



Back to the Future

Engagement, Community and the Road Ahead



The number of American adults on Facebook hasn't increased since 2016¹. eMarketer reports Facebook engagement is sinking², it's already down 10% versus last year, and is seeing even more dramatic declines in engagement among key demographics with only half of American teens using the social media site³.

LinkedIn now has 562 million members⁴ but only 260 million users are active on LinkedIn monthly⁵. The average amount of time spent per month by those active users: **17 minutes**.

Social media may afford associations with another digital channel for member engagement, but fewer than half of members surveyed in Personify's recent **Member Experience 2.0 research**⁶ told us they want to engage with their nonprofit or association via these channels.



Although difficult to believe, online communities have existed on the Internet for over thirty years. The Well, started in 1985, and Usenet newsgroups, started in 1979, are widely regarded as the first virtual communities on the Internet. The Pew Internet & American Life Project⁷ reports that 90 million Americans have participated in an online group and estimates of virtual community membership in the United States have exceeded 25 million – more than six times the population of Los Angeles.

In the early 2000's, the birth of social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn seemed to promise a new advent of digital communication, broadening the opportunities for users to participate in a more global community. Yet for many nonprofits, that early promise remains unfilled. While social networks and community platforms seem interchangeable, they aren't. The Community Roundtable defines social media⁸ as "a loose network with the predominant structure being a hub and spoke model of interaction between an audience and the content creator". It is composed of users who have nothing in common, using the platform due to friends using that platform, creating a communal monologue with transactional engagement – a quick comment or, more often than not, a click of a like button.

However, as more and more organizations are learning, it's not the quantity of engagement that makes the difference – **it's the quality.**



In today's highly connected society, it's funny to think that your constituents can still feel disconnected. To mitigate this disconnection and reach your constituents, consider how nonprofits can harness the growing preference for opportunities through digital channels and transcend the limitations of social media to create meaningful interactions, build relationships and deepen engagement?

In the 1986 film "Back to the Future," Dr. Emmett Brown remarked to Marty McFly that you never know when or where a bolt of lightning will strike. Marty, with the perspective of his recent trip into the past responded, "We do now."

Many organizations are taking a similar approach, going back to the future and turning their attention once again to online communities to provide members, donors, supporters and others with a feeling of belonging. They join a network of other people they can connect with based on shared interests and/or characteristics. They bring with them a rich awareness of what's worked in social media and embrace the new capabilities of community platforms, which have done the same.



What is a community?

For nonprofit organizations, community is more than just a destination for discussion to take place. Communities have goals of building a loyal following, growing, and cultivating a supportive environment while helping members and furthering their mission. Community doesn't just happen, it's intentional and needs to be taken care of.

It's easy to feel a sense community, but community can be difficult to define. This helpful description suggests you know you're in a community when your group or online social circle has these characteristics⁹:

- Tight interlinking relationships between a significant percentage of members
- An acknowledgment of shared fate or purpose
- A potentially wide range of topics/conversations within that shared purpose
- A distributed leadership network – sometimes with a single leader, sometimes not
- A core membership that is relatively stable and active



In your organization's community, members and/or donors tightly interlink because of their dependence on the organization or shared belief in a cause. Since everyone is connected, constituents have a shared fate and purpose. A thriving community usually has many topics of conversation, which bonds constituents. That shared purpose and common bond creates a core membership of both active participants and lurkers who hold the community together.



Connection on the Go

Making Community Easier to Access

However, while early communities like the Well and Usenet groups might have seen members sitting behind a keyboard, the simultaneous rise in the use of handheld devices and access to social media sites has empowered users to put the power of their network in their pocket.

Consider the following:



4hrs

The average smartphone user used their phones for more than 4 hours a day¹⁰



70%

Up to 70% of web traffic happens on a mobile device¹¹



57%

57% of all U.S. online traffic now comes from smartphones and tablets¹²

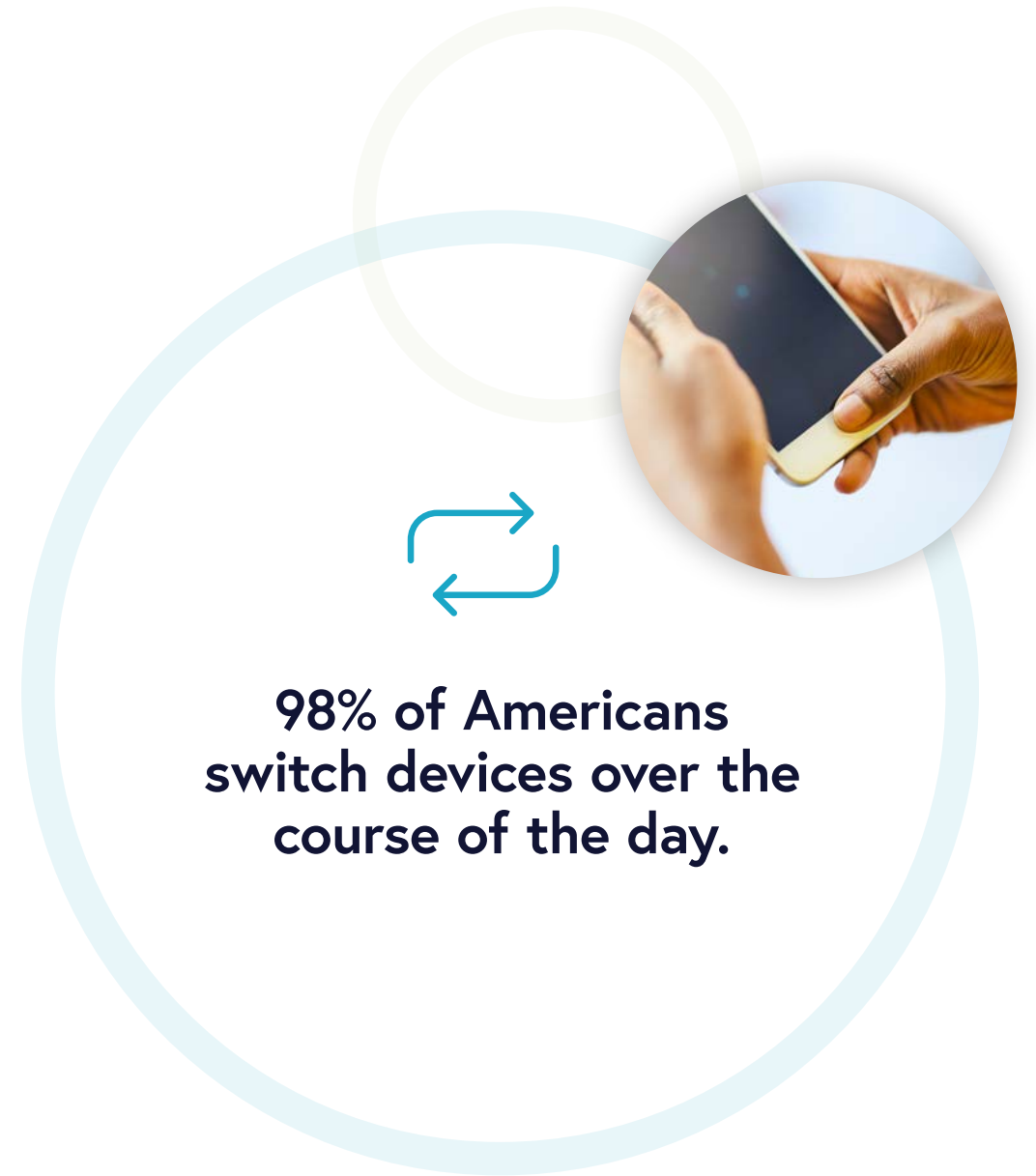


16%

Nearly 45 million US internet users—or 16% of them—will go online exclusively via mobile devices in 2018¹³



Enabling your constituents to read, search and contribute to your community from any device they are able to access has become a necessity. Mobile and tablet users access social networking sites and online communities 26% of the time¹⁴. According to Google¹⁵, 98 percent of Americans switch devices over the course of that day perhaps using their mobiles during the commute, laptops during the workday and tablets or mobile phone at night. Ensuring your community works perfectly on each platform to deliver a smooth and engaging user experience has never been more important.



Responsive design leverages a single website that automatically adjusts the size and layout of the given page to meet the standards of the screen it is being opened in. Although common in other areas, including ecommerce, online communities have long resisted responsive design. After all, communities hosted lengthy conversations, with copious amounts of text and long forum threading that made mobile design impractical.

With responsive design, the code powering your community is built to adapt content, design and navigation to each user's device and method of interactions. Websites render beautifully and are easy to use whether that displayed on an iPhone, Android tablet, laptop or another device. For example, if your online community's home page has a navigation bar where all options are presented

when viewed on a desktop browser, when accessed via a mobile device the responsive site will automatically nest some of those navigation options into a drop-down menu to meet the demands of the screen size.

By using your online community on their mobile device, your constituents are automatically adopting your mobile platform. However, the benefits of responsive design aren't limited to users. With only a single community site to maintain, your responsive site is one and done. If you or your [online community software provider](#) introduces changes, it only has to be made and tested in one place and is immediately delivered to your community members.



Driving Engagement

Applying lessons learned from social media

With the growing number of constituents looking to participate in your community across an ever-evolving variety of devices, responsive design is critical in improving access to your community and ensuring traffic remains strong.

But getting them to the dance is half the battle. As Marty McFly lamented to the band in "Back to the Future," If you don't play there's no music. If there's no music they don't dance. If they don't dance, they don't kiss and fall in love and I'm history."



Here too, online community platforms have learned from social media sites with online tools designed to help busy organizations make it easy for members to participate all while building the deep, meaningful, long-term relationships unique to community.

It's no secret that emotional engagement moves the needle but fostering it can be difficult. In fact, a report from Capgemini¹⁶ suggests that while 80 percent of organizations think they understand the emotional needs of their audience, only 15 percent of that audience feels the same way. Emotional engagement drives loyalty because it's how people build relationships. When interactions feel genuine, communities build trust with users and users build trust with each other.



80% of organizations think they understand the emotional needs of their audience (but only 15% of the audience agrees.)



Show us how you *really* feel – quickly...and easily

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words.

Emojis, those small icons—smiley faces, winking eyes, hearts of all shapes, sizes and colors—are everywhere these days, using an image to express an idea or feeling. According to eMarketer¹⁷ 48.9 percent of US adult internet users include emojis in social media or text messages and over 60 million emoji are used on Facebook¹⁸ per day.

Why? They offer a sort of shorthand, increasing the precision and nuance of more open-to-misunderstanding digital communications. Because they often telegraph an easily identified thought or feeling, they are mostly understood in context and help users add tone and clarity to our messages.

Because binary 'like' and 'dislike' buttons don't properly reflect the myriad of reactions to the vast array of things community members may encounter, making a broader set of emojis available directly within your community can lighten the mood, soften controversial posts or provide those who don't have the time or confidence to share a longer message in writing a mechanism for staying in touch.

Reactions also provide perspective to the broader community. If others leave a Reaction on a post, it's an even stronger signal that it's the kind of content they're interested in seeing or the sort of post they feel is more relevant. Generally speaking, even when a negative option – a frowning face – is presented, users employ Reactions to show their approval and support. More than half of reactions used across social media are the heart, or 'love' reaction.



Voicing support, inspiring action

Clicking an icon to show support is one way to engage but putting your support behind something represents another equally important opportunity for communities to come together. After all, online communities create the digital space for people to not only connect emotionally but also to come together to share ideas, collaborate and push innovation forward.

A community built through member feedback empowers users. Think about how revolutionary the up/downvote has been in providing everyday users with even a small bit of editorial influence or how crowdfunding platforms can build entire communities around products that haven't even been manufactured!

Streamlining the process by which community members can share their ideas, acknowledge them and then put them into action delivers yet another advantage over social media. With the vote completed, communities provide the opportunity for members to collaborate further, ideating on the original concept, developing plans and enacting a strategy to bring their vision to life.



Encouraging continued participation

Most online communities rely on a small number of individuals generating a majority of the content and discussion, which means fewer overall opinions. Introducing digital badges within your forum, as rewards to encourage participation, can create delight, foster continued engagement for those driving the most activity as well as incentivizing those new to your community to start being more active.

Members like recognition. Badges tap into basic human psychology motivating users to contribute, share and be active. The same way that badge ribbons are popular at in-person events, online badges, ribbons and other indicators of other attributes within an online community are appreciated and similarly beloved.

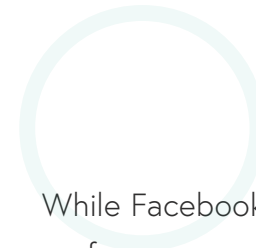
Yet badging doesn't just provide value to community members. Like reactions and voting, they can - and should be - used to strengthen the health of the community, validating what matters to members and diversifying the conversation to encourage a wider variety of voices. Badges should serve as a reward for contribution, acknowledging members for coming together for the common good of the organization and its mission.



Creating the right experience

Access and engagement go a long way towards creating a meaningful experience for community members but what can you do to further help things along?

Social media has long struggled with issues around privacy. Facebook meticulously tracks its users' online lives, far beyond the company's well-known targeted advertisements. Details that people often readily volunteer — age, employer, relationship status, likes and location — are just the start. When users travel to other sites, Facebook can continue monitoring their activity with software like its ubiquitous "Like" and "Share" buttons, and something called Facebook Pixel — a code snippet dropped onto the other websites that allows that site and Facebook to track users' activity. This data has served as a valuable asset for Facebook, and serves at the core of its business model.



While Facebook users must agree to the company's data policy when signing up for an account, some regulators contend that Facebook has not obtained users' explicit and informed consent to track them on other sites and apps. Many of Facebook's 2.1 billion users have no idea how much data Facebook could collect about them and how the company could use it.

The reality is that even if protected by a password, your community is a very public part of your organization, visited by hundreds, thousands or perhaps hundreds of thousands of constituents. However, online communities provide you with additional tools to ensure you're not only protecting your users' sensitive information but also the integrity of the digital space you've worked to create.



Assigning role-based permissions accomplishes multiple goals. First and foremost, it gives you a high degree of control over what community members are allowed (or not allowed) to do. You may choose to limit the community members posting in a certain part of your forum, or create a bespoke area exclusive to particular users, such as your board.

Additionally, just because your database is set up in a particular fashion it doesn't mean that your community should follow suit. More granular control over permissions also allows the user's experience to drive what content or capabilities you expose to the different members of your community.

Organizations must recognize that that different user types exist in online communities and they should understand each group's needs to manage their community successfully and to give a better service to their members. By automatically presenting relevant information to a community member based on their role and associated needs, the user is able to more quickly find what they're looking for, what's meaningful and will ultimately create the most impact.



If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.

Marty McFly might be a fictional character, but he was right about a number of things. At the top of the list? If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.

Social platforms -- Facebook, LinkedIn, even Twitter -- have a place in the world and your organization. They're all important and powerful tools. The trick is finding the right job for each tool and it's important to pick the right tool for your community.

Take what you've learned on social media and revisit the idea of community. Go back to the future and see what change you can influence.

You'll find that, combined with next generation features like out-of-the-box responsive design, the incorporation of popular engagement features and the ability protect and guide through detailed, role-based permissions you'll harness that energy more effectively -- and grow your community on secure land you can call your own.



About Personify

Personify is the market-leading Constituent Management and Engagement (CME) platform that empowers modern organizations to better engage their constituents, maximize revenue and optimize operations. For over 20 years, we have been driving growth for a diverse group of organizations including organizations, nonprofits, event professionals, YMCAs and JCCs. For additional information, visit www.personifycorp.com.



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