



Community Manager training

Module BM02: Community Management Strategy

Individual exercise

On the basis of three examples from <https://cmxhub.com/article/20-examples-of-successful-online-communities/> presented below, describe how you can apply their ideas to your community.

Duolingo

Duolingo is an online language-learning tool that has reached over 50 million language learners since launching two and a half years ago. In the past year alone, they've launched 39 new language courses all with a team of less than 40.

How are they scaling so quickly? Community.

With hundreds of volunteers, Duolingo was able to empower their community to develop, test, and spread the word about their language courses.

This didn't just happen overnight though – they started small and the community evolved to the point where it could actually develop content alongside the internal team. In this article, we'll learn how they overcame the challenges of building new language courses and a language-loving community from Kristine Michelsen-Correa, Head of Community at Duolingo.

“The Duolingo community is amazing: incredibly supportive, language savvy (of course), and willing to help others learn where they can. They're all aspirational and kind,” Kristine explains.

In the time she has been there (just over two years), Duolingo has grown from 4 million to 50 million language learners all over the world. **This is their first time sharing the community story and giving us deep insight into the challenges and triumphs of building a massive community-powered content engine.**

First, how does it work?

When Kristine started in her role at Duolingo, “We thought about ways to grow language courses.” They only had so many people on the internal team to develop courses. This was a long, laborious process that was far from scalable.

“There were bilingual Duolingo community members who wanted to add languages we never thought we'd be able to offer because of the size of our team.” So they had to think outside the office.

They turned to their community members and released what they call the Incubator. The Incubator allows them to scale their entire course-creation engine, bringing in community volunteers and empowering them to teach what they know.



The Incubator works in phases, which we'll describe in more detail.

Volunteers apply: There is a formal application process for people interested in volunteering in the Incubator.

Phase 1: Courses Not Yet Released.

Phase 2: Courses Released in Beta.

Phase 3: Courses Graduated from Beta.

At this point, they release the course into the world and continue to collect feedback from the community.

The Common Challenges of Creating User-Generated Content Engines in Your Community

As they experimented and grew the Incubator, they identified several common challenges that community builders face when developing scalable user-generated content programs and worked to solve each one.

The challenges of creating a user-generated community strategy include:

1. Accommodating different levels of contribution.
2. Maintaining high quality of content.
3. Making it easy to contribute.
4. Managing multiple languages.
5. Making it engaging to contribute.
6. Determining incentives to participate.

1. Accommodating Different Levels of Contribution

In terms of the structure of the volunteer programs, Kristine says they pick the best leaders through the application process and then let them run with it. "We pick the leaders and then contributors pick the people THEY want to volunteer with. We want people to be empowered. We don't want to make this too regimented."

Not everyone can contribute in this way, however. It is a high level of involvement. But it's still important to give people a way to contribute, especially if they're already clamoring to do it, and to make every contributor feel like their contribution is important. So how do you do this without undermining your own efforts?

While Duolingo empowers their volunteers to create course content, they also find other ways for members to get involved.

"The community also helps with beta testing by going through the course and catching errors as they're learning," Kristine explains.

And how did the team even know how best to structure the Incubator and the selection process? They first experimented with **forums**, which are alive and thriving today in many languages.

"We learned a lot about setting up ground rules from the forum program. Always make sure everyone understands why they're contributing and what the goals are."



“The Incubator is also how we transitioned our in-house language experts into community manager roles, where they were responsible for mentoring volunteers that applied to the incubator.”

2. Maintaining High Quality of Content

“We had to create a way to open up the platform, but also help people through the process.” Quality was a major concern, though Kristine says that the application process helps bring the best possible contributors to the forefront. Even so, they’ve learned there are several concrete ways to ensure that quality remains high.

Leadership:

They leverage their talented in-house language experts to help shepherd the contributors: “A staff member experienced in language course creation becomes a mentor and is assigned to a language team.” This helps streamline the process and facilitate engagement and quality content.

Constant communication on teams:

“A chat system was created, so that each team developing a course has their own place to communicate with each other.”

Communication among the larger network of volunteers keeps quality high and people motivated.

“There’s also a global and announcements chat where people keep each other informed, a place where tips and even motivational gifs are shared.”

As a result, **“There is real community being built between strangers and their link is their passion for languages.”** By ensuring that these contributors feel a strong sense of community, they feel more obligated to do a really good job which keeps the quality of the content really high.

3. Making it Easy to Contribute

Duolingo community volunteers collaborate a lot together, and it’s important that the in-house team makes this as easy as possible for them to do. This is why the 3 phase structure to launch a course has been instituted. During each phase, the in-house leaders help volunteers along and keep things moving within the platform.

Phase 1: Content Creation

“This is where the bulk of the content creation comes in. Their community goes in and translates sentences again and again to create the content.” This is all part of the product.

“The average time it takes to create a course that is ready for beta is three months. During this time, volunteers spend an average of five hours per week participating in the community, and many spend much more time interacting and contributing.” They have to ensure that the volunteers’ time is well-spent, and so the in-house team takes care of the more technical aspects of course creation.

Phase 2: Content Moderation



During phase 2, courses open to beta learners who provide feedback. The contributors make the changes and keep building a better course.

Phase 3: Launch and Iterate

Feedback is given once the course is totally live. It's always easy to give feedback and the contributors are given the tools they need to make the changes on Duolingo's behalf.

In this way, all parts of the process that volunteers help with are within the product itself. They can remain in that one environment and continue to chat with their team while they do so.

4. Managing Multiple Languages

One of the tricky parts of building a global content engine in so many different languages is just that: there are a lot of languages.

Instead of making one big forum for all contributors, they've created language-specific chat rooms for volunteer teams so that members can comfortably communicate with each other around the course in one set language. This allows them to create camaraderie around the languages there.

Outside of the Incubator, learners and contributors can also speak in the specific language forums on the Duolingo site, and then to go to the one main Duolingo discussion forum to have conversations around other topics.

5. Keeping Contributors Engaged

"We do everything we can to make the volunteer experience one that is rewarding and fun," says Kristine.

How do they maintain momentum to finish courses?

1. **Cooperation, not competition:** One of the key engagement tools they use are the phases of course creation. **Everyone works together to achieve the next phase, creating a cooperative model that incentivizes group work rather than individual contribution.** When the group levels up, they level up together.
2. **Fun competition among language groups:** Members of the community can track their progress and compare themselves to other teams. "This creates healthy competition that drives the different language communities to work to represent themselves in a more positive light."

Also, the whole team pitches in to help with course creation: "The entire Duolingo team is constantly interacting within our community. Even the engineers are involved in this process and they're all known by name within the community."

6. Determining Incentives to Participate

With so many different cultures and languages, creating incentives can be tricky. What motivates someone in the US may not motivate someone in Russia or Brazil. However, the team has found that there are several keys to success when determining incentives.



Incentives for Global Communities:

1. **Recommendations:** Volunteering time to build a new language course is a huge accomplishment. Offer recommendations for college, graduate school, or jobs. Learn what your community members' larger goals are and find ways to get them there.
2. **Recognition:** When you go to a course page, you'll see the names of the volunteers that contributed to the creation of that language direction.
3. **Giving back:** In Duolingo's case, people want to teach their language to others. This is a point of pride.
4. **Personal growth:** Make sure people are learning along the way. On Duolingo, the process of course creation is an interesting technological challenge. People learn a lot about how language courses are built.

There are many ways to incentivize participation, but the best ones that will spark the deepest engagement are the ones that are intrinsic or scalable: recognition, giving back, and growth.

In Summary, Duolingo's Advice for a Successful UGC Program:

1. Understand that different members will be interested in contributing at different levels of commitment, so build in multiple ways to contribute.
2. You can keep the quality of user-generated content high by ensuring there's a strong leader providing guidance, and creating a sense of community so members feel committed to the group.
3. Never ask members to do **too** much. Let them focus on the content and remove as many technological barriers as possible.
4. When working with a community comprised of very different groups (ie. language barriers) a good approach is to break those groups out into their own sub-communities so they feel comfortable and connected.
5. To keep contributors engaged, create cooperative rewards, or rewards that incentivize the group as a whole rather than just individuals. You can also create competition between groups, creating stronger ties within each group as they'll feel more like a team.
6. When trying to incentivize your community members to contribute, focus on intrinsic incentives as they'll have the biggest impact.

Looking Ahead at Learning Communities of the Future

"We're improving what's possible technologically as well as through community," Kristine explains. This is powerful stuff that is bridging the gap between product and community.

There are always challenges that crop up as you build a community from scratch, but Duolingo keeps approaching them head on as they think about how to build a global community around language learning that will last into the future.

"We're growing up," Kristine explains. "You need to have a bit more structure as you grow. You've got a lot to get done, and you need to make sure everyone is working together. We're looking towards the future with lots of excitement. We know we can bring access to even more people."



DietBetter

Weight loss is a multi-billion dollar international industry. We've got commercial diet programs, meal replacement companies, diet books, plus pills and supplements, all created by companies who aim to cash in on people's desire to lose weight and look better.

But most of these companies are doing it wrong. They're selling a quick fix and they end up churning through customers who aren't satisfied with their products.

So how do you do it right?

Jamie Rosen, CEO and founder of DietBetter, **believes it lies in building and sustaining community.**

In this article, we get to sit down with Jamie and talk about how DietBetter is using their die-hard community to drive real business value, all **with an ad and marketing budget of zero.** We also talk about how DietBetter sustains a community in which 80% of members in their DietBet games engage with the site every single week, an engagement metric we rarely see so high in online communities.

Jamie shares with us what a healthy community looks like, how anonymity can be more rewarding than real identity in communities of purpose, and how to leverage influencers in your community to grow your userbase on your behalf.

A Community Sparked Out of an Idea

In 2008, Jamie Rosen visited friends at two different companies and noticed a strange coincidence: both companies were hosting dieting challenges for their employees, putting money into a pot and betting one another that they would lose weight together.

"I saw my friends doing this together and having fun. The whole thing was a morale-building experience. People would go out running along the Hudson River during their lunch breaks. Losing weight is usually solitary and dreary but in this case people were laughing their way through the experience."

Therein lies the power of community, Jamie discovered: we can take our everyday solitary struggles and flip them into manageable chunks when done as part of a community.

Yes, Sometimes Your Users DO Know What They Want

Jamie may have come upon this idea back in 2008, but it took several *years* of thinking through the concept before launching the actual product.

"It took a while for the idea to germinate. To be honest, I didn't just drop everything and start this."

Instead of merely launching a platform, he asked potential users what they actually wanted – and then listened to the responses.

"First, I put up a test website," Jamie explains, "and asked: 'Are you interested in playing with your friends or with strangers?' I'm not even sure *why* I asked that question. I just threw it in there. But the answer was so surprising. **Over 70% of people said they'd prefer to lose weight with strangers.**"

That's when the true idea dawned on him: people could come together anonymously online, in a totally private way, and allow themselves to be vulnerable and safe, and accomplish goals they were too self-conscious to discuss with their real-world friends.



“The idea that people were interested in playing in these games with **strangers** was really intriguing to me. That’s what piqued my interest.”

“You could start to see where people’s heads were at. They were saying, “I’m uncomfortable with my weight and I don’t want to talk about it with people at work or friends.” But that didn’t mean that they did not want community – in fact, it was quite the opposite.

This social dynamic is not intuitive. We often hear fitness “gurus” tell us that we need to make our real-life friends our “accountability partners” when we are achieving goals, whether they be around weight loss, kicking bad habits, building a side project, or being more productive at work. But the truth is, an *anonymous* community of strangers may be better at holding us accountable, a community that won’t judge us when we falter, so that we can push ourselves and share our missteps.

“Weight is a very sensitive topic and people feel vulnerable when they talk about it. **Losing weight often results in failure**, so there is safety in doing this with people who you will not have to face in the real world.”

“So what really drives our community is this idea that we are social but with an anonymous component to it.”

This won’t work for every community, but it certainly works when we want to discuss sensitive topics, better ourselves, or challenge ourselves in new ways in the company of likeminded individuals.

How Structure Breeds Community

What is truly surprising about DietBetter’s success is that the team consists of just 5 people, none of whom currently focus on community-building, and yet they have tens of thousands of die-hard community members. Within the games, over 80% are actively engaged on a weekly basis.

How is that possible? It’s because everyone’s goals are aligned in each “DietBet” game, which have a clear structure: lose 4% of your starting weight in 4 weeks (the “Kick-starter” dietbet) or lose 10% in 6 months (the “Transformer”). Each game has its own organizer (or host) who can play the role of a community manager, along with a cohort of “players” who sign up, bet into the pot, and commit to lose the weight in the specified timeframe. In this environment, community is a natural byproduct.

“People have a lot to talk about in our games, from the mechanics of the weigh-in process to the ups and downs of their struggles along the journey. People really bond in our 6-month games as they get to know each other really well.” Over the course of the game strong communities emerge — but are suddenly dispersed at the end.

They realized that in order to really create long-term engagement and retention, community must exist outside of this temporal structure. This is a huge turning point for them and signals a major focus on community-building to retain and motivate customers outside the game framework.

“After 6 months, the game would end and you’d never see these people again.” It was a major lost opportunity. Here is how it originally worked:

Early Days Game Structure



- A “Game host” creates the game and defines the parameters (including the start date and bet amount). The game host can be an influencer like Jillian Michaels who invites their fans to join her dietbet or a community member. Games can be public or private but most are public;
- Incentives are sometimes offered to build excitement while the game is filling up: “When Jillian Michaels hosts a dietbet, she regularly gives away autographed books and DVDs to the players who invite the most friends each day leading up to the start of the game. She also offers content tips and suggestions throughout the experience.

This has major limitations in that hosts like Jillian Michaels don’t scale. There’s just one Jillian. So in order to create a sustainable and steadily engaged community, the community needs to scale itself.

The Opposite of Facebook: How the Blogging Feature Was Born

While Facebook has militated that we all use our “real name”, there are thousands of reasons why anonymity can and SHOULD be the way of online communities. This is one of the key ways that DietBetter has begun to scale up.

“We keep hearing from people: ‘Facebook is depressing.’ On Facebook, everyone’s always bragging about what’s going on in their lives. Everything is always ‘great.’ No one is talking about their struggles or confessions. In our world, however, that’s exactly what people share. Everyone is honest because they know they’re not going to be ridiculed.”

And isn’t that what we all want – non-judgmental validation that we’re going to be okay?

Again, Jamie saw that his users knew what they wanted – a safe space where they could talk about their mishaps and move forward. In response, last month, they launched blogging as a new social area on the site, so that people can share experiences in a non-judgmental place.

“This is all about camaraderie. Everyone on the platform can relate to what everyone else is going through. The vibe is like, ‘Hey, I’ve done stuff like that too!’”

Jamie insists: “It’s the anti-Facebook element that is really attractive to people.”

“Within the first month, we got over 1000 blog posts in a community of just tens of thousands. We didn’t even promote this feature. People really want to journal and share their experience. They become natural advocates.”

Focusing on Retention: How the Groups Feature Was Born

“We’re expanding our definition of community to include groups outside our game cohorts. It’s going to help drive two key business objectives.”

1. Retention: This will allow people to continue their relationships with other players after their game is over.
2. Acquiring New Users: Some people aren’t in the mood to take out their credit card on Day 1, which we require to join a DietBet. So we launched “Groups” to let people get value from the community without immediately joining a game. They can stick



around and make friends, get inspiration from other users, and make healthy lifestyle choices in a safe space.

“Making habit changes that are sustainable takes time and requires a long-term perspective. You’ve got to take it in stages.”

The games are fun and motivational, but Jamie argues that, “People really get the most value over the long-run from the community support: **it’s all about camaraderie and a safe space to get and give support.**”

“That’s what’s been working for people, creating a circle of accountability with other members of our community. So we’re building more of that.”

The Fitness Warriors: A Story of Strangers Transforming into a Community

People’s lives are changed every day with DietBetter, but some people are truly transformed by their online weight loss journey. They’re not just losing weight, they’re building intimate friendships and a support network for making sustainable lifestyle changes. This is what Jamie is trying to scale over time.

“When we first launched in 2013, among our early users a group of friends formed organically. These women met in games and stayed together. Their games would end after 4 weeks, and instead of going their separate ways, they’d ask, ‘Where should we all go together to join the next game?’”

“They would jump around as a group and they added to their numbers as they did. **They became a tribe inside the platform. They named themselves “The Fitness Warriors”. When they started, they were all size 12’s and higher. Together, they all got down to size 5 or less.**”

The Fitness Warriors cemented their friendships as part of the first group of players in the beta version of the six-month Transformer game.

“One day, they were bemoaning the fact that they were so close to each other and yet they would never meet. One Fitness Warrior said she had a house on Nantucket and offered to host everyone. She didn’t think anyone would take her up on it but they did ... more than she could even fit in her house. So over the course of Mother’s Day last year, all of these women flew in to meet each other. It was a chance for them to finally meet each other.

“When we heard about it, we sent them T-shirts, a healthy gift basket, and a VIP bag from C. Wonder on Nantucket, which is owned by one of our investors.”

Acquisition and Retention: Size Doesn’t Matter

“In terms of our size, we have a couple hundred thousand people who have played in games. A few tens of thousands of people are actively playing at any given moment.”

“We’re not a HUGE community. But we’re seeing really intense engagement, largely because people are paying for our service up front. **We used to have an opportunity to play for free, but nobody did it.** People **want** to pay for this.”

This is what we call a good problem.



They want to commit to putting down a deposit. And these are sizable deposits. “The average bet size is \$30. You get a significantly enhanced engagement rate when money is at stake and people are committing to make life changes.”

“Others try to create *so little friction* in their communities and onboarding process, but then there is no skin in the game. In our case, that high bar of commitment and betting on yourself has kept us on the small side but the engagement is incredibly high.”

Key Takeaways from the DietBetter Story

1. Structuring your product in the right way can create community even if your team is lean. DietBetter does not have a dedicated community manager and their entire team consists of just 5 people.
2. Anonymous communities work when people are seeking to challenge themselves in ways that make them open to failure or ridicule—people are actually more supportive of others in these situations than in a “real identity” environment because everyone is struggling together.
3. Ask your users what they want – they often have the right answers or will lead you in the right direction.
4. The quality of engagement in your community is far more important than the sheer size. If people are pulling out their credit cards to join, you’re doing something right – even if your userbase isn’t the size of WhatsApp’s or Twitter. Keep that key userbase happy and keep delivering them value worth paying for, and size will come in time.

Conclusion

“We’re building out a database of ‘local heroes’ who can be ambassadors for us. They help us to organize new groups or invest in the community other ways.”

They’ll be tying together their power users in more tight-knit ways and finding new means through which to make people healthier – together.

“We can all do this together. There’s a karmic component to helping people.” And if they can find a way to scale good karma, I’m pretty sure we’d all agree to be beta testers.



Foursquare

When Foursquare launched in 2009, CEO Dennis Crowley noticed something special happening. Although they had thousands of users and were poised for growth, some of them were doing incredible things: contributing hundreds of edits at a time and spending hours every week on the app.

Dennis realized that they should recognize and engage these users right away, and he created a special designation for them and gave them tools to connect with one another. These became Foursquare's superusers.

Investing in Foursquare's early users and power users has been a huge strategic focus for the team, who decided to unbundle the app into two separate apps last year to better serve their users. Through all the growth and changes (between January 2010 and April 2011, the userbase grew from 250,000 to 8 million), their superusers stuck by their side, growing and scaling with them. There have over 40,000 superusers today.

They have learned a lot along the way about how to grow and engage their most avid fans while building products that people love. And the key to all of that is their 40,000-strong global superuser community members, who help them edit their location content at a superhuman pace.

According to The Community Roundtable's 2015 State of Community Report, companies with multi-tier community advocacy programs are the most successful: on average, 46% of their members remain active. This fuels external advocacy and ensures that their community remains an active part of the company even as it grows and changes.

Take eBay, which recognizes and rewards Top Sellers, who then go on to generate massive amounts of revenue for the company. Or take AllRecipes.com, which recognizes its top contributors with its AllStars program. As of 2014, they had *never spent a dime on marketing* and are still dominating the Internet of Food almost 20 years after its launch.

We interviewed Foursquare's Support and Product Operations Director, Tracey Churray, and researched how companies like eBay, SAP and its clients, and AllRecipes.com have built their superuser programs.

Even if your company does not have an eBay-sized budget, you can still invest in your top users. In fact, it's one of the most cost-effective ways of building life-long loyalty. Investing in these users now will help you scale while your company is still small.

Today, Tracey will walk you through the superuser program at Foursquare, and we will show you how her work can apply to yours, whether you're a founder, CMO, or new community manager.

Tracey has immersed herself in the tech world for 10 years now. She grew the AWeber customer support team from zero to 35 people, and has now been growing with Foursquare for three years. She helped them navigate huge change in 2014, when they unbundled the main Foursquare app into two apps: Foursquare and Swarm. Through it all, she has seen their superuser program expand and deepen.

We present you a roadmap for figuring out how you can scale using a superuser program (is it for marketing, product, or scaling support at *a fraction of the cost?*) and how to implement the program piece by piece.

Defining Why Superusers Are Key



It's important to gather your first superusers before launching the program to make sure that you are building for them, but it's never too late to start a program like this.

You may eventually face these challenges: your internal support team reaching capacity and most customers go elsewhere to solve their problems; your product team feeling at a loss for what to build next; and in the case of major company changes, your marketing team facing an uphill battle communicating with customers they don't really know.

Turning to your superusers will allow you to scale all these processes without hiring. But where do you begin and how do you scale a massive superuser community?

Not every company is Foursquare, but you might begin to identify a handful of people who wants to get closer to your brand. That is a starting point for a community. It's time to leverage your close relationships to achieve your support, marketing, expansion, or product goals.

Pre-Work for Creating a Superuser Community

1. Choose a business case

It doesn't matter if you're a founder, a Chief Community Officer, a CMO, or a new community builder tasked with engaging loyal fans for the very first time. You should still think about how to get your top users to engage with one another.

Pick one business case, and start there.

At Foursquare, the role falls under support and product (these departments are interconnected). Here are some other examples to get you thinking about how to leverage your top users.

Examples:

- if revenue is your goal, take a cue from eBay's Top Seller program;
- if awareness is your goal, take a peek at what AllRecipes does with its AllStars. Results from AllRecipes consistently rank at the top of Google search and have been that way for years. Foursquare, too, recognizes its superusers for the content they create and edit. It incentivizes both quality and quantity of content and moderation;
- if support is your goal, SAP research has shown time and again that superuser programs reduce support costs. This is happening at Foursquare as well as Salesforce;
- if product growth and internationalization/localization are your goals, Foursquare has that process down pat. It turns to its superusers for localization initiatives and has even created a beta program prior to publicly launching Swarm, which ensured the new app's success. Twitch does this as well.

2. Know Your Brand

You'll want to launch a superuser program after you define your brand personality. Find a way to talk to your superusers, create an outline for how you want to communicate with them, and ensure that your voice is consistent.

At Foursquare, this is done informally. "We're a small team and everyone started here as an intern first, so they've gotten time to learn how we communicate with users and how specifically to communicate with SUs. For Tori [who runs Foursquare's superuser fo-



rums], it helps a lot that she’s also our internationalization coordinator and that she’s bilingual, as our community is so global,” says Tracey.

Most communications happen on a forum – which got a start on GetSatisfaction but has since migrated to a Vanilla Forums home – and in a Google Group for power superusers.

If your company is larger, consider creating or following an existing brand guideline that empowers your internal team to speak on behalf of the brand while maintaining a consistent voice.

3. Outline member motivations

If you don’t understand your superusers’ motivations first, what could happen? You might waste money, damage your reputation, or even lose customers who feel patronized. You’ll build something arbitrary and ignore the very people you’re trying to serve.

Tracey has done extensive work to figure out what motivates Foursquare’s superusers. Below are her insights:

- **leave a lasting impression:** “In meeting people and talking with them, it’s almost as if it’s a way to put your own stamp on the internet,” she says. “You get to make a mark on a product that millions of people use all the time without being an engineer or knowing code. That’s the underlying motivation;”
- **finding their people:** “I think another part of it is because we’ve always had this fun and playful personality and affable brand.” There are no shortcuts in brand-building, and this is why having consistent communication across customer touchpoints is so crucial;
- **feeling heard and seen:** “On the back end of it, we work hard to maintain this database and talk to our users. If they tell us something crazy is going on, we interact with them and fix it”;
- **make the program feel human:** Don’t send your superusers into a human-less void. You need someone to run your program, a human voice in line with your brand voice. At Foursquare, this person is Victoria (Tori) Ugarte.

Doug Whittle, SAP Community Consultant, agrees: “I have yet to see a SU [superuser] program be sustained if there is not SOMEONE at some percentage staying ‘in charge.’”

“The open channels of communication are very important,” says Tracey, echoing the need for a leader at the community’s helm.

Now it’s your turn: If you’re the boss or if you are presenting this to your boss, what is the business case you are solving for? How will you propose communicating with your superusers? What are your superusers’ motivations, and how can you give them what they want while also serving the business?

Framework for Building a Superuser Community

1. Define When to Start.
2. Talk First, Build Later.
3. Define What Superusers Will Do.



4. Create a Superuser Vetting Process.
5. Organise Your Superusers into Tiers.

1. Define When to Start

Dennis Crowley, Foursquare's CEO, came up with this idea almost at the get-go. He immediately saw the potential that their most engaged users would have on the business. He took this early hunch and turned it into a program:

"The SU program came out of Dennis's head many years ago. He saw everyone contributing and thought, 'All these people are superusers!' We engineered an application to define membership. It's been around since pretty much the beginning of Foursquare."

But just because Foursquare had a leg up doesn't mean that it's too late for you.

For you, the timing will depend on how the work you did above (aligning the program with business goals, creating brand guidelines, and identifying key motivations) and what you learned about the work that needs to be done. Look at what your business goals are and determine when a superuser program can be most effective for each of those needs. For product needs, it's never too soon to speak with your top users and create open lines of communication among them (Foursquare had a simple Google Group from the earliest of days).

2. Talk First, Build Later

Before you decide how your potential superusers might contribute, it's helpful to define who they might be first.

This might seem confusing: why consider recruiting applicants for your program before defining the roles of your superusers? But think about it. How will you know what superusers should do until you've talked to your earliest candidates? It's a chicken and an egg problem solved rather simply: talking to those who you have already built a relationship with.

If you're not sure who to start with, turn to your support queue. Who have you interfaced with multiple times? Who do you know on a first-name basis? These people need not be "influencers."

Run your business case and motivations by them. At this point, it's fair to have them sign an NDA, since this mirrors a private beta program. These early confidants will help you define the actions you want your superusers to take.

At Foursquare, they launched a private beta in anticipation of their split: "Before the launch of Swarm, we got 200 people in a beta plan and had them sign NDAs. We invited all of our SU3's [their top tier of superusers], press people, select superusers who had blogs or had been long-time fans."

This set them off on the right foot to create tools from scratch for Swarm and develop a long-term strategy.

3. Define What Superusers Will Do



Foursquare superusers have a variety of clearly defined tasks and the engineering infrastructure to do them on the app (*their open API really, really helps*). “They find duplicates or merge venues, flag bad tips, photos, phone numbers. It’s completely volunteer.”

“Our location tips are crowd-sourced as well. We don’t directly moderate that as a support team or a community team. It goes back to our community. Our community then reviews it and then votes on whether the tip gets taken down. That gives that group of folks such a feeling of empowerment. They have real privilege. One of our superusers created a whole set of tools based off our API so other superusers could go in and make edits.”

Today, they also have a forum to turn to so that their members have a place to connect with one another and collaborate. Their new forum officially launched when Foursquare decided to unbundle into two separate apps.

The lesson we can learn is this: give your superusers tools to take desired actions, and then let go. Foursquare’s open API has massively enabled their superusers to build and use even more tools or themselves.

4. Create a Superuser Vetting Process

So you’ve talked to users to see who might be a superuser, then defined their tasks. But now you have to be selective in who actually joins the program.

Foursquare doesn’t try to engage everyone in the same way. Instead, they encourage those who show early promise to take a look around the program. Then they give them the tools to start engaging in it more deeply.

Why? It’s all about keeping those motivations pure. Those who are not motivated intrinsically should not be part of the program.

“We want to make sure that the people who are part of this program are the ones who are going to make edits and make good edits,” explains Tracey.

“We didn’t gamify this because we don’t want to mess up the incentives. We’ve done small viral things to promote the superuser program. On Swarm, you get a sticker. Everyone’s profile has a special emblem on it. We don’t go crazy about it because we want people who are internally motivated. We don’t push to upsell this program.”

But what if *you* don’t have applicants bursting at the seams?

Turn to your support tickets and find those who give you feedback. Tracey says that they often will turn support tickets that are flagging errors into opportunities to tell users about the program. **Early advocacy is often showcased in support.**

Now that you have boundaries in place, you’ll want to create tiers of superusers, giving them goals to work towards.

5. Organise Your Superusers into Tiers

Now with boundaries in place, create tiers of superusers, which offer them goals to work towards.

“We’re on our third version of super tools, but they’ve been there for a long time,” Tracey explains.

Below are the tiers that Foursquare uses:



- “SU1”: A member applies, Foursquare give them a bunch of edits, throws some curve balls at them. The Foursquare team looks to see how many edits they’ve made and how good those edits are. Then members are automatically bumped up to the next level if they meet the requirements;
- “SU2”: The member has done enough good edits, and SU1 members move up to the level of SU2. These members have more editing ability. Their votes weigh more than an SU1 would. They can then lock venues, etc.;
- “SU3”: These members are moderators in the forums. “They’ve been around for four or five years. We have a separate Google group for them and some of our engineers are on our Google group. They have direct access to our engineering team.” This is the pinnacle of Foursquare superuser-dom.

At each level, Foursquare recognises their members and (here’s the key) listens to them. They send out about one swag pack per year to their top tier, but that’s not the point, Tracey says. They look at what really motivates their members, and they recognise them in sustainable ways.

This creates a continuous cycle of rewarded advocacy and engagement.

Conclusion

While Foursquare’s superuser program lives under the engineering and product departments, the program touches many more aspects of the business.

“One of the things I’ve been most impressed with is taking community feedback and putting it directly into the product,” says Tracey. “We’ve elevated the community’s voice internally.”

In many organisations, people don’t know where community fits. But a superuser program can pervade the organisational culture in any department. Once a program is started, superusers can contribute in endless ways to the product, marketing, localization, content, or support goals of your organization.

They use superusers for all kinds of tasks internally, even if their business goals are clearly defined around product and support. “In the process of localising things, we include our superusers.” Localisation is hugely important to Foursquare and will become ever more important to companies as they expand internationally. “We recently released a bunch of stickers. A lot are unlocked by shouting things when you walk in somewhere. We had to localize that.” So they asked their superusers: “In your country, what would you shout to get this sticker?”

“We’ve just seen that the smaller pockets of geographically located people tend to work better because they’re using the app in different ways.” They’ll say things like, “Let’s go fix Greece today, and they’ll fix everything that is in Greece in one day.”

That’s the kind of teamwork that many companies dream of, the kind of actions that leaders everywhere wish they could inspire. Building a superuser community puts that kind of teamwork and action right at your fingertips.