Critical Steps For Building an Online Community

The following is a list of the critical steps to consider when embarking on a project or plan to build an online community. This information is available within various other Collabor8now Ltd blog posts and Slideshare presentations (https://www.slideshare.net/stephendale/presentations) but for convenience I've curated these into a single post at:
http://collabor8now.com/collaboration/12-key-steps-for-building-an-online-community/

The items have been kept deliberately brief, but further and detailed information (with relevant citations and references) can be provided on request.

1. Ensure you have community facilitator/community manager with strategic oversight for the platform and business goals. It takes a lot of time and effort to convert a new community member into an active community member. The community manager's role is to build relationships with and between members, initiate discussions, prompt members to participate and slowly increase their interest. Relevant skills for a manager/facilitator are:
   - Engagement & People Skills
   - Content Development Skills
   - Business & Strategic Skills
   - Technical Skills
2. Focus on the people and not the technology. Keep the technology simple to begin with, e.g. threaded conversations, themed groups, polls and integration with corporate email (e.g. for activity updates). The most important aspect is making it easy for members to find and connect with each other.
3. Start slow and think small. The community needs to work small before it can work big. Community building is a slow process of stimulating interactions, building relationships and fostering social capital. It begins small and grows with time, at its own pace. It can take anything between 3 to 12 months to get the community to a stage where it's generating its own discussions/content.

4. Consider having a low-key community launch workshop. Don't make this a big publicity promotion – it may raise unrealistic expectations.
5. Be prepared to devote time and effort in attracting the first 50 members. Start with personal invitations to key contacts. Involve this "founder" group in strategic planning for the platform and communities and encourage them to be advocates, e.g. ask them for promotional ideas to help launch the community. Will they be willing to tell their friends about the community? Who do they know with an interest in the topic?
6. Start with as few themed groups as possible. Too many often means it will be hard to create a community feel; conversations will be diluted and stretched too thin. It's difficult for members to get to know each other if you've got dozens of different groups with little or no activity.
7. Focus, encourage and nurture active members. Be aware that members are fickle beasts. They may check things out, but it takes a lot of personal attention to keep them interested. Otherwise they come, browse around for a few seconds and then vanish back into the corporate wilderness.
8. Welcome newcomers to the platform. Make them feel wanted.
9. Reach out consistently to new members; ask them what they want from their community rather than enforcing an environment that the business wants.
10. Don't control the conversations. Let the users decide what is important and in their own voice.
11. Don't set unrealistic or meaningless management targets. Getting people to register is relatively easy – if that's a goal. Better to measure numbers and growth rates of active members.
12. Once the community is up and running, consider having regular community events, for example:
    ○ Webinars on a key topic of interest.
    ○ Themed and facilitated discussions. A community could join a live chat room to participate in a themed discussion. This discussion will have a set topic.
    ○ Weekly Interview. Similar to the themed discussion, this is a weekly interview with a VIP or "expert" on a particular topic.
    ○ Competitions/Challenges. The community may host a regular competition or challenge for members to participate in.
    ○ Newcomer orientation. Once a month, a community may host a day to welcome new arrivals in the community. This can involve regular members introducing themselves, setting up some basics threads for newcomers to participate in and help teach members about the culture of the community.

- ○ Product-Launches. A community might celebrate the launch of a new product or service.
- ○ Member achievements. The community may also celebrate the achievements of a member. This might be about a promotion, the birth of a child, a marriage, etc.

Steve Dale
Collabor8now Ltd
steve.dale@collabor8now.com
@stephendale