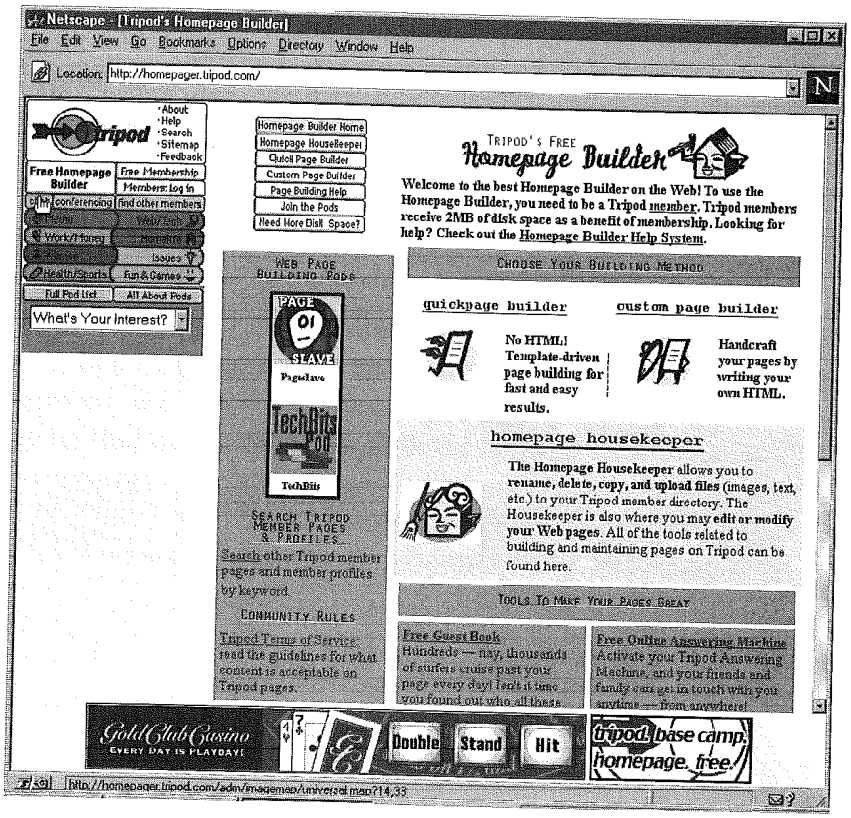
Figure 10.8 The Tripod page-building facilities include the Quickpage templates and the Custom page builder that requires familiarity with HTML or use of the Help system.



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1932 and was asked to select from three membership options: the free homepage, the GeoPlus plan, or the GeoShop option. I chose the freebie, but I'll soon talk more about the premium plans. Once you've chosen the type of page you want to build, you go through GeoCities registration, filling out and submitting the form and—as you wait for confirmation and a password to arrive in email—you read a greeting message sent from the neighborhood you've just joined.

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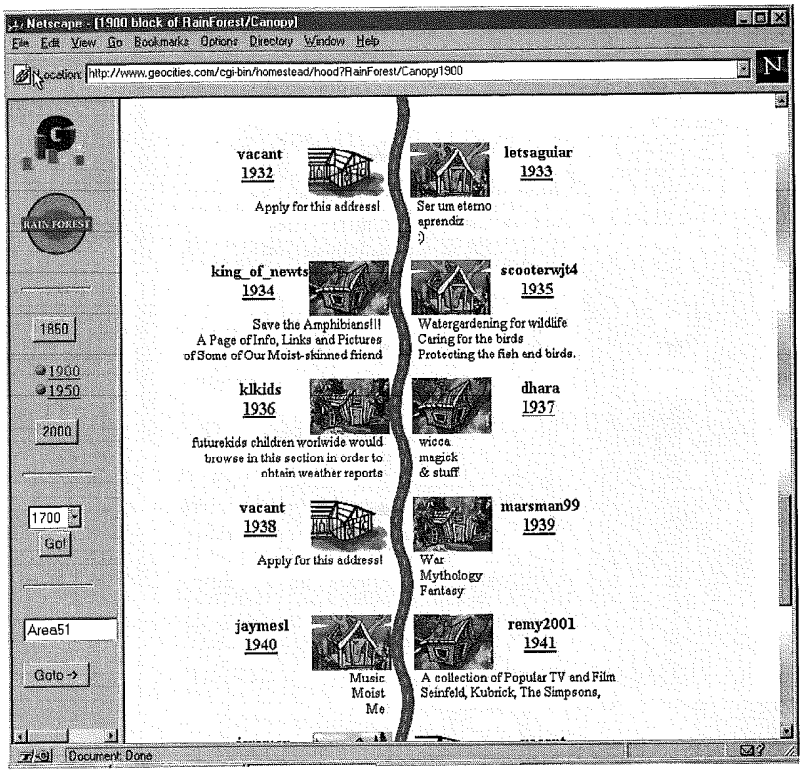
Figure 10.9 To join GeoCities, you first have to find and choose a vacant building site in one of their neighborhoods. I found this nice spot in the Rainforest Canopy neighborhood.



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The Rainforest group invited me to visit the community leader's page and to check out the featured pages from the neighborhood. It also suggested that I participate in the GeoGuide Banner Exchange Program that rotates banners pointing to each other's homepages throughout the GeoCities neighborhoods. The program helps homepages get exposure, but you have to do some legwork first to qualify to enter the rotation. If you use the GeoGuide on your pages and get at least seven visits from other members per day, your ad becomes part of

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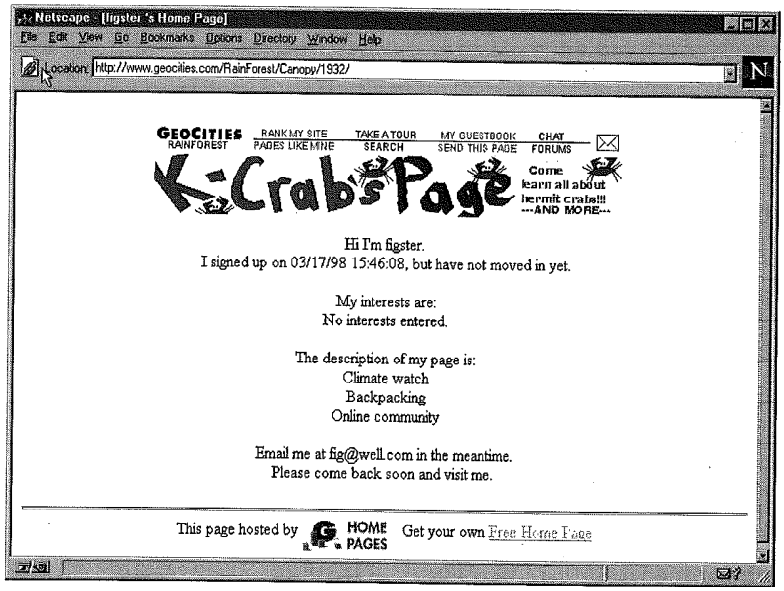
the rotation. Of course, with so many other members' pages, you won't get much exposure, so you'd better make the best of your banner design.

Once my confirmation email notice arrived, it pointed me to my new homepage URL that was waiting for me in a very rudimentary form as seen in Figure 10.10. An exchange banner was displayed at the top of the page and, unlike on Tripod, there was no easy template to follow. Instead you have two options: You can upload already built HTML files to GeoCities, or you can use the GeoCities File Manager and HTML editors to modify or totally replace the default homepage there on the GeoCities site. There are tutorials and an online Help guide to coach your efforts.

Figure 10.10 Once I chose my homepage site and registered, GeoCities provided this placeholder page for me until I was able to replace it with content of my own. Note the ad banner, part of the banner exchange program that drives traffic to personal homepages.



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Chat and Forum Access

Of course, part of your interest in establishing your own community within a site like Tripod or GeoCities will be access to chat and/or forum facilities. To what extent can you expect that you'll be able to have your very own chat room, message board, or conference to accompany the Web page you build?

Tripod provides conferencing and chat services from two different directions. From the pod side, its discussions are hosted by poderators, so if you are really intent on becoming a community discussion host on Tripod, you need to put in your bid for poderator status. From the zone side, all discussions are hosted by Tripod editorial staff. There is no anonymous posting allowed in Tripod discussions. Member names accompany each response.

The Tripod conferencing platform is a linear one, organized by topic and requiring membership in the pod to post responses (see Figure 10.11). Considering how many people host homepages in the various pods, there's not a lot of interaction in the conferencing area; in fact, only 14 of the 46 pods even have conferences listed in the directory. But the light traffic allows the simple scrolling interface with its lack of convenience features to work well for those who use it.

Chat on Tripod is offered both on a scheduled basis and through rooms opened by members who have purchased premium accounts. The chat interface requires the Netscape browser to push new responses to the screen. Without Netscape, the user must repeatedly refresh the chat window. Since Lycos bought Tripod, it now offers access to some of its own chat rooms through the Tripod chat page. Its chat interface includes Java-driven alternatives and I expect those to eventually replace what Tripod offers today.

GeoCities handles things a bit differently. Like Tripod, it requires participants in discussion to be members, but since it has no editorial content area to compare with Tripod's zones, its discussions are reached through neighborhoods, with a special category called People and Chat, which has a separate breakdown of topic-related chat rooms.

All of its neighborhood-related Java-based chat rooms are available all the time. There are no scheduled chats using temporary rooms. For its forum platform GeoCities uses eShare's threaded interface and gathers the forums for all of its neighborhoods in one place.

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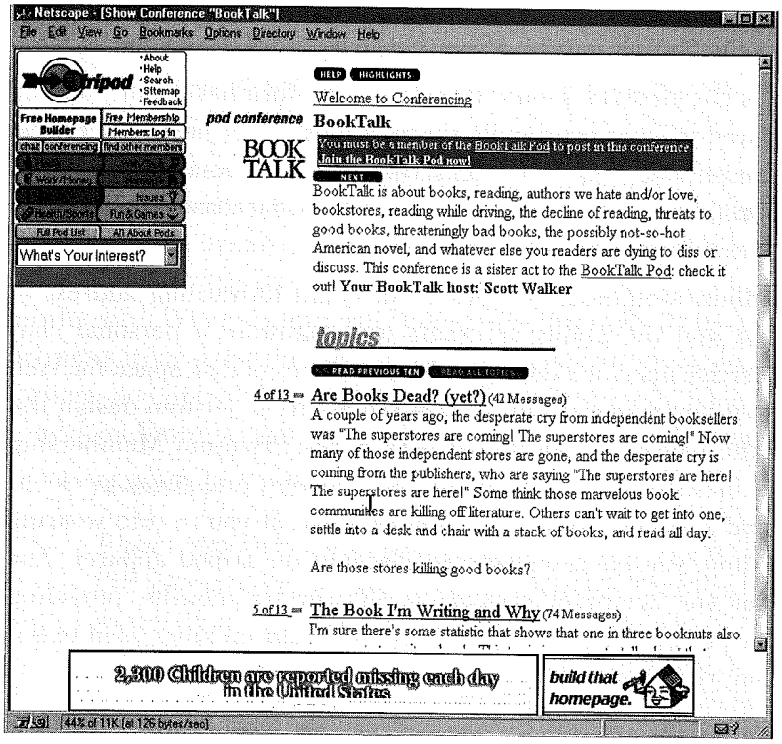
Figure 10.11 The conference associated with Tripod's Booktalk pod uses a simple-to-use linear response model that works well for the light traffic it gets.



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Premium Services

Most people who join either GeoCities or Tripod probably do so for the free page-building and hosting services, but some whose needs aren't quite met by what they can get for free are willing to pay a bit extra in order to build more robust sites or to give their sites more commercial potential.

GeoCities offers members the option of paying for homepages that can promote a product or service. The users are responsible for creating and maintaining them through FTP uploads or the Home Page Editor. Each commercial homepage is limited to 5 MB of disk space and may generate up to 50 MB per

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day of traffic. The commercial homepage gets a distinctive icon in the neighborhood dircctory identifying its status, and gets listed in a special commercial page directory. The introductory cost for the service is $50 per month with a onetime $50 setup fee. Members who choose to sign up for six months in advance can have the $50 setup fee waived.

The GeoCities Commercial Home Page program does have some serious limitations compared to what you can do through most other hosting services. GeoCities does not provide support for cgi scripts, custom domain name registration, secure electronic transactions, or specialized database applications. And GeoCities does not provide usage statistics.

Tripod's Premium Membership provides an email forwarding address of *yourname@tripod.net* and the ability to create and maintain a personal chat room. Premium service also includes up to 12 megabytes of disk space for Web content, access to a larger image library, and the ability to custom design the images used on the pages. An additional perk is the Premium Membership Preview, an email newsletter that features "free goodies and sneak peeks at Tripod content and services." But wait! There's more! If you're into wearing promotional clothing, you get a 20 percent discount on Tripod apparel. The additional cost for the premium package is $18 for six months, providing Tripod can display ads on the page. Should the Premium member wish to not have the ad appear, the cost doubles.

Editorial and Member-Created Content Presentation

As you can see, the free homepage you build within one of these worlds will be surrounded on the site by relevant content. Putting up a premium page allows you more latitude in your design, but in neither case do you have the autonomy that you'd have were you to build your site elsewhere on the Web, outside of the integrated service arrangement. But going that route, the costs would be considerably higher, and you would have to work harder on promoting your site to get the same amount of attention you'd get in a world with its built-in affinity structure and cross-promotional arrangements.

Your decision of where to locate your kit-built community, if your aim is to save money, should consider which other features related to your community's focus attract people to that world. In the case of GeoCities, the attraction at this time is exclusively the appeal of user-built neighborhoods and homepages

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with no overhead. Aside from some exceptional user-built sites, there is no other content to draw non-GeoCities members. But Tripod continues to serve its original purpose, which was to provide helpful and interesting information to an age group. To that end, they maintain a vigorous editorial program that creates steady streams of articles and resources in their content Zones. Associating your community with such a vigorous content provider may enhance your property values.

The Tripod Zones do feature member-created content, which is delivered to its members and visitors alike (see Figure 10.12). Including such content in lively editorial areas that draw heavy age-group traffic is likely to bring in more memberships and more attention to the rest of the user-created areas on the site. What visitors will find within the various interest-related Zones are news item about the newest pods, quotes drawn from member surveys and forums, and opinion polls. The Zones help define the Tripod community and convey its flavor, as you can see by the following sample Zone descriptions:

Media Zone

Tripod's Media zone doesn't publish celeb gossip, because we're not People or EW; we're into grassroots artists like They Might Be Giants and Ani de Franco. We also offer how-to tips on DIY media—like starting your own zine, record label, etc. Our goal is to get readers savvy about media, not saturated by it; so go behind the scenes and beyond the hype with movers & shakers (and up & comers) from all different types of media. Right now, Tripod's Media zone is focusing on "Film," "Music," "Books," "Zines," and "Television."

Work/Money Zone

*Get off the treadmill... and start a successful career (and a healthy bank account) on your own terms! Tripod's Work/Money zone is currently divided into 6 areas. The "Work Smart" area is about keeping your eyes open for career opportunities—whether you're a temp or a CEO. "Find A Job" gives you a leg up on the competition. "Explore Careers" is for anyone who wants to do something they *really* love. "Grow Money" offers expert tips on everything from stocks to mutual funds to 401(k)s. "Understand Money" explains mortgages, life insurance, credit cards, and other necessary evils. And "Burn Money" is about how to spend your money in a smart and satisfying way!*

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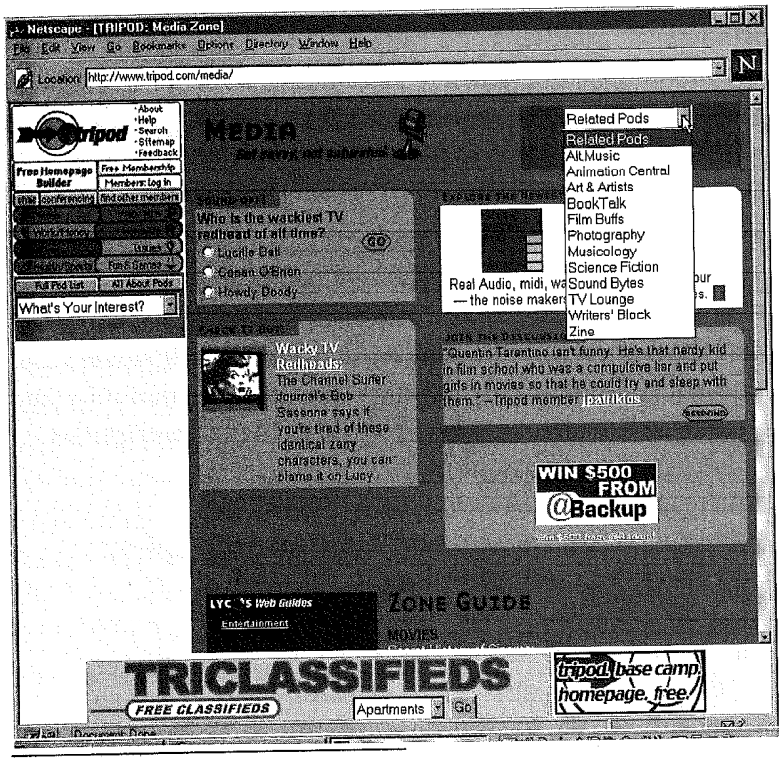
Figure 10.12 In the areas of Tripod that are published by its editorial team rather than by its members, member-created content is still featured. Note that in the Media area, a pulldown menu points to related pods.



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Privacy Issues in Worlds

I'm saving most of my discussion of the privacy concerns of online communities for Chapter 11, but it's important that we look at how both Tripod and GeoCities confront the issue with their members because their formats represent one of the more refined models of user exposure to the potential of personal information harvesting.

I've mentioned several times in this chapter how members of these integrated community sites reveal information about themselves as they register,

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choose where to locate their homepages, actually build their homepages, join the various interest areas within the overall site, and take part in chats and forums. Obviously, members make themselves quite vulnerable as they commit their trust to systems that trade them free services for their exposure to targeted advertising.

There is no free lunch and the services of GeoCities and Tripod can only be provided at low or no cost if someone's paying for access to all those users and the information they volunteer about themselves. Of course, no one wants to be taken advantage of or exploited, so it's especially important that services that have such captive audiences assure their members that they are being treated fairly and forthrightly.

GeoCities devotes a lot of page space not only to assuring its members of its trustworthiness, but to educating them about how specific methods of information gathering work on the Web. The GeoCities Privacy Statement tells its members:

> *One of our main goals at GeoCities is to respect the privacy rights of anyone who joins GeoCities or visits any of our neighborhoods. Except as set forth within this privacy statement and within the scope of our community and content guidelines, we will never release personally identifiable information about our individual members and visitors without their permission.*
>
> *Our view is that our members and users are the ones who should generally control whether or not they share any personal information and how that information is used if it is shared. Furthermore, we believe that it is our responsibility to provide something of value in exchange for any information shared—in our case, free personal homepages, email, chat room, and other free services.*
>
> *Furthermore, we actively support various Web and industry efforts to establish policies and standards in the areas of cookies, user information, and privacy.*

Included in the rest of its Statement are explanations of how GeoCities collects information about its members and what information is used for what purposes. It describes how cookies work to keep track of visitors to a Web site

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and provides pointers to other sources of privacy information and education on the Web.

Tripod makes much briefer work of its privacy statement than GeoCities, but cuts to the chase and makes this *vow* to its members:

> *We will never share or sell your personal information with anyone else, unless we have your explicit permission to do so. And except for use in tailoring our site to your needs and interests, we will never use any information about you in any way except in aggregate (i.e., when we tell a potential business partner that "x percent of our audience is made up of women"). And we always give you an option of whether or not you want to receive any ad-related information from us.*

Summary

GeoCities and Tripod are still young systems, but they are proving that people will throng to services that provide free tools and space for building the most basic of Web artifacts: the personal homepage. Because they draw such large populations and encourage them to segment themselves by interest, they are natural community sites.

There is little to indicate so far that they are as strong in supporting group discussion as they are in providing homepage real estate and construction materials, but they have not devoted many resources to developing platforms and hosting structures that would support expansion of the interrelationships between their members. Tripod shows more promise in this area than GeoCities does at this time. But the addition of free homepages to the chat-centered services of Talk City and WBS is shifting the balance in a more interactive direction.

As with most of the Web, it remains to be seen if the comprehensive services provided in Web worlds can be supported indefinitely with their current advertising-dependent business models, but for the near future they look like a good first opportunity for starting small, simply designed community sites on the Web. If you're looking for an inexpensive entry point for setting up a homepage associated with like-minded Web settlers, joining one of the two Web worlds I described in this chapter or trying out one of the other similar services could certainly be worth your while.

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SUPPORT STRATEGIES AND REVENUE MODELS

11

There are more questions than answers about the revenue-earning potential of online communities. Fortunately, as the rest of this book has illustrated, there are many models of community on the Web, and many approaches to making money or otherwise finding financial support. Every one of these is getting a chance to either prove its validity by keeping the Web community in operation, or to evolve into a form that will.

In this chapter I'll get as near as I can in this diverse, uncertain and fast-shifting marketplace to the nitty gritty of supporting your Web community financially. As with every aspect I've covered so far, the right solution to each situation is dependent on the community's description and purpose. An operation serving as a base for the Web's chat fanatics won't support itself in the same way as a site serving the needs of the amateur rocketry community.

As I explained in Chapter 2, "Identifying Group Styles and Needs," café communities draw very different audiences and traffic patterns than shrines. People who spend much of their time on the Web participating in conversation are a very different type of customer from those who spend their time browsing through published content. And the community that forms around the discussion of financial planning information will attract very different advertisers from one formed around the techniques and gear of hang gliding.

To begin this chapter, I describe the methods being used today to support Web sites in general, not limited to community sites. Some of these are revenue-generating and some are not. I follow that with examples of different

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types of Web communities, explaining how they're operating today to bring in the income required to run their sites and make a profit. Let me emphasize at this point, just in case you haven't heard, that profit is not yet easily come by on the Web. It continues to dangle temptingly in the future as the ultimate reward awaiting every company that prepares itself well in the present. Community, as much as any other application of the Web, requires adequate preparation and careful growth on its way to that reward.

According to what I consistently hear from the Net's business pundits—and I do agree with them here—it will take a focused definition of your community, aggressive implementation of brilliant strategy, and plenty of patience and luck to reach the point at which you're running in the black. So the best overall advice I can offer in the short run is to work on the definition and strategy and keep your costs as low as possible except for those ambitious few of you who are committed to making a run for the dominant position in your community niche. For you, your most important immediate task is to get and maintain high brand visibility on and off the Web. From that position, holding the high ground of name recognition, your challenge will be to attract and serve an ever-growing stream of traffic in a manner that cements user loyalty. The actual earning of profits will only come following the aforementioned patience and luck.

There really aren't that many different techniques for funding Web communities. The variety is in the great many combinations and angles for applying them. There is also the harsh reality, emphasized by Hagel and Armstrong in *Net Gain*, that sites that have achieved dominant positions in their genres *do* get the bulk of the advertising. It's from this perspective, rather than from the viewpoint of the cohesiveness and self-identity of the community, that size really does matter. But advertising is not the only approach to supporting Web ventures. It may be the most prevalent and the most intuitive, given how people view Web pages, but often it's not the most appropriate model for the specific community's population.

The Range of Funding Techniques

Because of the variety of community models I've referred to in this book, it's necessary to consider the whole gamut of possible financial support methods,

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from funding the site out of your own pocket to the ultimate investment-capitalized dream of building community into a business that will count its profits in the millions. The search for perfect solutions and good matches of funding methods with audiences is never-ending. The Web is a flexible environment in which changes in direction and design can be, and are, implemented quickly and relatively cheaply compared to those in the physical world. So the examples I provide in this chapter are, like the rest of the examples in this book, only snapshots of what is being tried today. No doubt new ideas, technologies, and alliances will continue to emerge and be adopted.

The solutions to the revenue problem are not just the concern of online community builders or even of Web-centric companies. All levels and segments of business now recognize the importance of what is to be gained by making the Web work commercially, and to that end many resources are being, and will continue to be, poured into the development of new tools, markets, and business models. The stock market continues to demonstrate its faith that the Web will be the home of some phenomenally successful businesses.

But not every community sees itself as a business, and not every community will need to earn revenue directly from the presence of its users. There are plenty of valid reasons to host a community besides the expectation of profit. Bills must be paid to run a Web site, and the money to pay those bills must be justified, of course, but not every site generating revenue to cover its operations has to live up to *Net Gain*'s market domination model. Most businesses are small as are most meaningful communities, and the Web is, and should continue to be, a medium with which a great variety of needs can be met and dreams fulfilled.

What is often missed as companies build toward megasites and communities is the basic truth that meaningful community—composed of relationships that engender loyalty and personal involvement—is found in small populations with very focused interests. These can exist on small sites on the Web perhaps even more comfortably than within the expansive structures of the huge traffic portals that try to provide countless virtual neighborhoods. And, as I've emphasized in earlier chapters, the larger the site and its traffic flow, the more difficult the provider's task of supporting and staying in touch with these small, personally meaningful communities.

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Keep these realities in mind as I describe some of the models being used today to drive Web-based businesses. The large size and heavy traffic that makes advertising work today will depend on customer loyalty to remain successful in the future. The techniques that appear to be working today have yet to be challenged by the passage of time and the evolution of people's usage habits on the Web.

The Hobby and Club Approach

Most homepages and Web sites aren't designed or meant to support themselves financially. They are paid for by their owners as elaborate personal profiles, electronic business cards, vanity brochures, or artistic expressions to be made accessible to the world. Most of them are barely noticed in the vastness of the Web, and cost no more to maintain than the amount of the owner's monthly ISP fee. Some people seeking more exposure go so far as to register their sites with search engines, and many who participate in interactive communities have their homepage links displayed wherever they participate in discussion. Where the expense is so minimal, the question of supporting the page and any community of people it attracts is moot. There are creative means by which even the most modest homepage owner can engage visitors in discussion, using one of the Web's buddy list platforms, for example, or linking to a message board running on a commercial site.

Organized groups in the offline world, or groups of people with common offline interests who find each other online, may need more developed sites than can fit under the basic user's ISP plan. They may have much more content to provide to members and may want to have their own discussion platform or other helpful technologies integrated into the site. Still, they won't want to spend a lot of money because the only source of funding may be the dues paid by the members of the club or association.

Monthly expenses for keeping a small site on the Web may run from $50 to $100; more if a separate domain name and other services are necessary. The site could provide a valuable service to the group for planning activities, sharing information, broadcasting announcements, recruiting new members, and enabling communication within the group, and so is worth spending a little money on, but not so much that the group feels encumbered by the expense.

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In such a case, the organization of the members who actually use the site as a communications tool may take on the responsibility for assessing the costs and contributing the funding to build the site and maintain it.

Communities Worth Subsidizing

As with small informal groups, a community on the Web is a worthwhile investment for organizations even if it's not designed to generate revenue. Communities mediated through the Net are valuable in their relative efficiency and cost savings when compared to communications methods that don't make use of the Web. Rather than frequent travel expenses, costly printed mailings, and constant long distance phone communications, organizations can now conduct much of their business using planned online conferences, emailed newsletters, and combinations of group discussion and mail lists. These advances lend themselves especially to nonprofit organizations and professional associations, but communitylike techniques are also a great fit for corporate-subsidized customer support operations.

For the nonprofit, a Web site serving the online public not only informs people of its existence and activities, but serves as a communications hub between the organization and its members, donors, and potential donors. It can be designed to demonstrate the value and accomplishments of the organization, and to be kept up to date and accessible to a much more targeted audience than even the most ambitious direct mail campaign could reach. For a member-supported nonprofit, a Web-based community site can be a constant affirmation of the relationship between the organization and its supporters.

For a business intending to serve the needs of its customers, the Web can replace expensive 800-number help lines and paper manuals with interactive services and easily updated online information. This is a practice being adopted by more businesses as they discover how large a percentage of their customers have access to the Web. The investment in hosting such support communities can save money and please customers at the same time. A corporate site doesn't have to be based around support; it can host community activities relevant to its products and services as a public relations gesture and still be able to justify the expense.

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Professional associations are formed to share communications among companies and individuals who work in the same field and face the same challenges. Their agendas usually include a hefty schedule of meetings (with their accompanying travel expenses) and an endless series of documents mailed out and circulated among their members. Many meetings can be eliminated or at least made more efficient through the use of online group discussion. Documents can be emailed, made available for downloading, or posted on the association's Web site. The savings in these two areas alone can justify the creation and maintenance of a community-featured site that can develop into an essential organ of intragroup communications.

Paid Subscriptions

The oldest form of financial support for online discussion communities, this model has fallen into disfavor in the 1990s simply because so much content and interaction on the Web is now provided for no charge. Though a monthly subscription fee might cost the user less than the price of a few cups of coffee, people in this first wave of Web usage have gotten used to paying only for their connection to the Web and nothing more. Convincing them that it's worth paying extra to access an online service or community is difficult, even for financially helpful sites like the *Wall Street Journal* (www.wsj.com) and *Business Week* (www.businessweek.com), which charge annual fees to visit their Web pages. But unless your company has an established name that people trust enough to consider it worth the surcharge, or unless your content, hosting, and participants have built a reputation for delivering premium value, don't even consider going down this road . . . yet. Even if you find users willing to pay, the difficulties involved in charging and collecting fees combined with the higher customer service expectations held by paying subscribers could create headaches you may wish you hadn't invited.

Many content providers would like to charge regular fees for access to their sites, but the model works in much the same way that country clubs do: for communities that demand very targeted content and the exclusivity of select memberships to serve their specific needs and tastes. Still, the model is fighting against the current market mindset that free service is the only fair service. It's impossible to say how trends will change, but I can envision a future in

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which the prospect of paying for membership in communities that prove their value to people over time will be acceptable to Web users tired of constantly changing, inadequately hosted, shallow implementations of the community model. We just haven't reached the point yet at which a shakeout in advertiser-dependent sites has occurred and enough Web users have arrived at an intolerable level of frustration with the quality of free community services.

Paid Admission Events

These are still rare, but should become more popular in the future, especially in the areas of professional meetings and entertainment. Like conventions and exhibitions in the real world, professional online meetings lasting from a weekend to a month or even longer permit discussion among colleagues and experts without incurring the expenses and inconveniences of travel, and without requiring busy people to coordinate all of their schedules in order to attend. The Meta Network (www.tmn.com) produces online seminars that it hosts using its own Web conferencing software, Caucus, and coordinates with professionalism developed over many years of practice facilitating internal corporate communications. Its events feature invited guest presenters, multimedia exhibits, and breakout groups. The following paragraph from the Meta Network Web site describes one of its recent events, Virtual CivicNet:

> *This event brought together 350 participants from 15 countries for the first entirely online Community Networking Conference. Virtual CivicNet included workshops in organizational development strategies and practices, online keynotes by community leaders in the field, participant-driven collaborative discussions, an exhibit hall of participating organizations, and highlighted some of the most recently available technology including real-time-audio, chat, web-voting, video, interactive participant directory, and training and conferencing software.*

The Meta Network's fees for participation in events vary depending on the attendees membership in affiliated organizations or status as student or teacher, but they have generally ranged between $100 and $200 for access with several hundred people attending. Sponsors desiring exposure to the participating population pay to have their logos and links displayed on the event site, kicking in additional revenue.

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Entertainment events that can successfully charge for access are currently more problematic than professional meetings mainly due to the bandwidth limitations of today's Web. Though most discussion platforms work well over the average modem, events relying on those platforms in the entertainment area—mostly moderated celebrity interviews—are provided for free, with corporate sponsors picking up the tab for expenses even when the latest teen idols are featured as special guests. As bandwidth increases to the point where high-quality music and video are available to attendees, the combination of these media with group discussion will attract populations who are more willing to pay to join the temporary event-centered communities. Pay-per-view will begin to work on the Web just as it does now on cable TV, except that the audience will also have the ability to interact.

Advertising

Earning income from advertising can be fairly simple if your income needs are, too. But as the size of your site scales up, the sophistication of your advertising support structure must escalate tremendously. Where small sites may get by with informal arrangements displaying links to small business sites with whom they already have relationships, getting the big ad bucks from corporate sponsors requires professional ad salespeople, state-of-the-art traffic measuring technologies, legal contracts, and staffs of designers and programmers. These are some of the more impressive front-end expenses of building a large-scale community on the Web. It's only when you've reached a very high level of traffic and membership that such expenses can begin to be offset.

The main problem with relying on advertising for most sites is that no matter how well produced your site, you may not get as many ad placements as you need to support it. Estimates by Web business analysts in early 1998 claimed that 70 to 80 percent of all ad banner placements outside of the 25 most popular Web sites were going unsold. You're not likely to be among those top 25, and even if you've got an active site, you may struggle finding buyers for ad space on most of your pages.

There are companies whose purpose is to help with advertising distribution. DoubleClick (www.doubleclick.com) specializes in buying available ad space at wholesale rates on sites that have healthy traffic flow, and other companies like

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LinkExchange (www.linkexchange.com) help sites find other complementary sites with whom they can swap ads, thus effecting a sort of partnership for mutual benefit. But building sufficient advertising revenue to support your site when you have only moderate traffic requires that your advertisers be perfectly matched with the identity and preferences of your community. Such perfect matches are every ad department's dream because they are so hard to come by.

To make the most of their presence in a high-traffic community, advertisements are programmed to rotate and display for the audience segments that, hopefully, will find them the most relevant. Community sites help this process by identifying their users in several different ways: by the information they enter as they register, by the topics of the chats and discussions they visit, and by the personal profiles they build for other members to see. Keeping track of these key audience identifiers requires expensive programming, but the more certain the advertisers are that their ads are being seen by the right people, the higher the rate they're willing to pay per hit or ad view. And since they pay by CPM (cost per thousand hits), you have to boost your traffic to levels where counting by the tens of thousands makes sense.

Getting users to *click* on ads rather than merely viewing them (if, in fact, most discussion participants even notice them as they chat or read through topics) requires such accurate targeting of the product to the user that only the most focused communities can hope to earn the higher ad rates that come with clickthroughs. In *Net Gain*, the authors projected (in early 1997) that advertisers would soon begin paying only based on the number of actual *sales* that resulted from their advertising displays. As of a year later, there is not much sign that such a change in policy has taken place. In fact, the Electronic Advertising & Marketplace Report reported that ad revenue had jumped by over 150 percent from 1996 to 1997. It was an encouraging sign, but the news was delivered with some disclaimers, pointing out that "A handful of sites continue to dominate the market and those same sites are dependent on a handful of the same advertisers month to month." As to profits, the report noted that, "the majority of profitable ad-supported Web sites are small companies that have been successful due to low startup costs rather than tremendous performance." That should be encouraging news for the frugal among you.

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Transaction Commissions

It took a while before credit card transactions through the Web became reliable enough to overcome the real risks and public fears of cyberfraud and techno-larceny. But once sufficiently powerful encryption technologies, payment interfaces, and backend database solutions were developed, sales through the Web began a steady rise. Some analysts continue to project that the value of commerce through the Web will reach $100 billion in the year 2000. E-commerce has indeed arrived and Web-based merchants, following the model of real-world stores, can now pocket the markup they put on merchandise sold online, but with less overhead to deal with. Goods are shipped directly from manufacturers' warehouses; there are no *brick and mortar* stores to build, and no floor staff or showrooms to pay for. All you need, as a merchant, is for the right customers to find you. You may even be able to build a community around the sale of your product on the Web. If you've built a community based on a strong focus and interest, you can almost certainly find merchants whose products are a good fit with that community.

It could be that the Internet *storefront* is going to become even more popular as a center for communities. The buyers of a product have something in common, and many products define the cultural niches their buyers occupy as clearly as almost any other means available for doing so. From automobile models to computer programs and clothing, merchandise identifies buyers' demographics, preferences, and interests. The ability to purchase specific merchandise on a Web site can draw such groups together just as surely as content does.

Conversely, sites hosting diverse populations that segment their users by the discussion spaces they frequent can target e-commerce by matching products to their self-defined niche communities. Rather than defining a community by the users who buy backpacking gear, they can sell backpacking gear to the users who congregate in discussions about outdoor activities and adventure travel. You can begin by selling the product and then building a community of its buyers, or you can begin by building the community and then finding the appropriate products to sell to its members. Either way, purchase transactions on the Web will generate revenue if the basic retail sales formulae work. On or off the Web, the selling price still must exceed the total of the wholesale

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cost, shipping, and overhead if any money is to be made. Selling through the Web, where overhead can be cut, makes that formula easier to achieve.

The Suitability of Ads or E-Commerce

A community is defined by some commonality among its members. The commonality may be broad and vague or very specific and focused. The more definite the commonality—the more the members share values, needs, buying tendencies, and taste—the higher the community's value to advertisers and merchants, for it tells them how likely it is that the community's members will purchase their products. It's not rocket science. Communities can be very appealing to advertisers and marketers.

Community sites that require registration deal with their members both as individuals and as subgroups. At the very least, most of them know the email addresses of all members and understand, through tracking their activities, something about their preferences and tastes for content and conversation. Where they choose to hang out in chat rooms and forum discussions gives their advertisers an indication of the kinds of stores they might like to shop in and the products they might be willing to buy.

If you want to make the most of the advertising and e-commerce revenue potential of hosting a Web community, you have to think like the advertisers do while also putting yourself in the place of your users. Ads and transaction opportunities are only effective if users are paying attention. If you know enough about your users, you may be able to present ads and products in ways that will be appealing to them. If not—and if neither ads nor products result in sales for the sponsor—you can expect those revenue sources to dry up eventually. As you go through the experimental stages of seeing which advertising arrangements work best with your community, you should follow the example of the smaller sites referenced in the report noted earlier and hold your costs low enough to let ad revenue keep your site afloat.

In deciding whether to use your valuable screen space for advertisements or transaction pitches, keep in mind that ads earn you money—at least at this point in time—whether users click on them or not. Links to e-commerce stores, on the other hand, take up as much screen space as ads, but ask for a much greater time commitment from the user and don't necessarily earn you money

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unless the user clicks through and makes a purchase. You will make more money from a transaction than you will from an advertising hit, but the chances are much smaller that you'll see a purchase. So, if you want to provide e-commerce stores for your members, choose carefully the products that will be offered for sale in your community and budget the screen space allocated to them wisely. Products that your members aren't interested in buying could actually cost you lost ad revenue in the long run.

Financial Support Models in Action

All of the support methods I've described so far are in use around the Web. I've said a bit about how they are employed by different types of sites, but haven't yet gotten very specific about which types of communities successfully use them for financial support. Among the examples I offer in the rest of the chapter, you'll probably recognize some that resemble your Web community. As you compare them to your situation, note that the following variables are critical to the effectiveness of any revenue model:

The size of the site. Huge traffic numbers are much more attractive to advertisers.

The demographics of the user population. Affluent users have more to spend. Advertisers like that.

The perceived value of the community, its content, and its features. They must be considerable if users will pay extra to subscribe.

The expenses of building and operating the site. Profit comes easier and sooner when they're kept low.

The focus of the community's population. The more specific, the easier to get higher advertising rates.

Rather than list sample communities by the financial support techniques they employ, I list them by the type of community they represent, for in actual practice most sites use a combination of techniques to earn revenue or to secure financial backing. That's a wise approach to take because, unless you're one of the top traffic-drawing sites on the Web, a single approach to supporting your site is not likely to be enough and leaves you floundering if it fails. I'll

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begin with community sites for whom commercial revenue generation is not an appropriate support model.

Supporting the Not-for-Profit Site

Setting up and running a Web site costs money, but many nonprofit organizations (NPOs) know the Web to be one of the more economical ways of reaching an audience of potential donors and dues-paying supporters. The question for you, if you're one of them, becomes whether an online brochure and newsletter is enough, or if enabling interaction is a worthwhile addition to the content you provide to your audience. There is additional expense involved in the installation of message boards and chat interfaces, and the resulting interaction is not going to add value to your organization unless someone, either from staff or loyal volunteers, is able to host them. You must weigh the possible benefits of greater involvement by your constituency against the costs of supporting it.

A site can be the online communications organ for an existing NPO such as the one provided by the Natural Resources Defense Council (www.nrdc.org) that uses its Web pages to inform members and interested readers and recruit new members (see Figure 11.1). Note that it provides the ability to charge for memberships online. E-commerce is not the sole domain of the profit-making sector. Representing 350,000 dues-paying members, the NRDC Web site supports a community by serving as a center for correspondence between members and the organization, and by keeping members current and informed about all of the organization's campaigns. The cost of fulfilling the same functions through mailing out print publications would be many times the cost of providing this site.

Earlier in the book I described Diabetes.com as an example of a highly focused community site. Though not directly representing a nonprofit organization, it provides a not-for-profit service to diabetes sufferers and is funded by Sun Microsystems and Bayer Pharmaceuticals. Bayer places branded informational notices on the pages of the site (see Figure 11.2). They're not banner ads and aren't linked to promotional information. Bayer and Sun fund the site as part of their giving programs, and gain some good public relations exposure in the bargain.

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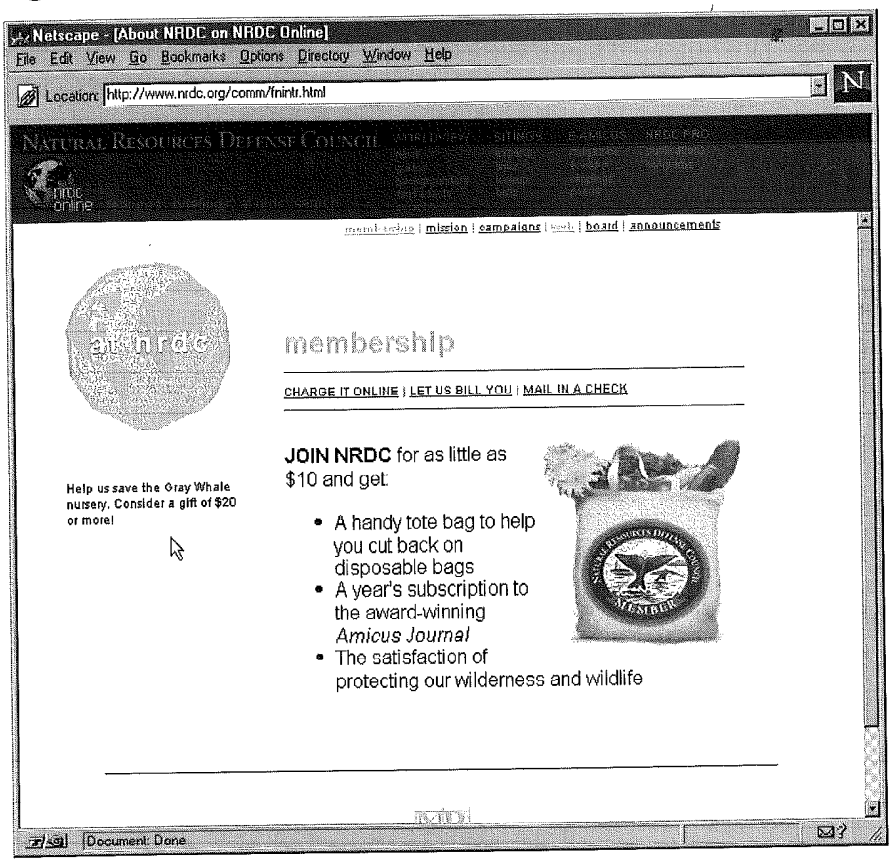
Figure 11.1 The NRDC site updates its current members and recruits new ones from those who come to see its content and to contact the organization.



Copyright Natural Resources Defense Council www.nrdc.org.

Building Community for PR and Customer Support

Businesses also have reasons for hosting communities that don't *directly* bring them income. Customer service, customer support, and public relations all add indirectly to the bottom line by increasing customer loyalty and attracting new business. Such operations are becoming more prevalent as corporations

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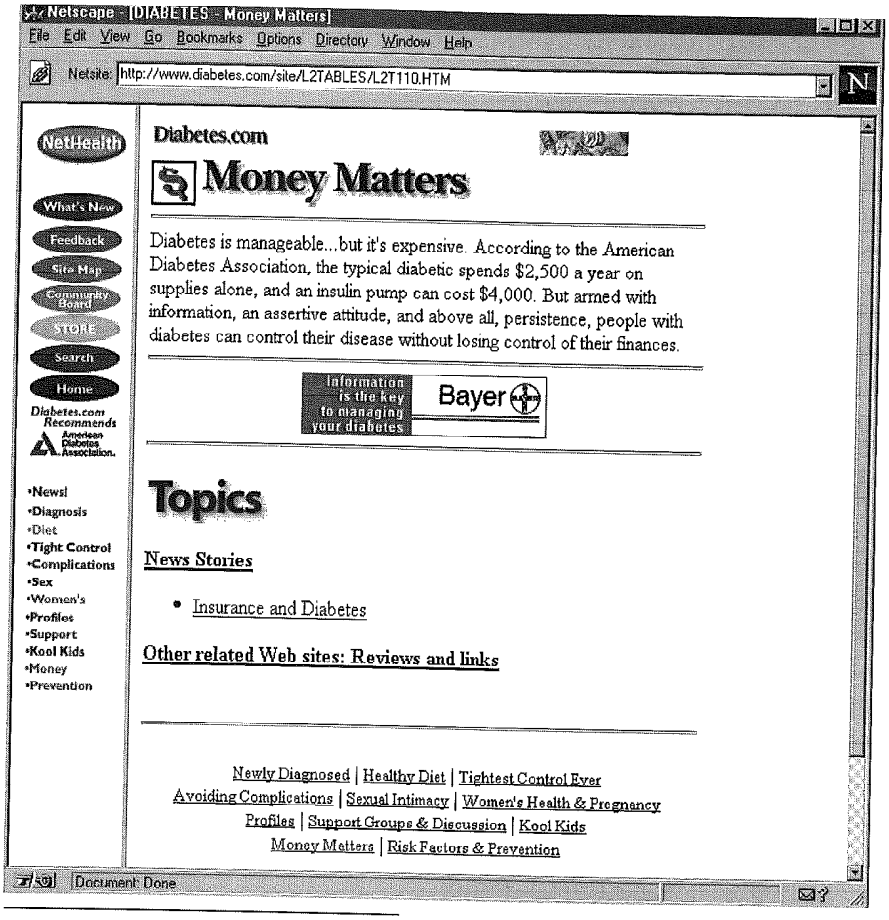
Figure 11.2 The Diabetes.com site is partially funded by Bayer Pharmaceuticals, which gets recognition through small graphics placed on its information pages.



From Diabetes.com, copyright Net Health, a division of Epicenter Communications, Inc.

become more comfortable on the Web and find an increasing number of their customers there.

Autodesk provides and hosts discussion groups on its corporate site to educate and bring together users and developers of its software products (see

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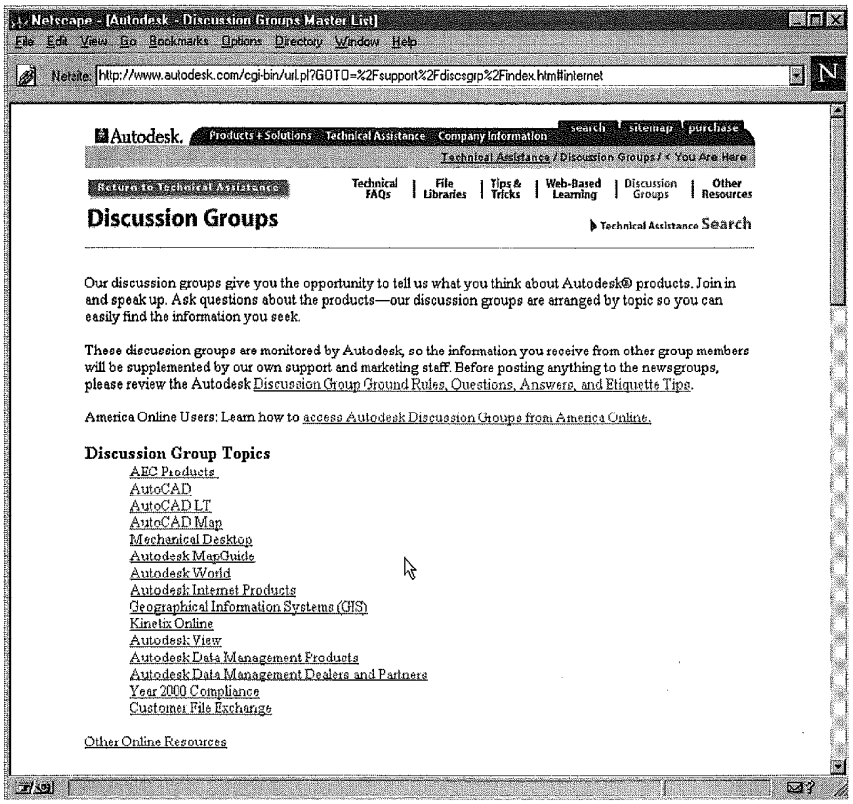
Figure 11.3). By providing its users and developers' communities with information and contact, it builds loyalty to its brand at the same time as it promotes collaboration among its customers. This is a win-win solution to the customer service problem because customers not only get responses from the company, but they get the benefits of fellow software users' experiences and tips. In the

Figure 11.3 Autodesk encourages users of its software products to communicate with each other and with the company through the discussion groups it hosts on its site. Both customers and Autodesk benefit from the exchange.



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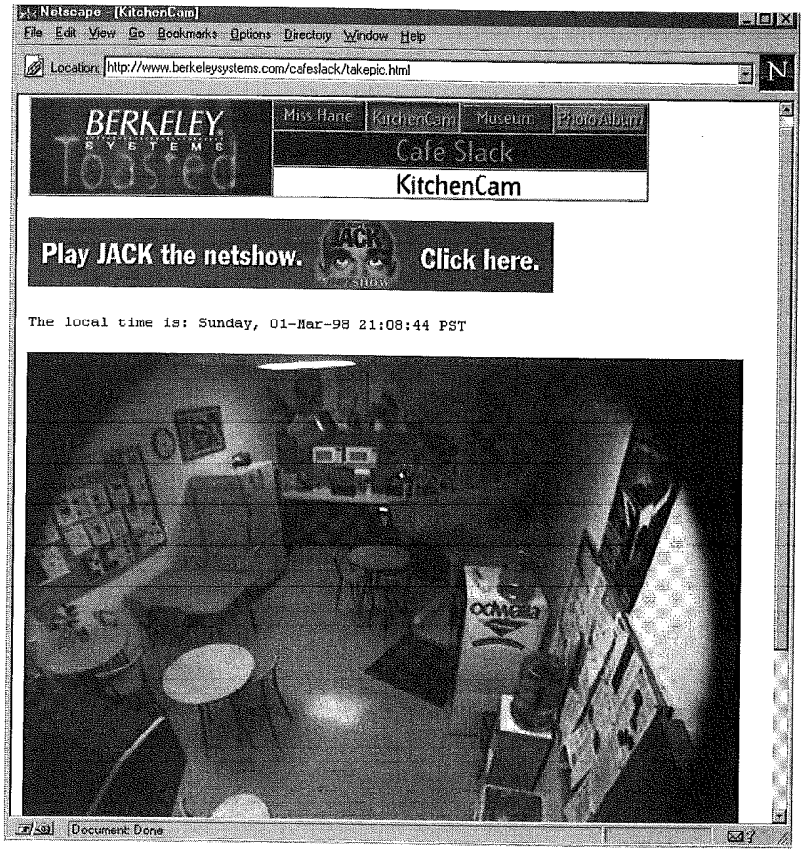
age of the Web, savvy software users understand the value in buying products whose vendors host such valuable support communities.

Berkeley Systems, developers of the AfterDark screensaver and the You Don't Know Jack trivia game, hosts the Toasted site, which invites Web site visitors into the company's office kitchen (see Figure 11.4). The site also offers a downloadable game for the You Don't Know Jack Netshow, provides photo galleries by (and of) its staff members, and features a museum demonstrating and

Figure 11.4 It's Sunday evening and there's nobody home in the Berkeley System kitchen, but the software company invites its fans in anyway. Being loose with the customers helps build a sense of community with them.



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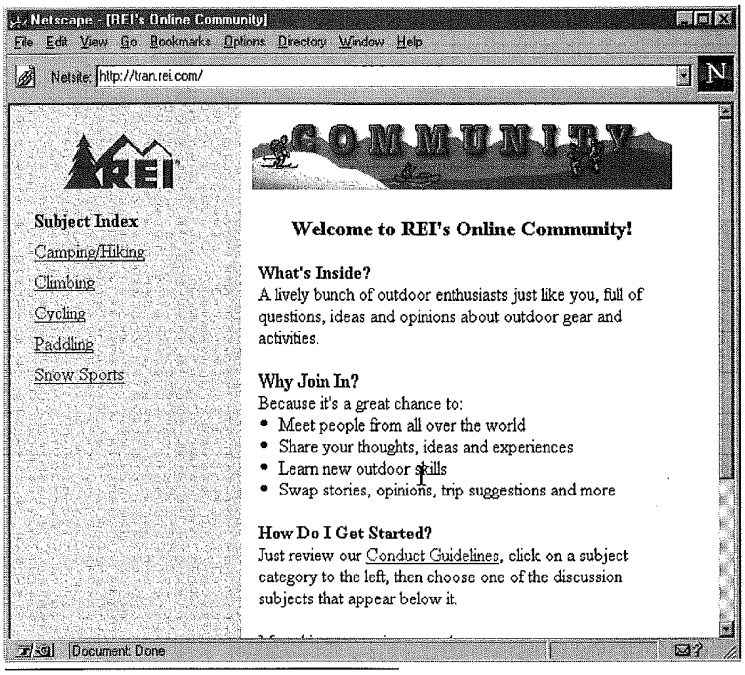
describing the graphic development of Berkeley Systems products like the infamous Flying Toaster screensaver. A company can build itself a cult following if its products and personality hit the right chords and it reinforces its image through a quirky Web site such as this one.

It's not just computer companies who fund community-building sites. Recreational Equipment International (REI) provides an extensive presence on the Web that not only includes a store where over 6000 items are available for shopping and purchase, but points its customers to a community area where they post their experiences and advice for others on a simple message board (see Figure 11.5). In its Feedback pages, customers can ask questions about the gear it sells, the services it provides, and its co-op membership arrangement.

Figure 11.5 Outdoors enthusiasts visiting REI's online showroom can stop by the community area to meet up with fellow hikers, bikers, and paddlers.



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Adobe System's Business Solutions area (www.adobe.com) invites users of its products and patented formats to describe how they use them in real-life business applications. In what it calls its *Business Buzz* section, customers submit descriptions of their projects and provide graphic examples wherever possible. It's a customers' mutual support site that, like Autodesk, works very well to increase the utility of Adobe's products. The use of interpersonal communications arrangements to allow customers to support each other not only is a good public relations move, but also takes a considerable load off of the company's support staff. Users of a product are often far more knowledgeable about it than people hired to read product support answers out of a printed manual. In fact, customers supporting other customers on the company's site often provide important feedback and ideas about the products they use. The value of such indirect input to the company is impossible to calculate in terms of dollars, but it can be profound.

Keeping the Small but Passionate Community Afloat

Think in terms of hobbyists: individuals, small associations, and clubs with strong interests. All of these use the Web as a place to share ideas and discoveries, to meet other enthusiasts, and to keep up to date with the pursuits and pastimes around which their relationships revolve. I used the Vintage Bus site and the Unofficial Elvis homepage as two examples of the work of dedicated fans and true believers. The Magician's Corner is a similar creation by an individual in Scotland (see Figure 11.6). It has its own newsgroup as a place for magic enthusiasts to communicate. Its host and creator, Sandy Wilson, provides most of the content, based on his research and experience, that fill its pages, but he invites contributions from others.

The traffic through a hobby site is likely to be too low to attract much in the way of advertising or retail business, but making money is not the point when there's a passionate interest being pursued. The costs for providing a site like the Magician's Corner are modest and may even be absorbed, in this case, by the site owner's magical day job.

Clubs and associations, usually formed initially outside of the Web, increasingly use the Web to inform their members about activities and to provide them with the means to contact and stay in touch with each other. Many send

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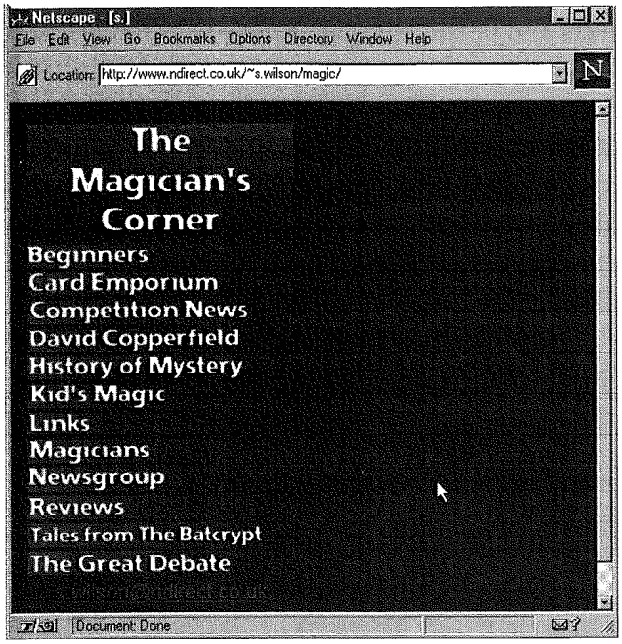
Figure 11.6 It's a hobby so it shouldn't cost much to build a Web page like The Magician's Corner. Revenue? Hobby site providers do it out of passion and enthusiasm.



out electronic newsletters while accepting submissions and announcements from members for posting on the site. Members of these groups often pay dues, which go partially toward supporting their sites. Since administration costs for these small- to medium-sized organizations are normally dues-supported, the costs of creating and maintaining their sites may simply replace those of printing and mailing out traditional newsletters.

There are many creative ways to keep costs low on a community site. Using a newsgroup as the site's discussion venue as both the Vintage Bus and Magician's Corner sites have done spares the site the expense, licensing, policy-making, and maintenance hassles of supporting discussion on a commercial site or platform. Combining Web pages with chats held on a buddy list network such

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as ICQ's is another way to tap into the Web's free software economy. For a hobbyist, club, or association, it's not so important that the facilities be fancy, but that they be serviceable and effective for making the community work at the lowest possible cost.

Making a "Community" of Your Small Business Clientele

Small business sites selling specialty items have become the mom-and-pop stores of the Internet, selling to customers who can now be found anywhere accessible to a dialup connection. The Net has given birth to thousands of such electronic shops, and it's reasonable in many cases to regard their clientele as "communities" because they come back repeatedly to purchase their wares.

Like mail order catalogs, many of these home businesses still take orders over the phone rather than through online transactions. But now e-commerce facilities are usable by even the cottage industrialists. Inexpensive transactional interfaces are being made available and affordable by forward-thinking ISPs like Virtual Storefronts (see Figure 11.7).

On small business sites, customers can correspond with the proprietors through email. Newsletters are often used to keep customers up to date with the latest products, and affordable chat and message board platforms now make it possible to connect users of the products to each other. As with every other marketing situation on the Web, the key to success as a small business site owner is to get noticed and to get word about the site and its products traveling through the right grapevines in order to reach the right people. If you provide a good product, good service, and good communication with your customers, you have a good chance of finding yourself a loyal community of buyers and a steady source of income.

A handicraft supplier, The Wax House, provides an online catalog for candlemakers who can shop and buy products for their craft on the site (see Figure 11.8). Contact with The Wax House owner is made through email, and visitors can subscribe to a newsletter that includes product and price updates. Through the site, the candlemaking community is served and The Wax House can run its business economically while providing a wide inventory of products. If

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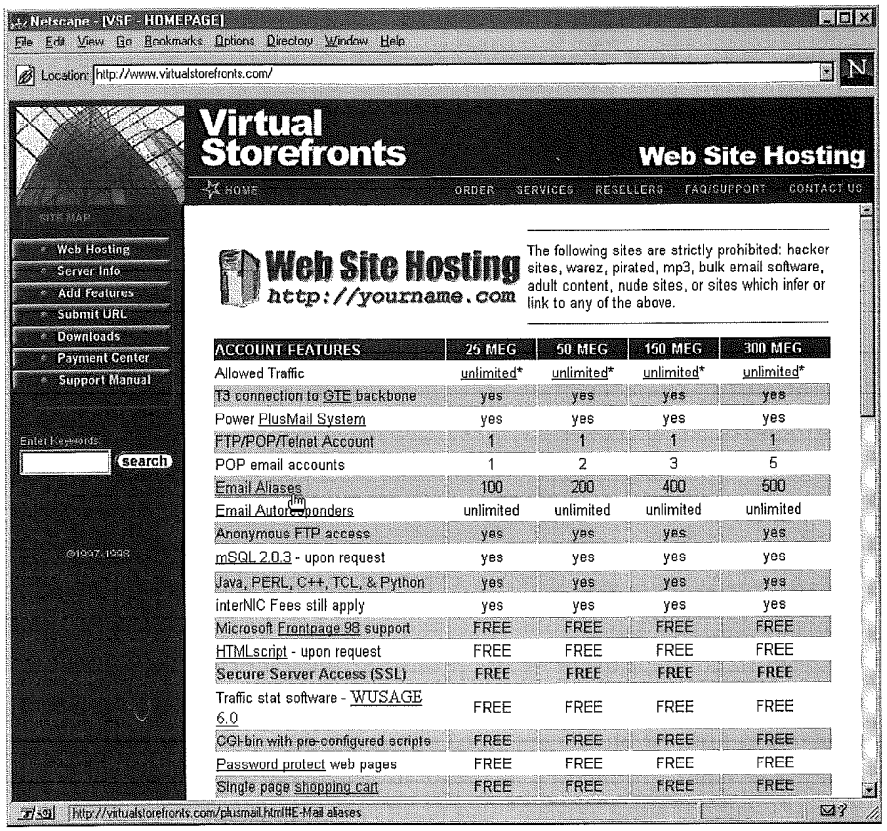
Figure 11.7 You can set up your small business on the Web with an ISP like Virtual Storefronts that will also provide you with electronic shopping carts that let your customers order and pay for your merchandise online.



Web design done by David Tanguay.

customers don't find all they need to know on the site, they can use the toll-free number.

Supporting Communities Centered Around Discussion

Sites that exist primarily to host group interaction don't rely on special interests, content, or products to attract people. Instead, they draw users to the availability of environments where conversation can happen. Sites like the

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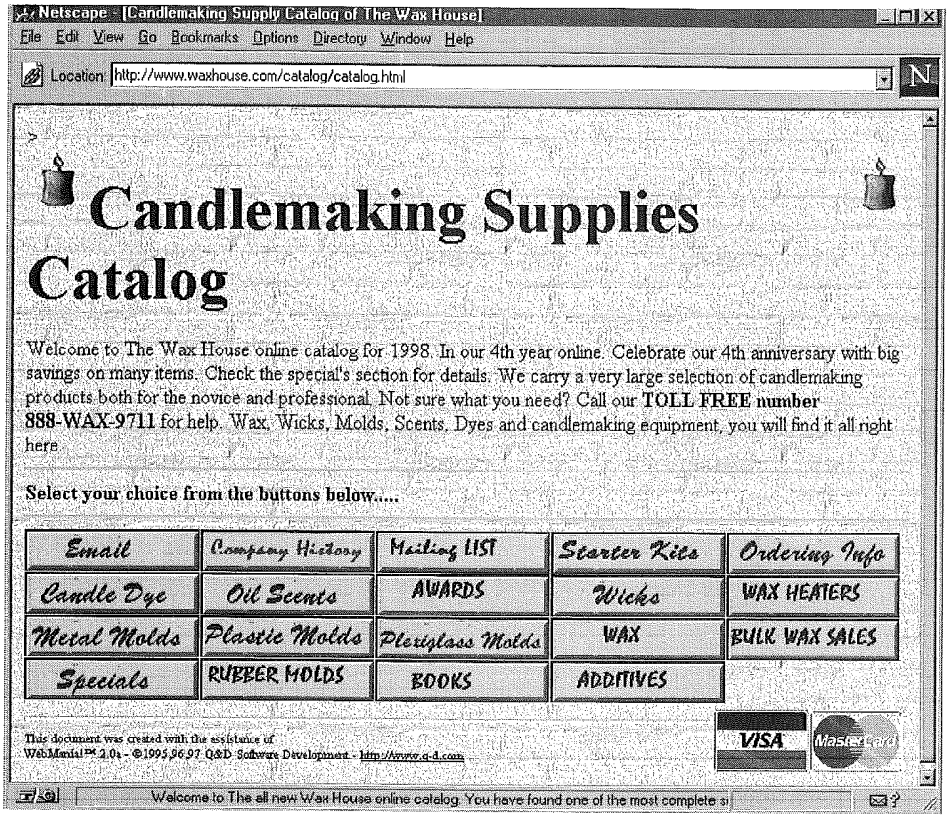
Figure 11.8 Running low on candlemaking supplies? You and those like you can find what you need on sites like The Wax House, a small business serving a niche craft community on the Web.



Copyright Michael Frend.

WELL and Talk City also facilitate conversations by organizing them by interest and allowing their users to create their own discussions and communities. They further enhance their users' experiences by upholding standards of behavior, providing good discussion moderators, and keeping the sites' conversational contents orderly. Because such sites provide their services on a commercial basis, they can afford to build out their facilities enough to entertain

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larger populations than the hobby and small business sites, incurring correspondingly higher operational expenses as a result.

But just because the services provided by discussion platform sites have similar characteristics, don't expect that their revenue models will be alike. The form of discussion, the topics of discussion, and the consumer profiles of the participants all come into play in determining which income-raising methods will work.

Tying Forum-Based Revenue to Community Identity

Though it's now accessible on the Web and no longer requires its members to dial in directly to its server, the WELL continues to charge a monthly fee of $10 to its members for access to its hosted forums. Though hosts are not paid, their membership fees are waived, and though there are many forums on the Web that are free to use, the WELL's users pay to participate in a discussion environment that has a relatively long history and is still free of advertising, as you can see in Figure 11.9. It's doubtful, at this time, that a new Web startup offering only discussion could draw enough people who would be willing to pay subscription fees just to converse. The WELL's tradition and reputation for interesting banter still attract a steady stream of new users, though it remains a small system, just bringing in enough revenue to support its small staff and operation.

Café Utne, a similar forum of comparable size to the WELL's, is largely subsidized by its parent magazine, the *Utne Reader*. Like the WELL, it also has hosts but since it does not charge a fee for usage, there is no fee to waive as compensation for its hosts' services. There are banner advertisements present at the tops of its pages, even where discussion is taking place, but based on the moderate volume of traffic and the placement of the banner ads that scroll off the screen whenever participants are reading through topics, it's unlikely that the rates advertisers pay are going to generate a profit for the Café. Its accompanying site, the Utne Lens, provides an online companion to the magazine and includes an e-commerce area called Kaleidoscope (see Figure 11.10). The Café doesn't have to pay for itself completely through the advertising it attracts. The discussions serve the magazine by supporting its readers' culture interactively and by occasionally providing usable content for the print publication.

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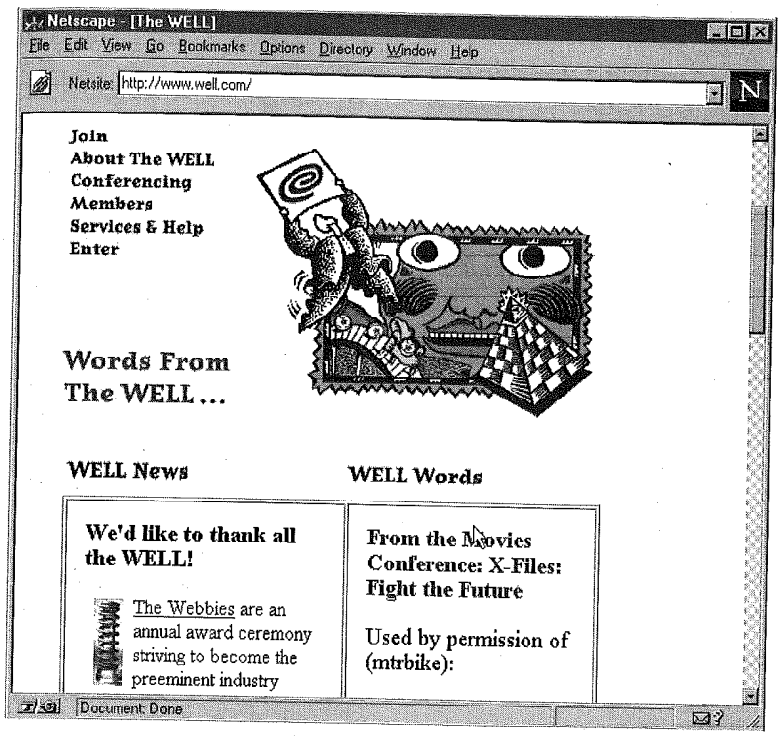
Figure 11.9 The WELL's homepage—not an advertisement in sight and it's the same throughout the discussion system. The absence of ads on the site is one reason its members are willing to pay a monthly subscription fee.



Salon, the online literary magazine, attracts a regular following of people who appreciate the written word, whether it's the work of professional writers or their fellow forum members. Like Café Utne, *Salon*'s Table Talk discussion area is an adjunct to a magazine, the difference being that *Salon* is an electronic magazine rather than one that sells on the newsstand. Like the Café, *Salon* displays banner ads throughout its Table Talk conversation pages. If you can judge by the sponsors who place ads on their sites, the profile of the typical *Salon* member would seem to be economically upscale from that of the Café Utne reader. *Salon* displays ads from IBM and Mercedes Benz, while the Café features ads from

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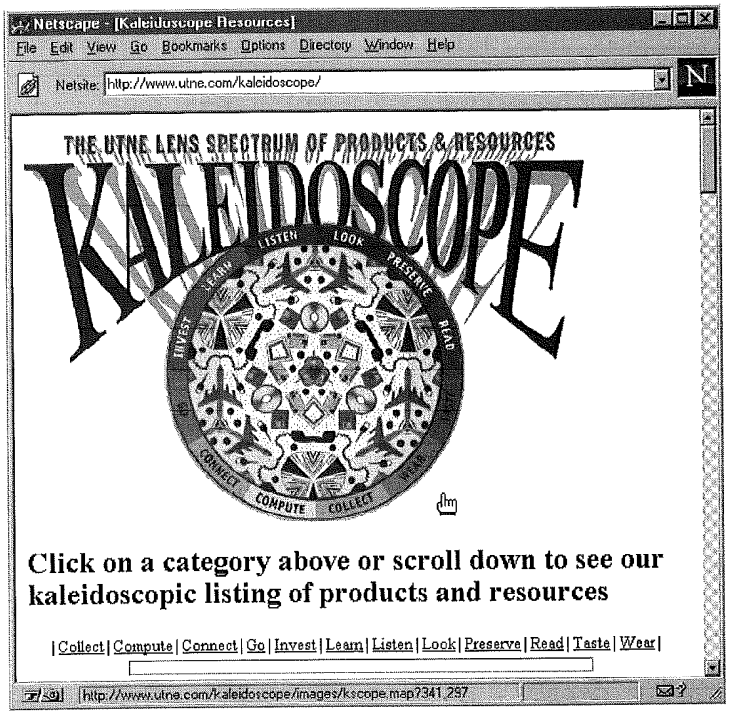
Figure 11.10 To augment income from advertising in its interactive Café, Utne Lens attempts to make additional bucks with the Kaleidoscope online store, aimed at the *Utne Reader* and Café community.



lesser-known and smaller businesses. Demographics count heavily where advertising rates are concerned, though the determination of user demographics on a Web site is still far from an exact science. The difference in ads on the two sites could just as easily be due to the differences between their ad sales teams and the fact that *Salon* is based in San Francisco while Café Utne is based in Minneapolis.

If advertising is to be the primary revenue source for a forum, community members should be clearly identifiable and targetable by advertisers. The breakdown and naming of conversation areas is critical for this to work. If the site provides editorially produced content, as *Salon* does, the Community

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Manager and hosts should build participation in their areas by linking to them directly from the specific content that visitors find attractive on the site, and by featuring forum topics and excerpted postings where they will be seen and followed by curious content visitors. Stimulating and restimulating interest in the discussion area is important in keeping participation high, for the more time that users spend in forums, the greater the opportunity to expose them to more revenue-producing ads.

The deep interpersonal relationships that develop in forum-based communities should be supported to raise members' feeling of identification with the entire community, including the provider. *Salon* attracts an audience and market segment optimally adapted to linear asynchronous discussion as opposed to chat. *Salon*'s editors have chosen to appeal to an audience whose consumer profile fits advertisers of high-end products. By doing so, they get higher revenue return from the participation of their community.

Chat Centers: Partnering and Crosslinking for Exposure

Talk City attacks the revenue-raising front from many angles at once, including advertising, e-commerce, and creative partnering. As a site that has positioned itself as *the* place to go on the Web for quality hosted group interaction, it has steadily built its traffic numbers since spring of 1996. It's constantly in search of additional eyeballs to expose to its advertisements, and in that pursuit has partnered with WebTV, AT&T, CBS Sportsline, and IDG Publishing to be their primary chat service provider while it continues to support and create chat activity in its own community. It has also partnered with major search engine site Infoseek, in an arrangement by which each site points to the other, exchanging context-related chat for searching services.

Since advertising revenues depend on how many eyes are present on a site, such partnerships are critical to Talk City's distribution on the Web, and thus to its bottom line. The company has also experimented with new forms of advertising to fit the usage habits of its chatting population. Its *Click 'n Stick* ad opens, when clicked, into a small separate browser window that displays prolonged advertising messages. Personally, I haven't found these to be very effective though the idea behind them is to take advantage of the fact that chatters are parked on the same URL for extended periods of time and

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might be interested in clicking on an ad that, by doing so, didn't close their chat windows.

To further use the valuable real estate of Talk City's chat pages, they have partnered with e-commerce vendors to sell their wares in the page margins. Amazon.com, FAO Schwartz, KidTools, and other companies offer books, toys, computer products, and greeting cards to the Talk City community.

WBS, Talk City's current competition for busiest dedicated chat site on the Web, is also partnering with community-targeting sites like ThirdAge.com to provide a robust and diverse chat experience for an identified market segment. Partnering in this way, of course, is a trade for each other's specialties. ThirdAge.com knows how to attract the mature audience of people aged 50 and older to Web content. WBS knows how to set up and run interesting chat rooms and events. As a result of the partnership, ThirdAge.com adds another quality feature to its site and WBS adds more users, a strengthened demographic representation of the older population, and an additional attraction for older people to join its system directly. WBS also has a store, which it announced in a pre-Christmas promotional newsletter:

> *The New Line Web Store features movie posters, T-shirts, and other great items from movies like "Austin Powers," "Lost in Space," "Boogie Nights," "A Nightmare on Elm Street," "Shine," "Pink Flamingos," and more. This month, the first 150 purchasers from the WBS community will receive a free collectable "Lost in Space" phone card, and all WBS community members will receive $5 off any purchase of three or more items.*

Leveraging the Strengths of Discussion Communities

It's a simple fact that the two megachat sites just mentioned can process a *lot* more user traffic, both in terms of users and total participants, than our most notable forum sites. The nature of chat, where a single room can host 50 or more simultaneous users while hundreds of different rooms can be open at the same time, is that its communities are much cheaper to maintain, for the number of people who populate them, than forum communities. Forums attract fewer people (and, importantly, fewer younger participants), but if they are managed well and are associated with popular content or an entity that people identify with, they can sustain very loyal and long-lasting communities.

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Your goals, when all you provide is a place for discussion, should be (1) to build traffic to levels that are attractive to more people and to advertisers, and (2) to form partnerships for sharing services and communities in ways that will bring more people to you while providing a greater selection of services to the people conversing in your community. Make use of the strengths of *your* community-building to complement the approaches of other sites. If you're concentrating on a particular demographic or interest group, find sites that offer services you can't afford to offer, and make a deal with them to deliver your respective assets to each other. That way, you can both satisfy the users you already have and introduce more users to what you provide.

Partnering with Portal Sites

A select few URLs on the Web are used by a disproportionately large percentage of users as the pages they see first when launching their browsers. These pages serve as their entry portals for every Web session. A surprisingly large number of people who use the Netscape and Microsoft Explorer browsers never change the default *Home* or *Start* pages, thus registering visits to those pages with every session and putting them near the top of the most visited sites' listings. Having so many visitors on a site is a great opportunity for sticking users to communities, but neither Netscape nor Microsoft have been effective in developing interactive community. Instead, they seem to have defined their communities in terms of the more technical needs of their users, providing pointers to resources that will build loyalty to their respective browser platforms and by-products. This, though, is changing as Netscape, for one, has redesigned its Net Center home page to look and function more like those of Yahoo! and Excite.

The most popular portal sites are the leading search engines. The Web being as vast, chaotic, and expanding as it is, the search sites like Yahoo!, Excite, Lycos, and Infoseek consistently attract masses of people, most of them just stopping by long enough to use the search facilities or drill down through their indexed layers of Web site referrals. But enough people linger on the sites that thousands of users at a time click on Yahoo!'s *Chat* link and Excite's *People and Chat*. Since the traffic is already there, the goal of providing interactive community spaces is to keep as many users on the site for as long

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as possible. The existence of these high-traffic, general-interest community spaces in turn presents opportunities to companies that build highly specialized community content.

Reaching Large Audiences with Niche Communities

Yahoo!, according to current measurements, is the most popular site on the Web. In its *Chat* area, it has partnered with *People* magazine, NBC, and Web businesses specializing in personal finance, music, TV programming, and parenting to host its chat rooms and to produce scheduled chat events. Yahoo! is the traffic magnet and the partners are its niche programming agents.

You probably won't become the next Yahoo!, so suffice it to say that it and the other major search sites are the standards for driving volume traffic through channels that advertisers can easily target. Excite's chat areas don't currently feature the partnering that Yahoo!'s do, though it's not due to any lack of traffic. On a recent Saturday morning there were over 6000 people listed as chatting in Excite's *People and Chat* area compared to 2400 on WBS and 3300 on Talk City. But neither Yahoo! nor Excite concentrate on building their community cultures to the extent that WBS and Talk City do. Whatever amount of loyalty people feel to a chat site—beyond what they may have to the people they meet there—I would assume that members of Talk City and WBS feel more of it than do visitors to Yahoo! and Excite who, after all, came originally to search rather than converse.

There's not much new to learn from the current community-building efforts of such huge traffic aggregators except to note that, like Talk City and WBS, partnering with sites that specialize in content development raises the quality of interactive event programming. Partners specializing in serving specific interests not only lead more focused and interesting discussions, but are better positioned to book celebrity guests in their niches, and are more likely to know the right questions to ask them.

If you're hosting an interest community with a particular expertise and with contacts to experts or celebrities who would be of interest to a larger audience than you currently attract, partnering with a Yahoo!, Infoseek, or Excite, or, more modestly, with any general-interest site that boasts huge traffic numbers, may be an answer to garnering some of those impressive advertising dollars.

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Search Engines and Web Worlds

High traffic with low cohesion would best describe the community areas of the portal sites, but Yahoo! and Lycos have both struck off in a new direction lately by partnering with the homepage motherships, GeoCities and Tripod, respectively. Lycos, in fact, purchased Tripod and now points to it from its own homepage through a *Build a Free Home Page* link. As of this writing there is no link from Yahoo! to GeoCities, but the strategy of both of these alliances appears to be two-pronged. First, they intend to create more user cohesion with the search site by allowing users to build homepages associated with it, and second, they can aim their search engines into the large settlements of homepages on the Web world sites.

GeoCities, claiming over 1.4 million members and 400,000 homepages at this time, and Tripod, claiming 1 million users and 1.6 million member-created pages, represent a growing wealth of potential targets for marketers and advertisers. The contents of the homepages on their sites tell a lot more about the interests of their owners than advertisers can learn from their Web surfing habits. The partnership between search engines and homepage motherships represents the next step in *advertising-defined communities*. Like smart bombs that can identify their targets, this combination brings us closer to *smart ads* that can find exactly who they're intended for.

The more you can find out about the people who come to your community, the more opportunities you will have to market to them and earn premium advertising dollars. People are much more willing to reveal themselves through the contents of their homepages than they are in registration surveys. Collecting personal information by asking for it directly is probably never going to have a high response rate on the Net. Privacy concerns inhibit people's willingness to cooperate, but telling the world about one's interests and personal tastes on homepages is considered creative. The unanswered question is: Will users feel comfortable being so naked before the eyes of commercially motivated searches? Most people want their homepages to be found, but do they want their homepages to identify them for focused marketing campaigns?

What these search engine/Web world alliances also do is raise the value of locating small niche communities within the world boundaries. Whatever the

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focus of your community, it's more likely to be discovered by thousands of people (out of the million or so mothership members) than it would be through searches based on the entire Web. Bringing the power of the Yahoo! and Lycos search engines into the more limited populations of GeoCities and Tripod increases the value of every homepage producer there who wants her page or small community to be noticed.

Communities Based on News and Relevancy

Next to the need to find things on the Web, major providers of information about current events and news draw some of the largest audiences, especially when there are hot stories running wild in the public imagination. A trial or a scandal draw discussion contributors to sites like CNN and Time-Warner's *People* magazine like gawkers drawn to a car accident. And like the gawkers, these curious populations like to talk and express their opinions about the sensational goings-on. Stories that linger in public view for a long time—and six weeks is equivalent to about a year in Net Time—keep people coming back to them.

Not much interplay can happen in a discussion thread with tens of thousands of postings, but the stories, combined with the ability to state an opinion about them, are powerful attractions. CNN's interactive population is not only huge, but it demonstrates cohesiveness, bringing amateur editorialists back day after day. News stories of high interest are handled well by CNN, presenting good hooks in their headlines to which their viewers are moved to respond. By constantly updating the lead-in text at the head of the topic, they elicit fresh reactions from viewers.

The revenue model here is to spur repeat visits by users who return to stay involved in the news. The more they come back, the more they are exposed to the array of ads and links blinking in the page margins. Engaging topics, kept fresh and provocative, insure high traffic. Once one scandal goes away there will be another Story of the Day to take its place as the focus of public opinion and gossip. But does CNN need to make a profit from its online interaction? Probably not, though it would appear to host enough repeat traffic to at least pay for itself.

The same could probably be said for *People* Online, which doesn't concern itself with news stories centered around politics, science, and sports. It's all

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celebrity talk all the time, and its community shares the fascination with celebrity that is one of today's major forms of recreation. The *People* Boards are well maintained. Like CNN, they use WebCrossing as their discussion platform, but, unlike on CNN, you won't find any topics 70,000 responses long there. *People* Online, specializing as it does in the celebrity news arena, doesn't attract near the traffic that CNN does, but its parent magazine outsells all others and the online component allows it to release stories on a daily, rather than weekly, basis so magazine readers can be more involved as events unfold.

News-centered communities like CNN and *People* Online demonstrate three helpful guidelines for engaging users' attention on the Web:

- Provide timely information of interest to your audience in a manner that invites and encourages them to return regularly and comment on it. These are theaters of content where patrons can add to the common experience by expressing their viewpoints to a crowd.
- The subject of the news attracts audiences that marketers can recognize. If the information you provide is kept current and is focused enough, you will draw a population that advertisers and merchandisers will pay you to reach.
- The ability for users to interact about the news increases not only the frequency and predictability of their visits, but keeps them on your site longer.

Summary

The most reliable keys to financial success with communities on the Web are to serve a specific niche subject or service, to choose one around which you and a population share a passion, and to do that one thing very, very well. The business end of hosting communities on the Web begins with knowing your community and your reasons for hosting it. Revenue models are relevant if you want to run your community as a business, but are not as important if the community serves another purpose such as a hobby or as a support center for a nonprofit cause. Keeping costs low is always important, especially when no revenue is expected from the site, but for small businesses, trimming expenses can be what makes the venture affordable or even profitable.

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Subscription-based communities work only where the site, with its content and its population, has a strong enough identity and reputation for users to justify paying for services that otherwise are available to them for free on the Web. Good hosting, organization, and discussion moderation are often deemed worth paying for, especially in special events of limited duration.

Web communities can be justified by companies as a cost of doing business, either as vehicles for generating good public relations or as services to customers. By extending the company's expertise and personality into the Web, the interactive community component can win loyalty and fanhood and even attract new business.

The most prevalent means for earning income through the Web are advertising and, increasingly, transactions or e-commerce. To be successful, advertising requires high traffic and focused populations of users that fit within advertisers' consumer profiles. The more effective and efficient the ads are at reaching their intended audiences, the more advertisers are willing to pay to place them. Selling merchandise and services directly to users on the Web is most effective where there's a high concentration of likely buyers, so highly focused communities are especially important in making the e-commerce revenue model work.

Since traffic and eyeball count is so critical to bringing in advertising revenue, it's important to partner strategically to bring complementary services and populations to your site. Combining the community-building and hosting strengths of one site with the compatible content-production and high-traffic categorizing strengths of another site can raise the revenue potential for both. Don't think of yourself as standing alone against the rest of the Web's traffic magnets. Look for opportunities to make strategic alliances.

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TRENDS, HOPES, AND THE FUTURE

12

The Net, in one form or another, has been supporting group interaction for 30 years, so in one sense email, conferencing, and chat are nothing new. What is new is the size and the diversity of the population using them, and the money and expertise available to improve their designs. As I've warned a few times in this book, a lot of what you'll see and use on the Web by the time you read this will be very different from what I'm writing about today. You will be seeing new ways of using what are basically the same old tools, but you'll be seeing the birth and adoption of new tools, too.

Just during the first quarter of 1998, new interfaces have appeared, existing ones have been updated, service suites have expanded, business models have added new twists, and powerful unanticipated partnerships have been formed. I've spent as much time updating my information for this book as I have writing the original copy, as all authors do, I'm sure, who write books about the Net these days. I don't see the changes slowing down at all in the technical and revenue-earning areas of Web community design. But people will continue to be people, and just as conferencing on the Web today is a very recognizable grandchild of conferencing in the early 1980s, the shape of group interaction a year from now will still be very recognizable. There will just be a lot more of it, in configurations that are difficult to predict before they happen.

In this final chapter, I recall the three mutually influential aspects of successful hosting that I first pointed to in the Introduction: tools, technique, and trust. You can expect that the Web, in its approaches to community, will evolve

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in all three. Being the fast learning environment that it is, the Web will spur its community developers to pursue the practices and formats that demonstrate success, especially in building populations to the scales that attract lucrative advertising. That trends will continue in that direction is both bad news and good news for community building.

The bad news is that there will be fewer sponsors' dollars for less-than-huge sites that rely on advertising for survival. The good news . . . well, there are two silver linings.

First, the expansion of the mega-homepage motherships—the Web worlds, with their free and comprehensive community support facilities—will provide more room, and more free niche communities in which to settle for people who otherwise would not be able to. Think of it as subsidized affordable housing in communication space.

Second, it doesn't matter for a lot of people that some sites will gain economic dominance on the Web because there will be many other sources of financial support, just as there are now, for intentional online community sites on the Web. Their value has been demonstrated and their support justified in applications from organizational coordination to customer support to nonprofit public relations.

If we've learned anything over the past 13 years since the birth of both America Online and the WELL, it's that people find other people fascinating enough to go looking for them in computer screens, and to pay money to do so. We don't know how much they're willing to pay and we don't know how long most of them will keep coming back. Our job as hosts is to make the experience as fulfilling and useful as possible, but we can't predict how people will behave once the Web (or whatever follows it) has been around for 10 years. We can only read the trends we see today, and then make our best guesses. And so I'm going to do a bit of guessing here, trying to avoid going out on the skinnier limbs.

Tools: The Need for Speed

Access to the Web is going to get faster, but slowly. This, of course, limits the kinds of content and technologies that can be provided. It's not so hard to get animation to look lifelike on an SGI workstation or even over the office LAN, but try squeezing all that motion through a 56Kbps Web connection and it's like watching movies made in the early 1920s.

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Jesse Berst, an industry watcher and columnist on ZDNet whose fortune-telling batting average I've found to be pretty high, predicts that the 28.8Kbps modem will continue to be the standard—the speed at which the majority of people reach the Web—beyond the middle of 1999. This is in spite of the fact that most new PCs today and for the foreseeable future will be sold with 56Kbps modems in them. The power of legacy technology—the computers and modems that, for most of their tasks, are just fine with their owners—is capable of holding average access speed down for years after the new technologies have been released.

America Online is the real telltale for where that speed standard lies. AOL has the resources and the need to fully understand the technical reach of its users, and it is very conservative about advancing its programming and feature kit beyond the capabilities of the majority. AOL was still holding its interface design at the 9.6Kbps level into 1996, and though a fast connection always makes its service look better, you can use about all that AOL offers today through a 28.8Kbps modem. AOL has been a pioneer in developing compression technologies and other programming tricks to move the maximum information through the minimum bandwidth. It has aimed at the average American, not at the bleeding-edge technoids or even at the computer professionals. AOL tries to serve the kids in the family who use Dad's hand-me-down computer to get homework help online. AOL is not the Web, but it does understand marketing very well; and marketing, increasingly, drives the Web's development.

If what Mr. Berst and AOL indicate is true—that most of what we'll find on the Web for the next year will work best at today's average connection speed—it means that the bottleneck for content and media development between Web site designers and their audience will remain at the user end. Because most of the people who work with computers are already on the Web, we can assume that most of the people who will arrive over the next two years will be technology newbies. Until they hit the Web and start demanding fast, cool, multimedia content to play with on their new state-of-the-art, high-speed Net setups; and until more of today's users have upgraded their modems; and until high-speed access services—beyond 56Kbps—have cheapened and expanded significantly in their availability, only select populations will be sharing live video presence, watching live rock concerts, and schmoozing in 3-D simulated worlds over the Web. The standard Web page, email, chat platforms, and forum interfaces will continue to be the basic home tools of the virtual community for a while.

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That's the way things are now for most of us, but those who already have or soon will be blessed with high-speed connections are leading the way for us in adopting new tools and experiencing the current ones under optimum conditions. Among the leading-edge populations out there are the wired-at-the-office users, sucking down the Web through their share of a T-1. There are the home-based hot rods, paying hefty fees for their ISDN pipelines into the Net. There are the cable modem pioneers, just beginning to get the custom-designed content that justifies the speed of their connections. And there is the growing population of users running through 56Kbps modems who are running at almost twice the standard speed.

Together, those groups define the envelope-pushing minority of current and soon-to-be Web users. For most of what is on the Web, they will have shorter waits for pages to download But considering the conversational platforms and interfaces we've concentrated on in this book, one has to ask, "Does speed really matter all that much today, and will it matter all that much in the near future?"

You Can Only Read So Fast

I was logged in and reading onscreen conversation for hours every day when 2800bps modems were introduced to replace the 1200bps modems that were the standard when the WELL was founded. And I remember distinctly the discussions at the time noting that, at 2800bps, the text being transferred was scrolling across the screen at about the maximum speed most people could read it. It defined a practical limit, matching an average human capability with a technical delivery mechanism. Using the WELL's no-frills ASCII text-based interface, anything faster than 2.8Kbps would have been overkill had everything else been working perfectly. Of course, the WELL's server in those days, once loaded with users, did its part in slowing things down, and rare were the days when its members had to be reading fast just to keep pace with the transmitted conversation. It was when WELL users began exploring FTP libraries and doing file transfers that the need for maximum speed revealed itself.

Today, Web servers are rarely underpowered for what users ask of them. Slowdowns are more often blamed on Net bottlenecks and gridlock. But recent analyses claim that the Net is significantly faster in early 1998 than it was the year before in spite of a huge rise in traffic. Of course, the user may still experience slowdowns when the content of the Web site is too *fat* to move quickly

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from server to PC and onto the user's screen. Chapter 5, "Designing the Comfortable Interface," explained how designers have learned to degrade their content to accommodate the browsers and connection speeds of the full range of users. This is much the same approach that AOL has taken, and it's largely this recognition—that a range of capabilities must be served from the same site—that has made speed less of an issue on the Web.

The exhilaration of providing users with the latest, coolest, and most bandwidth-hungry toys has been offset by the practical considerations of pleasing the greatest number of users. So at the same time that progress is sprinting ahead and new gee-whiz applications are constantly being created, the pressure for users to upgrade their setups on an annual basis has been eased somewhat. More speed is better, but average speed should be sufficient to use most of the Web. So sayeth today's marketers.

No doubt, speed enhancements will change things. But speed probably won't be the most important force changing the character of Web-based community over the next year. More likely we'll see continued improvements in the existing discussion platforms, expansion of the Web world metaphor, and more attempts to innovate attractions to audiences through interactive events presented over the Web. Large Web sites will be trying to win the loyalty of more users, and small Web sites that appeal to niche communities will continue to multiply. And simultaneously, the average access speed will be creeping higher.

Platform Evolution and Adaptation

In Chapters 7, 8, and 10 we saw that the selection of discussion platforms and environments for supporting user-produced content is expanding and being transformed. Platform designers learn from each other, if not directly, then indirectly through curious users who show up on their home sites with experience using the competition's products. I think of them as *pollinators*, buzzing from one community site to the next, delivering viewpoints and feedback to one community that they picked up in the previous one. They are platform enthusiasts and, like sports and auto enthusiasts, they like to talk about gear. In this case, the gear is discussion interfaces. They ask the developers on their company-hosted sites why certain features, which work so great on Platform X, can't be incorporated into their product, too. The cross-pollination of features between software platforms and online cultures is much more intense than it's ever been. More users,

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using more platforms, increases design feedback, and feedback drives innovation as much as competition does. Discussion platform software is unique in the degree to which its users can communicate their experience to its designers.

The online community market used to be characterized by a narrow array of entrenched interface philosophies holding forth in isolated interactive dialup enclaves. There were completely different looks and feels to AOL, CompuServe, the WELL, and BIX, and with the prices that users paid for those services, they were truly like captive audiences. Once they'd spent the time learning to use one system, it seemed like a waste to leave the service and pay to learn another. Captive audiences don't demand change. They endure the less-than-perfect. They think of the platform, as they've learned to use it, as an investment they'd rather not lose. When I spent all day, every day, using the Picospan conferencing interface at the WELL, I'd dread the prospect of logging in to CompuServe and feeling like a complete idiot as I bungled my way through its threaded forums.

Today, the ubiquity of the Web environment connects many community providers, and platform designers understand that their products are all available on the same network where they can be used and compared by millions. There's less sense that you're losing an investment when you leave one community for another out of frustration with the interface. People can move to more user-friendly environs with no sacrifice. And there's no sense of risk-taking in trying out a community and its interface. A Web user can develop a working familiarity with a wide array of discussion interfaces without having to pay for the opportunity. Largely because of that kind of circulation of users, and because of the simultaneous development of more and better chat and forum platforms, the online community market has changed drastically over the past two years. The people looking for group interaction have become more experienced and knowledgeable about the technology they're using. They're no longer at the mercy of a limited selection of technologies. The users know how to talk back to the toolmakers, and the hyperactive Petrie dish of the Web will no doubt continue to accelerate improvements in tool design.

Better, Cheaper, Faster

Products like the Ultimate Bulletin Board and WebBoard offer more features for much lower prices than I would have imagined possible two years ago. The avid Web hobbyist can afford to run these programs on a desktop PC server far

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more powerful than the one the WELL ran on for years in the 1980s. Lessons learned from the histories of USENET, America Online, the WELL, and CompuServe have been incorporated into Web-based software that now supports all kinds of conversations and communities. It cost the WELL almost a quarter million dollars in 1985 dollars to get started, and what we got for that was a computer that slowed down when 10 users were scrolling text on it simultaneously. The computer and its disks needed an air-conditioned room of their own. Today, a hobbyist can put a system online that would technologically put the WELL to shame for about $2000 plus some Web hosting fees. Small community building is decentralized.

Increasingly, features and tools that used to reside in different places on the Web and in different applications on the user's PC are being bundled and offered as an incentive for registering on a site and becoming an identifiable entity within their domain. In exchange for volunteering some personal information, a user is given free access to chat, forums, content, homepage building, and email, not to mention contact with a population of users who are identified by their expressed interests.

Site providers today have access to a growing variety of tools that allow them to address the expressed and demonstrated community needs of all kinds of populations, from compulsive chatters to sales and marketing staffs. At the same time that tool selection has expanded, system performance has remained at or near the top of the system programmers' priority list, and software is being written that is cleaner and more efficient. People don't like to wait in order to converse, and they are waiting less as designers learn how to deal with the complexities of hundreds or even thousands of simultaneous users on a chat site or in an event auditorium. Forum platforms are becoming feature rich, allowing users to view their collections of conversations in ways that fit the unique characteristics of the medium. Using Motet, users can ask to see only the topics and responses that follow their postings. Platforms are learning how people actually behave socially in cyberspace.

The Web site operator now has a long list of platforms from which to choose to find the one best matched to the needs of his community. The most difficult part of shopping in the GIP market is that, with the proliferation of products, there are still too few agreed-upon terms and standards for comparing their features, strengths, weaknesses, and most appropriate applications. Hopefully this

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book with its accompanying Web site and sites like David Wooley's, David Strom's, and ForumOne will help in identifying the criteria necessary to loosely classify platforms by the kinds of communities and styles of interaction they best support.

Mixing Modes and Capabilities

Another factor driving the change in platform design is the recognition that communities need versatile interfaces for delivering a variety of content. My involvement in managing discussion for IBM's Deep Blue versus Kasparov chess event in 1997 convinced me of the value, in certain circumstances, of having both chat and conferencing integrated into the same platform. Though most of the interaction during the two-week period surrounding the chess match was suited to asynchronous discussion of chess, technology, human intelligence, and the contestants, following the moves in real time during the actual games was clumsy using a forum interface. A chat auditorium would have been much more appropriate. Yet, it would have been expecting too much, perhaps, to ask our thousands of participants to learn two completely different interfaces for one event.

Web Crossing now provides the combination of asynchronous discussion and chat in the same platform, as does WebBoard and Acuity's ichat. Other platform designers are realizing that, whether or not both modes are used for the same events, they work together well and complement each other for long-term community-building purposes. My experiences and observations have convinced me that asynchronous community members enjoy the more intimate feeling of a little real-time contact with each other and apparently the platform designer have been noticing this too. The huge growth of the ICQ messaging community is another indication that real-time communication is considered handy no matter what else the Internet user is doing.

On the personal homepage front, GeoCities has just announced the availability to its users of GeoShops, a suite of e-commerce utilities that its members can purchase and install on their sites. Tripod is said to be preparing a similar package for its members. The feature wars continue, and hopefully for the benefit of the end user. Though it's impossible to tell yet how successful these micro-entrepreneurs' e-commerce products will be—first, in selling them to the members, and second, in supporting small business ventures—it's the next logical step in expanding the features of the homepage products that have now been accepted and used by so many.

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The individual user on the Web adopts new technologies in stages. As one technology becomes familiar and routine, related ones can be learned and added to it incrementally. Small-scale, inexpensive, easy-to-use business utilities are one such incremental step that will probably be tried by many users because of the low risk involved. The challenge to selling products through the Web, though, will continue to be getting noticed by potential customers. Web worlds sell the idea that by settling within a population numbering in the hundreds of thousands, a settler will have an easier time getting attention, but this remains to be proven in spite of the apparent logic of the idea. Some are now questioning the counting methods used to state Web world populations. As most subscriber-based commercial networks have done over the years, populations are calculated under the assumption, "Once a subscriber, always a subscriber." Hopefully, a more realistic and helpful means of stating sizes will replace that misleading convention.

The more graphic-rich community environments will also continue with their development. They have a relatively small but committed core of users, and one platform, at least, is nearing profitability with its community space. WorldsAway (www.worldsaway.com), run by Fujitsu, has been charging its users by the minute and allowing them to experiment and innovate with the tools and objects it provides. As with any community environment in which tools are made available, users find ways to use them that designers might never have predicted. In WorldsAway, a scene from which is shown in Figure 12.1, users found objects representing spray-paint cans—provided as part of the avatar-design kit—to be serviceable building materials for stacking into walls for housing in the virtual environment. And fuzzy wigs, also meant for customizing avatars, were used like beanbag chairs as furniture to make their homes feel more comfortable.

Like anthropologists, we can look at the stages of development in online communities and see ourselves moving through these primitive stages, attempting to civilize the environments we are provided. The designers of the environments observe and learn how users behave, what tools they need, and where the ability to innovate is most attractive to them. Fully graphical environments are leading the merely text-based community environments in their potential for providing a wide array of tools and possibilities for creative play. But until high-speed Net access is a reality for more people who enjoy avatar play, these platforms won't truly come into their own as mainstream hangouts on the Web.

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Figure 12.1 In WorldsAway's Brynn Turf community, some of the citizen avatars model their replaceable heads and bodies. A good balance between rich graphics and reasonably good animation at modem speeds, this pay-by-the-minute subscription community is about to go to flat pricing.

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Beyond Reading Speed

Ziff Davis's new cable TV station with complementary Web content, ZDTV, is distributing 10,000 *net cams*—miniature video cameras that transmit over the Internet—to its Net-connected viewers. The community they envision will communicate not only through Web-based chat and message boards, but through two-way video. Or make it three-way, since users will purportedly communicate not only with each other, but with ZDTV's studio, appearing at times on the cable programs and speaking to the TV audience in what will amount to broadcast mode. It remains to be seen how the transmissions will look from those without faster-than-modem connections. Maybe like early video transmissions from manned space capsules, I imagine. But from those who can send their signals through a T-1, the appearance of Netizens speaking from their homes to a cable TV audience could be fascinating and even entertaining. The user as information provider will take another step into the future. Once the online population

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moves beyond true 56Kbps, the possibilities for beyond-text group communication really begin to unfold. But according to the experts, most of us should hold our dreams of streaming video community in check.

In a *PC Magazine* article from December 16, 1997, written by Don Labriola and titled *Videoconferencing on the Net*, the author concluded that, "For most users, high-quality Net videoconferencing that delivers 24-fps (frames per second) full-motion video is at least a few years off. The Internet is likely to remain a hostile environment for live video until higher connection speeds and several recently proposed IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force) infrastructure mechanisms become widely implemented." I'm sure you'll hear whenever both of these requirements have been met because a lot of new applications will be straining at the bit to break free into the world of high-bandwidth video transmission. Meanwhile, take a look at the current implementation of person-to-person video over the Web sometime and ask yourself if you'd rather use it to carry on a regular group conversation or a plain old chat room.

As jerky as today's Net video is, the prospect of the Web being used for friendly impromptu get-togethers via Net camera connections, with a cluster of faces on each participant's screen, is definitely intriguing, especially, I think, for nonbusiness applications. Picture teenagers four years from now, finding excuses for not doing homework with four of their best friends talking to them from the margins of their PC screen. But it's hard to imagine that the exposure to others that video gives one's physical self will result in the same sense of community that exists today in media that permit us some privacy, some protection from exposure. It's a qualitative difference in communications bandwidth as well as a technical one. Yet, since face-to-face familiarity increases the meaningfulness and significance of relationships formed and maintained via text online, the availability of a *live* video-transmitted face and voice on the monitor will be a quantum leap ahead in emotional bandwidth from the words and graphical emoticons most of us are capable of putting together or interpreting in a chat or a forum. For widely scattered families, friends, and business associates, and for people just curious to see what their faceless online acquaintances look like, the video signal on the Web will be a great breakthrough. It won't replace the more coordinated group discussion advantages of chat and conferencing, but it will complement them in providing the element of visual contact that makes written contact more meaningful.

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The @Home network may lead the way into this next level of shared media (see Figure 12.2). It relies on cable modem connections between its subscribers and its content service. With speeds up to 100 times faster than a 28.8Kbps connection, a lot of new possibilities open up for its subscribers. A 10-megabyte file that would take the average Web user an hour to download will transfer in about 17 seconds through the @Home connection. That is a significant difference in media potential, and though it is still small compared to the size it must reach to recoup its investment, it still has the largest population of high-speed home users on the planet.

All of @Home's members are connected to each other through what amounts to a closed high-speed network, enjoying the level of bandwidth usually found only on office LANs. Animation and elaborate graphics won't bog down @Home subscribers. Applications that are slow-loading on the Web, such as chat applets, should open instantly once optimized for @Home subscribers. Real time will seem *really* real. It may be a while before @Home is carried by your local cable service provider (it currently counts its subscribers at less than 100,000, many of them in Canada), but the content and community the company will develop over the next year will be the first indicators of where content and community on a higher-bandwidth Web may be heading in the future. @Home gets the first chance to introduce a significant population to the potential of a truly fast community network, and its experiences will be worth watching.

Technique: The Maturing of the Community Theme

As time passes, we find more people on the Web accumulating more experience using more different tools in a greater variety of situations. The result is a fast-expanding core of competency, not just among the techies who work on the Net, but among the users of the Web who have other day jobs. The more people who understand what works and what doesn't, who provide feedback to community developers by responding or not returning to their sites, the faster moves the evolution in site design, marketing, and customer service techniques. The Web is a very fast learning medium, and that learning pushes changes not only in how sites are designed, but in how users behave and are treated. Hosting—the practice of welcoming and serving the users of a site—is refining its own definition as more people gain experience in its roles.

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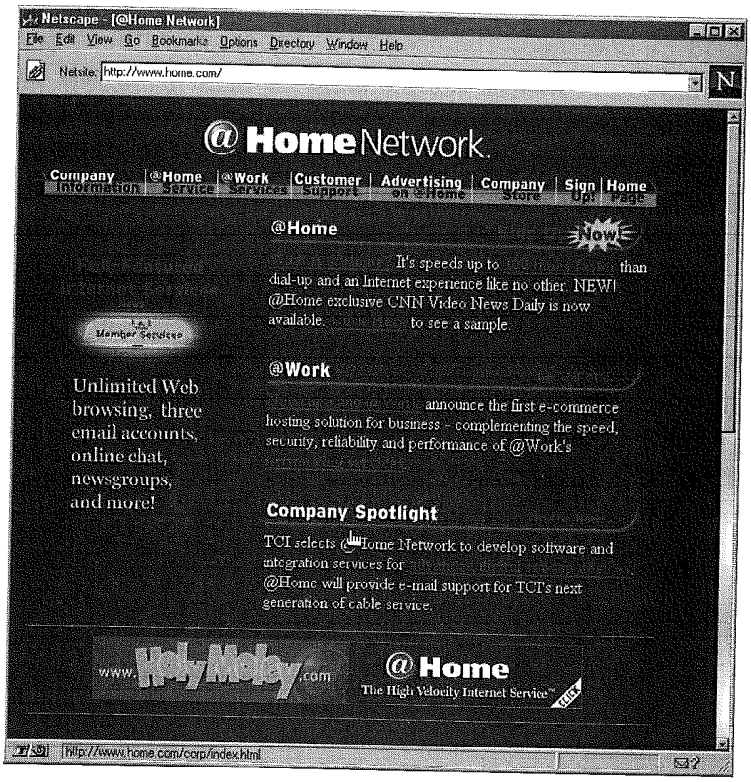
Figure 12.2 Using the high speed of TV cable and newly developed cable modems, @Home is delivering Web content that would be impossible to appreciate through current phone line connections.



The Expansion of the Host Pool

Specifically within interactive, conversational communities, members learn the value and techniques of good hosting. They learn by example, watching others do it, and they learn by trying it themselves and finding that it's not necessarily as easy as it looks. And as more people acquire skills through the Cyberschool of Hard Knocks, they become accomplished hosts and mentors for another generation. In a sense, *Netiquette* and Web-wide community standards are being distributed through these layered generations of hosts, guides, and moderators. People who have been touched by these teachings and have seen

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their value in the theater of personal interaction are more likely to integrate community practices into the Web sites they build themselves. More niche communities will form with quality hosting assured because their founders and custodians understand how people react and behave online, and how a good community site should be managed. The good-hosts-per-capita ratio should increase in the future. But if you don't have an experienced host already on your site or in your company, where will you find a good host when you need one? That has been a common question among the burgeoning collection of site providers who have been branching into community hosting lately.

Businesses now exist that will provide experienced hosting services for companies planning interactive events and new Web-based communities. Blue Barn Interactive is one example of a company that offers such services (see Figure 12.3). It can staff chats or forums with moderators for short- or long-term communities. It conducts training for inhouse staff, and can help recruit discussion hosts from offsite. Such services are especially valuable for organizations and corporations first coming onto the Web that need guidance as their internal cultures meet the Web's. Online community building is not a skill position that most companies develop in the course of their normal operations, and I expect they will make use of services that ease this direction of entry into the electronic marketplace.

Experienced hosts are also innovative hosts. Once their background is established through facilitating the daily meetings and events of online groups, many are likely to experiment in new Web-enabled environments—in the contexts of different content and platforms—to extend what they've learned into new forms. Chat was once new, so were forums, so was the instant message, and so will be networked audio, video, and the virtual reality communities that eventually will be populated by droves of avatars. The job description of the host will continue to broaden and it will be the experienced hosts themselves who push the envelope.

The Spread of Communicable Practices

An educated user base is more likely to recognize appropriate ways to use GIPs in new applications for augmenting and creating content. Workers who use the Web at home discover software and techniques that they bring to the office where they can put them to use in business applications such as customer support or intraoffice group communications. Along with the introduction of new

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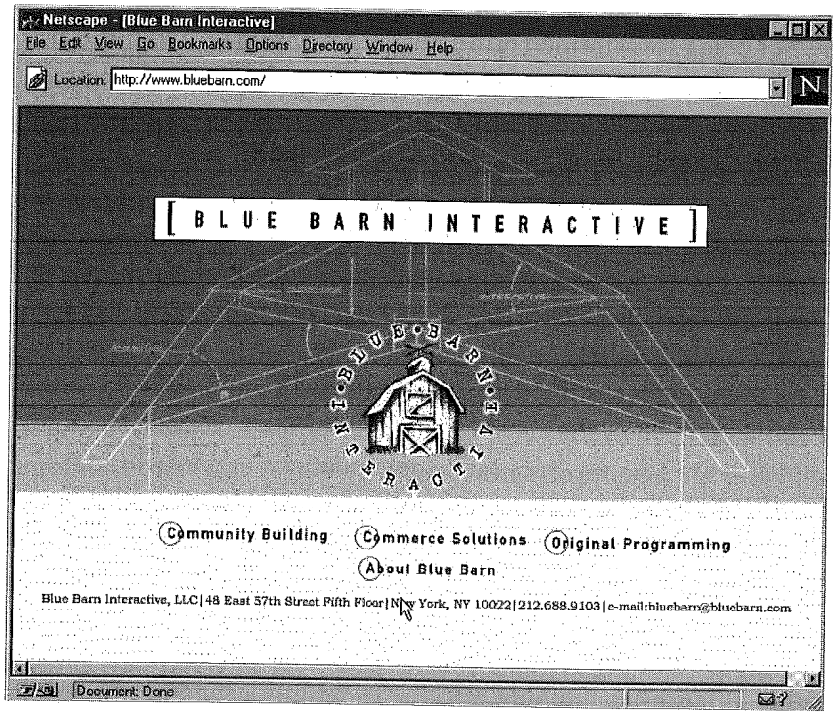
tools, effective community management techniques are also contagious and are increasingly infecting populations (in a good way, mind you) that used to be resistant to them—notably, the traditional corporation.

The conflict between corporate culture and Net culture has classically been described as that between a hierarchical power structure and a flat, distributed one. Too much open dialog among the workers has been regarded by some as a threat to the business establishment and to top-down control by management. But these days, keeping up with the speed of information—regardless of its distribution structure—is crucial to all large organizations. And corporations are discovering that facilitating communication among their workers is one way to speed new ideas through the system. They're still coming to terms, though,

Figure 12.3 Need some experienced hosts to moderate your upcoming Web event? Looking for seasoned hands and advice for starting up a community from scratch? Blue Barn Interactive specializes in providing such services.



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with how much openness of communication they want or can tolerate between their networked workers.

Simply installing a discussion platform does not improve a business's corporate identity all by itself. Workers who aren't trained in its use won't make good use of it if they can (or will) even use it at all. People in general and workers in particular have to feel comfortable with the medium and with the context in which they use it. In the workplace, they are liable to feel inhibited by the fact that any words they dare type in group conversation are being recorded on a company-owned system. The benefits of the flow of ideas between workers will only be realized if the system instills enough trust in its users to allow them to feel free to conduct their relations naturally and openly. If every opinion expressed represents a possible demotion or a lost opportunity for advancement within the company, the value of the interaction to the corporation, as well as to the individual, is going to be severely limited.

The Internet has grown to be what it is today because information has, for years, flowed freely between people on mail lists, newsgroups, IRC channels, and other group communications interfaces. There's a lot more secrecy these days, with the Net being transformed into a business environment, but the case has been made that these online discussion tools support very productive brainstorming, knowledge exchange, and trust in sufficient quantity to persuade people to share intellectual property in public conversation.

Whether the corporation can support true communities of employees or not, the tools and techniques for group interaction are going to be accepted more and more as a necessary competitive advantage in the business world. Corporate fears that the flat hierarchy of the network will undermine the established power structure will have to take a backseat to the reality that groups wired up to converse can work their ways through problems a lot faster than groups who aren't. The subversive intelligence of the networked community will continue to work its way into many organizations and institutions.

The Consolidation of the Dominant

Lycos, one of the largest search sites on the Web, has joined forces with Tripod, one of the largest homepage providers, and other traffic giants are partnering with other proven community hosting experts. There's no reason to believe that this trend of alliances, combining working community support structures

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with successful traffic-gathering structures, won't continue. It's a good one for both partners and makes sense for the users.

Once you've achieved the dominance of a Yahoo! or a Netscape through becoming the start page for millions of Web users, the top-dog position is yours to lose. People on the Web don't spend a lot of time deciding from day to day if they should change the default start page on their browser. But Infoseek—the new owner of WBS—knows that it needs to count on more than user complacency to hold users' loyalty. So it's significant that they, Lycos, and WhoWhere (the directory service that owns the Angelfire homepage site) all point traffic to their associated homepage and community sites as a means of sticking communities of users to them. It's more than a bit ironic that through the consolidation of traffic into the hands of fewer portal sites, more potential Web-based homesteads may be established by more Web users, resulting overall in a greater diversity of small, user-built communities.

The Rise of the Niche Farms

GeoCities, Tripod, The Globe, and Angelfire are *niche farms* whose effects on the average Web user can be viewed as offsetting some of the effects of Web site consolidation. Through their free and easy homepage building arrangements, they provide the means for hundreds of thousands of people to establish their own bases for microcommunities of friends, family, business associates, and customers. And even if most of niche settlers don't do any more than slap up simple cookie cutter–designed pages that say, "Howdy, here I am," that simple act is one of independence and personalization in the midst of a mass medium. How many TV viewers or radio listeners do the equivalent in those media? Web worlds strike a balance between giving users everything they need in a Web environment and giving them just enough to allow them to experiment, innovate, and customize their experience of the Web. That ability to affect one's environment has long been one of the hallmarks of the Net. However, as the largest Web businesses continue their rearrangement of the online landscape, they must avoid cutting off creative channels such as those provided by the homepage motherships if small, personal communities are going to have homes. We've come too far to revert back to where only the technical elite can feel at home online.

For me, the concern that mergers and acquisitions will homogenize the Web is countered by my belief that through channeling more traffic through

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individualized community-fostering environments, more people will find places and techniques for defining the new, the different, and the personal. As with the actual homes that people live in and customize to their own tastes in the physical world, people will find it easier to join and establish homes in small, intimate, owner-built communities where they can feel safe and comfortable on the Web. Being handed a packaged solution is not what most people are looking for when they come online. They don't want the online experience to be complicated, but neither do they want it to be so rigid and structured that there's no room for adjusting it to their own preferences.

Seeking Personalized Audiences

In the 1980s, there were more modem users, in total, logging in to independently owned and managed dialup bulletin board systems than there were subscribing to all of the so-called major networks like CompuServe, BIX, Genie, Delphi, and America Online. And on those major systems, their most loyal users were the ones who found discussion communities that were meaningful to them and where they spent most of their time. The huge prefabricated homepage shops and the open design platform of the Web will hopefully combine to perpetuate and satisfy the "small is beautiful" community preference regardless of how the forces of consolidation reshape the Web landscape.

Huge systems with huge audiences provide the opportunity for individuals to speak on large stages, witness the topics on CNN, where tens of thousands of responses accumulate in a week. But those stages are quickly crowded, and even one's best prose and most impassioned writing is quickly swept away in the cumulative flood of posted screeds and opinions. People get more out of their online contributions when they can feel some personal impact and feedback from their audience. Only when they are given the opportunity to interact with groups small enough that a real dialog can take place do they experience the sense of community that will keep them coming back. People will continue to seek and demand personalized audiences and communities both within and without the megasites.

Maintaining Trust

Where will today's revenue models take us? Will the advertising model prove durable or will masses of users adopt ad-blocking software and refuse to buy the products? I addressed these questions to some extent in Chapter 11,

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"Support Strategies and Revenue Models," and I know they will continue to be asked in the future, for a lot of money has been invested in building out the Web, and investors intend to get it all back and then some. The ability to find out about prospective customers is so important to vendors and marketers—which may include you—that there will continue to be a tense balance struck between the user's desire for privacy and the vendor's desire to learn, to track, and to store information about those users.

Projections keep pointing to a public willing to spend more and more money through the Web, though there are differences of opinion about what the public is actually going to buy with that money. But what if abuses of privacy take place, or one large scandal is exposed where privacy promises made to a member population are broken? Will many Web users begin to wonder if the free ride on the Web is really such a good deal after all? How much of being monitored, studied, and targeted will people put up with? Will more people eventually be willing to pay more for services just to be relieved of the feeling that they are being watched and examined? Community is an implied, trust-based agreement between people, and it's where there is a sense of community that these questions take on the most meaning.

Privacy questions ultimately end up in the realm of the courts and our legal system. The fact that there continues to be debate surrounding the government's role in enforcing or limiting personal privacy on the Internet shows how unresolved these questions are. Does the individual have the right to expect complete privacy in online communications, even excluding the eyes of our highest law enforcement officials? Can a government that denies that level of privacy be effective in supporting the privacy rights of users making homes on the Web? These are issues that will continue to simmer as people entrust more information about themselves to the databases and communications channels of the Internet.

The Revival of the Subscription Model

As Scott Rosenberg, a writer for *Salon*, noted in reaction to the imposition of an annual subscription fee by Microsoft for its online magazine *Slate*, "Most people feel like they're already paying for *Slate*." Rosenberg was expressing the prevailing attitude among Web users that today's $20-a-month, $240-a-year access fee to the Net seems like plenty to pay, thanks, for all of one's online services.

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And though community may be something that people deeply desire to feel in their lives, they don't necessarily think of it as something they should have to pay for. Charging money for community is like putting a dollar value on relationships, or so the attitude supposedly goes. But is it really? I can think of many instances of people paying money to gain access to structures and locales around which communities coalesce. It's not, after all, the relationships you pay for. It's the facilities required for transacting those relationships that cost money.

People tithe or make offerings to belong to a church. They pay expensive dues to join clubs and organizations that are more social than professional. It costs a lot to put a kid on a Little League team or in the Girl Scouts. And I rack up a $50 phone bill in a month without even trying, just making a few calls to my widely scattered family. These are all relationship-building activities. We think nothing of spending five bucks to hang out in a café or bar for an hour. So maybe it's too soon to say for sure that people won't pay to be members of interactive scenes where advertising is absent or more subdued. Maybe community will be one aspect of online service where people will agree to pay extra to purchase a greater feeling of privacy.

Slate's success or failure over time will demonstrate the wisdom of its own decision as a Web publication charging for access, but it's not known for its strong community and thus won't be a fair example of what is likely to happen to subscription-based communities. The homepage worlds of GeoCities and Tripod offer premium levels of service that users pay for, but in buying premium services those users aren't paying to buy greater privacy; they are paying to build fancier homepages. They don't represent the paid subscription case for communities either.

It could be that subscription-based communities will begin at the small end of the Web's size continuum where advertising is hard to come by anyway. Like small magazines with limited distribution, making just enough to print the next issue, small interest-based microcommunities may be able to use increasingly cheap components to start up and survive amid the behemoths. Advertising is only realistic as a revenue generator if the site draws enough traffic to give the ads value. It's conceivable that we'll see more small community services asking for members to chip in for their support rather than spend time scrambling for hard-to-come-by advertising dollars.

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Or Will Users Just Get Used to It?

But maybe people are becoming accustomed to swimming in waters increasingly owned and operated by large companies with only the bottom line on their minds. One of the unique qualities of the Internet has always been that it's not owned by anyone, but as it becomes more commercial, it is becoming defined more in terms of its content, which is definitely owned by both corporations and individuals. For new Web users from now on, that content will *be* the Net and, with its wealth of information and tools and its ability to reach around the globe to find specific audiences—all for *only* 20 dollars a month—the Net may continue to be accepted *as is*, privacy warts and all.

Most large commercial sites now assure their users that they won't share any personal information gathered about them. This is a good thing, but I find myself more concerned about complacent acceptance of the way things are than about the actual monitoring of traffic and the increasing domination of Web content by fewer players. I'm concerned that we will accept the way things are and, like the frog who doesn't notice that the water he's sitting in is getting hotter until he's poached, we'll allow our community environments to be determined more by the needs of sponsors to sell us products than by our needs to communicate and exchange ideas, feelings, and trust. Before we know it, our very relationships and information about them may also be the property of someone we don't know.

How many of us actually bother to read the privacy statements on sites we visit regularly? They aren't often easy documents to read. We accept that they are there and that they tell us what we'd want to hear. Perhaps, and hopefully, the people who care enough about the site to consider it an online home *do* pay attention to privacy policies. But in the end, it's up to the user to decide whom to trust. If you host a site, I urge you to post the essence of your privacy statement in easily understood language. Provide a prominent link to it on your site and refer to it as an important part of your introduction to prospective members of the community. Maintaining the trust of the people is the best thing any of us can do for the future of community on the Web.

Summary

The future of community on the Web is both a continuation of what has happened up to now and an unpredictable product of changing technology and

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social evolution. We can predict that people will continue to seek the kinds of social contact that the Net has made possible so far. It's an extension of what humans have done for as far back as we have history, just in a very different format. But the future also promises that we will be able to do more over the wires as bandwidth increases. We don't know yet how thousands of people at a time will be able to meet in videospace or how thousands of avatars at a time will be able to attend a Rolling Stones concert when the band members are in their seventies.

We can assume, though, that more people will understand the skills and techniques of hosting community on the Web and that more people will engage in starting and building their own personalized community locations using tools that are increasingly available. Community will become more decentralized—even as content becomes more centralized—and the platforms on which community lives will become more powerful, more versatile, and more customizable. The improvements in platform design will be driven by the wealth of experience of users and designers on the Web, and features will appear that serve the more subtle needs of the online community member and conversationalist. What we see today is still electronic community in its infancy. As it matures, it will find its natural place in our lives as humans, both on and off the Web. It will move beyond novelty and hopefully into a role that fills a valuable and useful social niche in our lives.

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FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCES AND CASE STUDIES

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Having been in community hosting roles for most of the past 12 years, I thought it would be helpful if I described three of my community management experiences from the point of view of lessons learned. Each of these provided its own unique teachings, which I've taken with me as I've moved along in my career, and in presenting these stories together they illustrate how some of the subjects of this book fit together. I don't intend for these accounts to follow any particular template for direct comparison with each other. Instead, I relate these stories simply to illustrate how each experience offered its own singular teachings about the management of virtual community.

In each of these cases I was in a community management position, but that's about all that the roles have in common. The owner/management structure was dramatically different in each case. In terms of culture and activity, only the first case—the WELL—was a true history-building community. My experience at the WELL took place before the advent of the Web, but the others used Web-based discussion platforms described earlier in the book. The Virtual Places beta trials were a year-long test of a new Web-specific chat platform owned by America Online. The Deep Blue chess match was a two-week-long event with a large audience using asynchronous conferencing. What they all had in common was people conversing through computers and electronic networks. I offer these accounts not as scientific studies but as anecdotal educational experiences reported by a wide-eyed professional in the field.

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The Early WELL: The Tool Users Meet the Tool Makers

The WELL was founded by Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant to be a combination of things. Stewart defined it as an electronic version of the civilized conversational salons where the European literati of the late 1900s used to meet and speak on the topics of the day. In his vision, smart, computer-savvy people would be attracted to converse and we would "sell our users to each other." Larry saw it as a regional version of CompuServe's global network model that could be franchised in different locations around the country. He said, "Let a thousand CompuServes bloom." Though the founders had experience using forum-type systems in academic environments before the WELL, I had no such experience at all. Nor did John Coate, who worked with me once I was given the job of Director. Our initial approach to the task of managing the WELL and its small population of smart people was to picture ourselves as hosts to an ongoing party who kept the banter going, the lights on, and the dishes full of chips and dip.

Interdependence with Members

The WELL was a direct dialup system that charged a monthly membership fee and an hourly usage fee. Calling from any distance beyond a few miles was costly and we'd occasionally send out monthly bills of over $300, so for users who liked to spend a lot of time engaged in conversation, any offers of complimentary time were welcomed. We traded comp time for various services. Because neither John nor I were experienced in the various electronic technologies that the WELL used, we gratefully accepted offers of technical advice in exchange for free time on the WELL. The WELL's first manual was written and offered to us for free distribution by one of its members. Another member programmed a real-time messaging system called *Send* that changed the way people used the WELL. Others discovered new features and possibilities within the Picospan conferencing platform, wrote online Help menus to help less technically adept people use the WELL, and pitched in with their expertise when there were major technical problems or system modifications to do.

We also gave free accounts to people who volunteered to host WELL conferences. And we gladly awarded complimentary access to journalists who, it

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turned out, became our most valuable marketers. The WELL was unique in its day and journalists looking to keep up with new technology found it to be not only an example of technology wrapped around a social scene, but an interesting place to converse, too. They began to write about the WELL not only as reporters, but as participating members. They described the WELL to the world in our terms: as a community.

Technically, the WELL was anything but a smooth-running system. With the small amount of capitalization it received when it started, we could not afford to hire expert programmers and system administrators. We didn't have our choice of top-of-the-line equipment, and we operated as a crew of amateurs keeping things together with the copper and silicon equivalents of string, chewing gum, and bailing wire. We relied on our users not only for providing add-ons to our conversation software, but to grant us slack when the system crashed (as if often did) or when it was running so slowly that the messages they typed would take almost a minute to show up on their screens.

The Host Community

Looking back, I know that the level of loyalty demonstrated by the regular WELL members was extraordinary. They stuck with each other and with the system through many difficult times because of the value they put on the relationships they had formed there and because they felt a sense of ownership. They had helped build the WELL. They *were* the WELL. Yes, there were fewer alternative systems then that they could have flown to out of sheer frustration, but the core of active users remained stable in spite of frequent downtimes and general system unreliability. The WELL was a very frugally run business, but it could not afford to pay for its expansion and upgrades with such a small paying population. It needed additional investment to provide the level of service that its users rightfully expected. Unfortunately, the WELL's two financially strapped owners were too preoccupied with their own survival struggles to help the WELL out of its jam. They asked only that we keep the business alive, which we did through 1992 when NETI sold its half of the WELL to the former owner of the Rockport shoe company.

What largely kept the WELL together was the collaborative nature of its community, its population of hosts, and John Coate's handling of them as our

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staff ambassador. We gave WELL hosts autonomy in their conferences. They were free to set standards and make judgments about the content and behavioral limitations within their discussion spaces, and they had access to software controls to enforce those judgments. Although John and I seemed to be constantly involved in conversations and arguments about higher-level community standards—notably the WELL's policy of "You own your own words"—we kept our hands out of our hosts' local policy disagreements. Hosts appreciated being granted such trust and self-determination. For the most part they were responsible in exercising their powers, and we were relieved of the burden of patrolling hundreds of conferences and thousands of discussions. The distribution of responsibility worked for the WELL, and the trade-off of free time for host services was a good deal overall in spite of the fact that we were just breaking even financially.

The Value of Words

Almost like clockwork, about every six months a *thrash* would break out. A thrash on the WELL was a public controversy with widespread participation that would refuse to be settled until all participants were emotionally and intellectually exhausted. It would often begin with something innocuous enough like a member having a posting deleted by a host because it violated the host's local ground rules. Members would take sides on the issue and refuse to yield as it escalated to a matter of principle and John and I were drawn in. We would attemp to stay above the fray, but often the thrash was about some position or action we'd taken, and we'd find ourselves at the center of the accusations. Some thrashes occupied our attention for days or weeks at a time. Our attitude in those days was that we would not expel users from the WELL except under the most extreme circumstances. It seemed like the appropriate policy at the time. We promoted the values of tolerance and diversity, but today I've come to value my own time more than I did then, and would probably opt now to let the expelled user share more of the discomfort that the rest of us once put up with.

One of the signature WELL thrashes was over the users' rights to erase their own postings. Our discussion platform was a text-based program called Picospan. One of its standard features was the ability for any user to erase his

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postings at any time. This was customarily used to delete messages where typographical or factual errors had been posted, but occasionally users would reconsider a possibly embarrassing statement or one that might be discovered by a shocked supervisor or contractor in the future. Generally, nobody even noticed when an old posting had been deleted (*scribbled* was the Picospan term for it) because most people's attention was on the new postings, not the historical ones. There came a day, though, when one of the WELL's user/programmers introduced a tool called Mass Scribble. Its purpose was to enable any user to direct it at a conference and, with one keystroke, delete every posting they'd ever made there. By aiming it conference after conference, a prolific poster could riddle hundreds of archived conversations full of holes. Wherever the user had responded in a conversation there would be left only the word <scribbled>, and the surrounding record would have lost much of its context and continuity. When one disgruntled WELL user and then another blasted the system with their Mass Scribblers, the ensuing thrash centered around the question of whether one's words, once posted, became part of the community's property as whole collaborative conversational works.

I was torn over the question. I knew that the WELL's history had been devalued by the erasures, but I could not deny any users' rights to delete words they had posted. If we said the users owned their own words, then they certainly had a right to withdraw them if they so desired. It was a classic illustration of the tension between individual user autonomy and the community's concern over its definition. Were the collective conversations of the WELL the material representation of its community? Could they be preserved to protect the community legacy?

Getting Cozy with the Community

It was not just John and I from the staff who spent time online with the members. All of our staff were active participants in WELL conferences. We lived split lives as staff members and as fellow WELLers. Yet the higher up the authority ladder, the more distance there was between the users and the staff members. Being near the top of the ladder, I was regarded by most WELL members—especially those who didn't know me personally—as something different and apart. And much as I enjoyed the community interaction, I held

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back from being just one o' the gang because on occasion I had to make policy statements that would have impact. It's difficult to act in an official capacity when you've become too close with the people you must address. And given the public criticisms we would often get from users who didn't like us or trust us for one reason or another, being too friendly almost invited attacks.

Our intention in mixing it up with the community was to set examples for openness and leadership that we hoped others would emulate. Together, John and I would often form a united front behind a policy or principle we were advocating, earning ourselves the nickname "the vile figtex" (my username, *fig*, and John's, *tex*). But, as Director the buck stopped with me and I'd often end up playing bad cop to John's good cop just to keep both of us from drawing fire. It was instructive to observe that John could maintain his credibility with members of the community at times when mine was called into question because it was my role to enact an unpopular decision. In some situations, the vile figtex could fill two very different and important roles in relation to the community.

Both John and I left the WELL because we could not do enough for it to fix its technical shortcomings. In today's terms, we didn't get our second round of funding. A community ultimately owes its loyalty to the relationships formed among its members. I have no doubt that without those relationships in place and the history the WELL's members built with each other, they would have abandoned the WELL in its early days for any system that was more technically reliable and responsive. The WELL was proof that human relationship could transcend the technology that enabled it.

Virtual Places: Nurturing a New Platform Community

In the summer of 1995, America Online decided to test the waters of the World Wide Web. Its business and the population of suscribers on its proprietary platform were both growing at meteoric rates and the Web was showing signs that it might present some competition for them in the position they were trying to establish as the preeminent online environment. AOL bought GNN, one of the Web's pioneering companies and the first Web site to display paid advertising. It also bought Ubique, a company founded in Israel that had developed a chat

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program for the Web that allowed users to place thumbnail-sized pictures on the screen—avatars—through which they could talk via text to each other. The other unique feature of the program was that rather than operate in what was then the standard chat room environment of plain windows with scrolling words sitting on a static screen, it wrapped the chat windows around a live Web page and allowed its users to move from page to page, defining each URL as a distinct chat room. The program's name was Virtual Places and it was meant to be the first Web browser with built-in chat.

In the fall of 1995 I began working for GNN in California and one of my assignments became managing the online testing of the Virtual Places client. Though I was formally a GNN employee, for the next year I reported most often to AOL Product Marketing in Virginia about my Virtual Places work. What was most significant about the management arrangement was my separation from the decision-making structure that was responsible for the future of the VP platform. The term *virtual* applied to several aspects of the software testing arrangement.

Starting Community from Scratch

Using VP required the user to download and install a client. The client communicated with a server located in Virginia. We announced the availability of the client on GNN's homepage screen with a client Download button. I put together an initial Web page that would be the landing page for first-time VP users when they loaded their clients. From then on, they could choose whichever Web page they preferred to be their startup VP chat room. The VP client would tell its users where other users were located on the Web and, naturally, users would gravitate to wherever there were people to chat with.

I posted a schedule of times when I would be present in a given URL-defined chat room to meet and greet new users and to answer questions. Of course there were bugs and performance problems, but people took to the platform in spite of them. It offered a level of freedom to create and explore that other chat platforms did not. Almost immediately, people began designing special Web pages to serve as their personal virtual hangouts to which they would invite other Veepsters. I began hearing from people who wanted to help grow the community, to serve as hosts of special chats, to build virtual HTML villages. With minimal initiation from me, the VP community began to define itself.

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Webtown

America Online contracted a small company in New York to create a graphic apartment building in which VP users could inhabit and custom decorate their own rooms. It was to be the first Virtual Places scene and users began snatching up rooms as soon as it showed up on VP's Places to Go menu. From my point of view, the VP population was a very different community from that of the WELL. At the WELL, I could post messages that would remain in a topic for all members to see and thus feel that I was reaching a good portion of the community. With VP, users could load the client and log in without any contact with me at all. I could look at the window showing where current users were located and find them scattered all about the Web, many of them obviously alone and surfing pages with their clients activated. The VP instant messaging tool allowed you to contact any other members regardless of their location and invite them to your URL, but my primary means for getting to know the population was through regularly scheduled chats.

At the same time that our professionally produced New York–style apartment building was being occupied, another more grassroots project was afoot, which its creator called Webtown. VP was beginning to attract some ill-mannered and abusive users, but a group of civil and sincere ones had found each other and begun to meet regularly. They made a point of getting acquainted with me and of staying in contact about the status and progress of the VP platform development. Their plan was to link together a collection of home-built Web pages and special chat venues that they would call Webtown, and they wanted my blessing. Of course I was encouraging and appreciative that they would show such initiative. Because, to me, they were communicative and responsive, I considered them the core community of our testing environment. There were other communities of regular chatters meeting on VP, but they were more aloof and seemed to have no need of contact with system management.

The design of VP actually facilitated that independence. It was a wide-open, create-it-yourself platform. At least on the WELL, it had taken management approval and involvement to create a new discussion area, though users were able to start new discussions within them. On VP, a new chat room simply required that you navigate your client to an unoccupied URL and get others to join you. The VP system manager could address Bulletins through the

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client interface to the active user base, but there was no way to be sure that users read them. And there was no way for me to know what users were saying or what graphics they were using in their avatars unless I was present in the same VP room with them. I only found out indirectly that there were others doing a more thorough job of monitoring the action.

Virtual Management

The first reports of a shadow government came to me several months into the beta testing trial. Users began showing up at my chats asking why they were finding themselves dropped suddenly from their VP sessions. I attributed it to bugs in the client or server, both of which were being worked on constantly. Then the reports began including claims that just before being dumped from the system, users were getting cryptic messages about their behavior or language being prohibited. They accused me of censorship and I told them that, really, I had nothing to do with it. I asked the staff I was working with at AOL to look into the possibility that someone at their end was involved and found out that AOL had assigned guides from its People Connection chat service to monitor Virtual Places and sanction users for violations of its Terms of Service (TOS). At that point, we had announced no TOS for the VP community and I was, to say the least, perturbed that no one had told me that they would be enforced within the beta test environment. I was more concerned, though, that such enforcement was going on without my knowledge and involvement.

To further erode the sense of trust among VP users, the guides were observing interaction incognito, without identifying themselves as AOL monitors and without interacting with the users. Given the VP metaphor, which was chat with personal identity enhanced through avatars and mobility, the fact that enforcement and punishment was being dealt out by the invisible hands of anonymous "goons," as some Veepsters began to call them, was threatening to the sense of independent community that was trying to take hold in the new environment. And to make matters worse, I was having a hard time finding someone to talk to who was accountable for these covert operations. It was a classic case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing. Finally, I began stationing my avatar in the rooms where the monitors had been active and called them out. I posted a response identifying myself as the beta test

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manager and asking whoever the TOS guide was to contact me via email so we could discuss the situation. He responded.

I never did get to find out who was in charge. The guide who responded to me agreed to start using his real name as his identity in VP and to interact publicly rather than remain invisible to the users. He seemed almost relieved to be invited into the community rather than being assigned to operate in the shadows, and for the rest of my time with VP we stayed in communication about the actual behavior problems—and there definitely were some—in the platform community.

Communication Breakdown

America Online was ambivalent from the start about its entry into the Web sweepstakes. The question always lingered over both the GNN and VP ventures of how success would impact membership on its flagship platform, the non-Web AOL. Halfway through 1996 the indications became plain that it was backing out of its Web initiatives. Development ideas from our end got lukewarm responses, if they got responses at all. The VP community was raring to move forward, to expand. Webtown hosts were eager to take on more responsibility, to produce an ambitious menu of focused chat events and programs on an array of custom-designed pages. But to move forward, they needed assurances from me that there was a future for the Virtual Places platform. Meanwhile, VP was being rolled out as a separate chat environment within AOL. My friends in GNN's VP community reported that far more abuse in terms of language and X-rated avatar graphics was going on in AOL than we'd encountered on the Web.

A community needs clear signals and communication from the people who manage its environment. Management represents stability in a virtual world. Without assurances that the world will continue to exist, it's difficult for the most valuable members to justify their continued investment of time, creativity, and caring. For a manager in my position as an intermediary between ownership and users, a lack of clear signals from the powers that be compromises the relationship with the community. The best I could do was to reveal to my most trusting contacts in the VP community my sense that the platform might not get continued support through AOL and allow that information to leak out

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into the community. Unfortunately, this is often the only way to deal with the wide gap of trust and communication between large corporations and the sincere communities that are at their mercy.

As it turned out, Ubique bought Virtual Places back from AOL in 1997 and the platform was adopted to run as the default chat environment at Excite, ZDNet, and on the Virtual Places Web site. I can only assume that some of the original beta community leaders still participate in VP-based communities, but Ubique's journey continues. Lotus, a division of IBM, just purchased the company, and its interface innovations may be headed in yet another direction.

Deep Blue versus Kasparov: A Mass Audience Web Discussion Event

The following somewhat breathless description is adapted from postings I made in a topic in the Hosting conference on Durand's CommunityWare site at (www.communityware.com).

I've made references to hosting events in conferencing or chat environments on the Web with time constraints put around them—strict beginnings and endings between which something was to be accomplished.

This is an account of my co-managing an event in thespring of 1997 as a consultant for Electric Minds. The event was the second chess match between longtime world champion Garry Kasparov and IBM's new, improved (and reprogrammed), parallel-processing computer, Deep Blue.

My job was to design the conferencing component and manage it through the six matches and 12-day duration of the event. When I was hired by E-Minds' president Wendy York-Fess to be project manager for the event I knew a little about chess. Very little, it turned out. I knew so little, I didn't realize how much I didn't know.

Likewise, I knew little about Electric Minds and its interface, having visited its site sporadically up to that point in March. Howard Rheingold, the founder of Electric Minds, gave me the name and phone number of a friend of his who had recommended an approach to the conferencing opportunity as forum for discussing chess from many points of view, from the match itself to the game

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of chess in general, from the hardware involved to the match's implications about machine "intelligence" and the end of human superiority as thinkers.

I had no idea how big this event was expected to be or what IBM's experience had been like the year before. I soon heard that the first match had been a huge embarrassment for IBM because the traffic had completely overloaded its facilities. Their real-time chat server had been so swamped as to be useless. IBM, of all companies, had been caught with its technical pants down in one of the most conspicuous events to have appeared thus far on the Web. They'd almost decided to skip the Web component for the rematch, just to avoid the PR risk.

So why would they select a tiny company like Electric Minds, with no experience producing events like this, to provide such a conspicuous service in what promised to be an even bigger Web event this year? Wendy and Howard had convinced them somehow that E-Minds was the one to do it, and off we went.

I wasn't an employee of Electric Minds (EM), so it would have been difficult for me to represent the company in relations with IBM; so John McCoy, Vice President of EM, took the role of client relations and project coordination with Big Blue. He was very good. There arose some very sticky issues around design, meeting of deadlines, and allocation of responsibilities, and John got us through them gracefully.

Lesson 1: Have a good negotiator handling client relations.

Staying on schedule is all important in a real time event of this magnitude and hang-ups with the client are a sure way of falling behind.

John and I got together and made our first list of project tracks and deadlines. It was March 4. The first of the six chess games would take place on May 3. We had two months. We agreed to aim for April 15 as our ready date for beta testing. (I decided to set my personal target date for April 1.)

Our To Do list included:

- Designing our interface—our front door—to IBM's site.
- Defining the hosts' role and selecting experienced hosts (whom we would offer $20 per hour) for round-the-clock presence in the conference.

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- Finding and recruiting appropriate experts in chess, science, and philosophy to lead the various discussions in the conference.
- Preparing EM's technical facilities to insure that they would not melt down under megatraffic as had IBM's.
- Coordinating our conference's topics with IBM's content.
- Designing our conferencing "program." What topics would we start with? How many? Which topics would we add as traffic increased? How would we use our experts?

It got more and more complex as we got into it, of course. We had to build redundant systems, persuade our ISP to provide us with another big data pipe, rent two gas-powered generators, and talk the building manager into letting us put them on the property.

Lesson 2: Have a systems engineer who will anticipate your traffic and overbuild your system for it.

Who would show up? IBM was going to promote the heck out of the event. They would be getting millions of hits on their ibm.chess.com site from chess fanatics and curious Web browsers alike. On IBM's chess homepage, there would be a button on the main menu bar that said "community." I would have preferred "discussion" or "discuss the match." We eventually agreed to have links placed throughout IBM's content site that said, "Join the conversation." But what kinds of people would click on them? Would they have any experience with conferencing in any form? Would they expect to find a chat room instead?

We would be directing all levels of Web users to an interface that was sure to confuse many of them. How would we intercede as early as possible and handhold them along? How would we save as many of those who had clicked on the "community" button as possible as participants in our discussion of the match? That became our major focus over the first two weeks.

EM's lead interface designer, a smart fellow who went by the name Vagabond Jim, helped us come up with a "landing page" that would greet clickers of the community button with a simple explanation of what they could expect once they reached the forum area, and a reformatted Electric Minds registration process.

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I had been strongly promoting the idea that users coming from the chess side should have been able to register and go *directly* into the conferencing rather than be forced to wait for email verification. I thought, "Once we have them, let's not risk losing them by making them wait. Many of them might not come back." But because we all (E-Minders and chess site visitors alike) had to share the same Well Engaged user database, the chess people would, in fact, also become de facto members of E-Minds. We had to treat their accounts with the same level of scrutiny that EM accorded its regular members.

This is a key consideration for membership recruitment for short-term events: How high do you raise the barriers for joining? If the event will last only a few days, is the risk of having problem users join so great as to require verified registration? Or do the benefits of allowing immediate access to the forum offset that risk?

We decided to offer more introductory and orientation material for the users to read while waiting for the verification messages to arrive in their email. Usually, this wait was only for a matter of minutes.

I began contacting the special guest candidates that Howard's friend had recommended: experts in cognitive theory, artificial intelligence, and the human brain. These were university professors, authors, even a Nobel prize winner. They were hard to get through to and, once contacted, very hesitant to commit time to coming online. My impression was that (1) they were very busy, and (2) they were reluctant to risk looking less than scholarly by using an interface they were not familiar with.

I got some conditional commitments from a few of them and then pointed my attention to the chess world. I figured we could survive without a cognitive theory expert; however, we could not survive without a collection of chess experts. Where would I find them and how would I get them to come online and talk chess? I pictured chess players as the serious-looking guys who hung out in the parks, chins in hands in between slapping a little clock and moving pieces around. How likely was it that those people would be prepared to use Well Engaged? The answer surprised me.

I thought that contacting local Bay Area chess clubs would be a good idea. We would be able to bring them into the Electric Minds office and give them a

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computer to work on, train them to use the interface, and coach them along. I was going at the process backwards. When I came across the Internet Chess Club, it was like falling down the rabbit hole into a Chess Wonderland.

The Internet Chess Club (ICC) has been around for years. I downloaded a small application they offered and installed it on my PC. It put a full-color chess board on my monitor. I could go to a list of games in progress and observe any of them. The chess pieces appeared on my application's window and moved as they were played. There were hundreds of games going on simultaneously on the site. You could ask to play with someone of your own ability and you'd be connected with them instantly. There were tournaments going on. I'd found my Root Community! But the site had its own message board and chat facilities that, I expected, its members would use during the K versus DB match. I wondered how I'd find some likely experts for our presentation of the event. I sent a mail message to the administrator of the site describing my search for experts.

I got a call back on the phone that night from Marty Grund at ICC. He was ecstatic. He told me that he knew most of the top professional players in the United States and others who would be perfect for what I needed. It was a breakthrough and one of the most important connections in the whole planning and execution of the event. It was April 3 and I'd spent the whole previous month failing to get commitments from any experts. Now I knew I could find people who were already wired and up to speed with the technology.

Lesson 3: If you need special guests to help host your event, try to find ones who already know the technology.

From Marty's referrals I found three chess teacher/historians, three programmers of chess-playing software, and the first- and third-ranked professional players in the United States. Through following some other Web links I was also able to recruit the U.S. women's champion. The chess champs were all former residents of the USSR where chess was held in much higher esteem than in the United States.

During the second half of March I'd also sought recommendations for excellent hosts for the conference. I needed enough of them to have at least one on duty at all hours for the 12 days. Some would man the graveyard shift

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while others would be online during the actual games. I knew that we'd want at least three hosts on deck during those peak traffic hours when the games were in progress. A game could last as long as six hours, but we expected them to average more like four.

By the end of March I had my team of hosts. There were eight plus three Electric Minds staffers who would be available. I bought copies of an instructional book—*Chess for Dummies*— for each of them and a copy for myself. We sent contracts to all hosts and experts (who were all paid for their participation).

It was nice having a wealthy sponsor and adequate funding for the event; I could not have gotten the professional chess champs to participate otherwise. And it was the presence of these acknowledged wizards that most impressed the people who were to show up in the conference. They were the color commentators who held forth during the actual games, commenting on each move by the world champ (whom they all knew personally as a competitor) and by the computer.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the K versus DB chess event was that it was a combination of asynchronous and real-time interaction carried out on the same asynchronous platform. I'd experienced this effect many times before on the WELL where we had no group chat platform. There were times, especially during real-life events such as the Oakland firestorm and the Gulf War, when users would have to continually reload a topic to keep up with the fast-moving conversation. The discussion during the actual chess games was just like that, and it was intense.

By the beginning of April we had most of our staff on board and the interface design was proceeding as fast as we could take it, but we were dependent on IBM to settle on its own design before we could finalize ours. IBM had contracted a large agency in New York City to produce its site and the changes and adjustments just kept coming. We continued to push back our deadlines as time got tighter.

We planned to open the conferencing platform internally for starting the initial topics and seeding them with opening responses a week before the first game. IBM was opening its site to the public at that time and we figured we'd just put up a landing page telling visitors, "Coming soon! Chess

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discussion. Come back three days before Game One!" That would give us time to practice and prepare without "talking out" our initial topics before the match was to begin.

I had made up a schedule for hosts and experts that had each host shift overlapping the following shift by an hour. That would give them time to (1) make an entry in our private Crew conference's "log" topic describing how their shift had gone, and (2) communicate with the host relieving them about any hanging problems or items of interest. The private conference was our "backstage" area where we could brainstorm and discuss ideas for expanding topics or enlivening conversations. It also turned out to be our crisis management room.

I treated the chess event as a stage production, a public performance. I wanted our hosts to communicate enthusiasm and to treat the forum visitors as they would the audience at a show. I even told the crew to "break a leg" on our opening night. But I really wanted us to have some "rehearsal" time before the conference was opened to the public, which was the main reason that we'd confirmed with IBM that the conference would not open at the same time its site launched. Our plan was to hold back until three days before Game One.

So much for plans. A week before IBM's launch it expressed surprise and shock that we weren't planning to open the conference simultaneous with its launch. "Oh no," we said, "we never planned to." "Oh yes," they said, "you are going to."

Lesson 4: Get everything confirmed in writing. Especially your deliverables schedule.

We had coordinated with them using Microsoft Project Manager and our delayed launch date was clearly on there, but we had not specified it in our contract for deliverables, thus . . .

We had to scramble to open six days before we'd planned to. My main fear then was not that we'd be online without practice, but that we'd exhaust some of our opening topics before the real crowds arrived. I was especially concerned that our chess experts, most of whom had yet to use the interface, would be reluctant to demonstrate their inexperience in public without some time to practice in private.

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But again I was surprised. Chess fanatics and experts are, by definition, problem solvers. It seemed that the newness of the interface barely slowed them at all. They took to it like ducks to water and charged ahead, opening amazing topics on chess fundamentals and history while leading conversations in all the related subject areas for which I'd failed to recruit academic experts.

Lesson 5: Enthusiastic teachers are wonderful guests and entertainers.

Instructors may not be well known outside their community of expertise, but they are the ones who have practiced and mastered communicating with non-experts. That teaching skill, combined with deep background and storytelling ability, makes for great, concentrated, and digestible content. They are experienced in responding to questions and leading inquiry.

Following is a brief description of the administration structure we had to build to manage the production of the event from our side.

Wendy had her counterpart at IBM. They were the two responsible parties to their respective organizations. John McCoy and I reported on a weekly basis to Wendy via a written report and an in person debriefing.

We hooked up EM's technical and design managers with those at Poppy-Tyson, the agency that was designing IBM's site. I was in touch with the staff arranging new content for IBM so that we could coordinate our new topics with their new articles and subject pages.

I had one of EM's user support employees serve as a support person for our experts. I had an EM host on duty as the Help Topic host in our public area. We wanted our Help topic to be as close to "live" as possible, with responses to questions posted promptly by the Help Host or the chess host on duty. We arranged to have Chip, EM's technical manager, posting system situation updates in our Crew conference. (We invited IBM's key people to participate backstage but, to our knowledge, none of them ever did.)

I felt ready to go once I had sent out the new schedules to my hosts and experts eight days before Game One. But we had yet to test the interface or stress test the installation. And, oh yeah, there was the Chess Applet . . . only the most important piece of the whole show.

One of the most compelling images we had of EM's conferencing production was that of an animated chessboard sitting on the user's screen with

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the moves by Deep Blue and Kasparov taking place immediately as they were made on the real chessboard in New York City. And as these moves happened, in the conferencing window on the user's screen would appear the commentary of a chess grandmaster who, along with tens of thousands of others, was following the game. The user would be able to post his own comments and, in the long spaces between some moves, take part in global world-class kibitzing.

The animated chessboard was a Java applet being developed for IBM, the world's most prestigious computer company, by an outside contractor. There would be no time to test the applet under load, but everyone knew that it would be the main attraction of the IBM site. There would be no live TV coverage of the match. The applet would be our window into the games. For it to work for us, it would have to keep up with the moves.

Knowing how badly overloaded the previous year's site had been, we expected that considerations of high-traffic capacity were at the top of IBM's design criteria for the applet. We assumed it would work—we were wrong.

Lesson 6: Don't assume anything will work.

Not that you can plan contingencies for every possible failure, but events are, for all practical purposes, LIVE. People will only have a short window of opportunity in which to participate, so downtime and malfunctions take on a much greater importance. Have backup plans for situations such as your featured guests not showing up or having local system problems.

Of course, running on an asynchronous platform solves some of these potential embarrassments, but if the event features a specific real-time component such as the chess games themselves, you don't have margin for error. The show must go on!!!

In our case, the show did go on. As IBM's chessboard applet fell 5, 10, and then 20 minutes behind the actual moves of Kasparov and Deep Blue, one of our discussion hosts put together a program that allowed me to upload ASCII chessboards directly to the discussion. Using the Internet Chess Club site's real time tracking of the moves, we were able to present close-to-real-time depictions of the chessboard as the games unfolded. Once again, the community had come through to solve its own problems.

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Summary

As different as these three experiences were from each other, they felt very similar to me once my role resolved into one of interacting with an online population. Communication and relationship are familiar territory and the work of improving them through keyboard and monitor requires the same attention to people's needs regardless of the appearance of the interface. Where there is most liable to be a communications breakdown is between the owners and business drivers of the site and the critical needs of the user population. If the Community Manager maintains contact and trust with the users, many difficulties can be overcome. For all the increasing complexity of the Web, the essentials of hosting its communities remain relatively simple. Pay attention and communicate.

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SUGGESTED READING

Of course there are thousands of books on the shelves today about Net culture and Web site construction. I can't say that I've read most of them. In fact, I'm pretty choosy about what I read. I can recommend the following list because having read them I can say that they were worth reading and helped me in my work. Some are how-to books and some are why-to books. You need both when you work at the intersection of human behaviors and technology.

Armstrong, Arthur G. and Hagel, John. *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997.

Whether their ideas and recommendations fit your needs or not, it's worth your time to read this book just because most business leaders on the Web have done so. The authors' central ideas—that Web developers will aim at building communities of their customers and that relationships on huge scales will drive the new business models—are now at least considered by anyone attempting to make money on the Web. Though I disagree with some of the authors' assumptions (as you probably noticed in my book), this was a comforting read because it legitimized community as a potential revenue source rather than as a revenue drain.

Damer, Bruce. *Avatars!: Exploring and Building Virtual Worlds on the Internet*. Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 1997.

Bruce Damer started an organization called the Contact Consortium to bring together the developers, users, and residents of virtual communities, especially those in graphical environments. His book explores many of the interfaces that allow users to represent themselves as more than just words on the screen, describing the communities and events that go on in them. His is a good account of the pioneering days in this medium.

Helmstetter, Greg. *Increasing Hits and Selling More on Your Web Site*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996.

If you're into building traffic on your Web site—and most community sites do require that you make some effort to increase participation and expand population—this book contains the basic tips and tricks for getting noticed and being pointed to. Of course the word-of-mouth marketing that a community does for itself is the purest way to grow, but that may not be fast enough for your business model. Helmstetter's book, though over two years old, is a good introduction to positioning your URL in search engines and forming reciprocal link-swapping arrangements with sites that host communities similar to yours.

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Johnson, Steven. *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate*. San Francisco: Harper, 1997.

Steve Johnson is the founder and editor of FEED, one of the more interesting and innovative interactive magazines on the Web. In his book he describes the effect of the interface—specifically the spatial metaphor inherent in the Web interface—on the style of communication and the self-concept of the people who use it. There are some good observations and ideas here, and some good writing, too.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993.

This is the book that fired interest in the concept of community before the Web arrived. Inspired by his experience on the WELL and then enriched by his visits to other very diverse groupings of people online, Rheingold, who writes almost exclusively about humans and their relationships to technology, delves into the questions of how privacy and freedom of speech will be affected by governments and large corporations as more of us spend more of our time interacting online. These questions still remain to be resolved as the population of the Web grows and virtual community becomes a business proposition.

Sterne, Jim. *Customer Service on the Internet: Building Relationships, Increasing Loyalty, and Staying Competitive*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996.

Jim Sterne's book looks at relationship as a business proposition, as do Hagel and Armstrong in *Net Gain*, but Sterne describes the practice of customer service from a more intimate vantage point. Where community begins and customer service ends is anyone's guess, but customers now expect to get the special handling that the Web makes possible and preferable. Sterne's prescriptions fit well with my own.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.* New York: Touchstone Books, 1997.

MIT professor Turkle presents an in-depth study of how people behave and present themselves in online social environments. Though she doesn't spend time exploring communities on the Web, her analysis of how people interact and see themselves in the virtual spaces of MUDs (multiuser dungeons) is applicable to the populations addressed in my book. When you've spent some time dealing with the genuine and created personalities that inhabit online communities, you'll come to appreciate Turkle's findings.

Veen, Jeffrey. *Hotwired Style: Principles for Building Smart Web Sites*. San Francisco: Hardwired, 1997.

Brief and to the point with plenty of illustrations, this book acts like a well-designed Web site and describes design in terms of how people actually use the sites they visit. Especially important are Veen's observations about designing appropriate sites for the intended audience and degrading designs to accommodate users reaching the Web through a wide range of equipment and software.

For more up-to-date information on material contained in my book, and for pointers to examples of the concepts I discuss, visit the companion Web site at www.wiley.com/compbooks/figallo.

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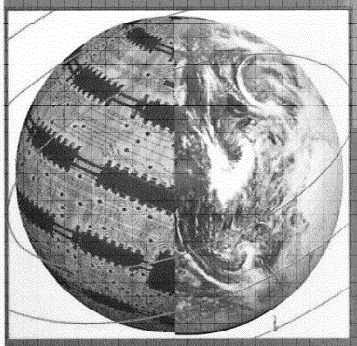

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CLIFF FIGALLO is Director of Community Development for *Salon Magazine* and its Table Talk discussion site. He served six years as director of The WELL, considered by many to be the definitive virtual community. He helped develop America Online's first Web chat interface, "Virtual Places," and he codesigned and managed the online discussion component for IBM's Web event, the Deep Blue vs. Kasparov chess rematch. Cliff has been participating in and studying applications for virtual communities for more than a decade, and he was featured in *Wired*'s May 1997 cover story on The WELL—"The World's Most Influential Online Community."

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