

# Do you need to be a subject matter...

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[Josh Hilliker](#) 4 posts since

Aug 2, 2008

I get asked this question a lot and I have a very strong opinion on this topic. however I wanted to ask this community.. do you need to be a pro of the subject to manage the community on the subject?

Tags: community\_manager, roles



[danielrae](#) 22 posts since

Jul 31, 2008 1. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Aug 6, 2008 3:22 AM

Interesting one.

Not really an opinion, but my an example of my situation. I run a Community for a software firm which is for users of the software, as well as potential customers. The majority of users are experts who have used the software for years, many of my colleagues are experts, in the sense that they are product support employees, or sales employess, but I'm very much a novice user, even though I manage the online Community.

I would say that as long as you have an understanding of the subject, you can act more as a "signposter", e.g. put people with questions on to the right people to answer the question. And you have to be good at understanding what posters are really getting at - reading between the lines!

On the flip side, if I was an expert at our software, maybe I'd be a better host, in the sense that I could answer very technical questions myself rather than getting one of our support team to respond.



[LJ Banks](#) 3 posts since

Jul 31, 2008 2. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Aug 5, 2008 8:07 PM

Do you need to be a subject matter...

I agree with Daniel. I don't think it should be a requirement to be an SME to run the community. And with a large enough community staff it should not be the community manager's job to be the expert. The best case would be the comm manager is the expert on running the community, while each part of the community has its own SMEs. For example, the forum moderator for individual forums is the expert on the forum topic. If that is not possible, then the forum manager knows SMEs to contact to get forum questions answered. It is helpful to have SMEs somewhere to help the community along, definitely.



[Jamie Pappas](#) 307 posts since

Aug 27, 2008 3. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 5, 2008 1:23 PM

Hi Josh,

My opinion is that the answer to your question is "No."

I do not think that being an SME is a pre-requisite for running a community, although it could be a bonus attribute.

The key to successfully running a community as a true community manager, IMO, is to keep the community engaged and thriving, and that does not mean providing them expert advice on the subject at hand.

SMEs fall into a different key role, IMO, than community managers. As the community manager, it's your job to invite the SME's to participate and be an expert in the software application itself, not necessarily the subject that is being discussed on the platform.

I think Barry's wiki with definitions of Community [Resource Staffing](#) supports my theories on what it takes to run a successful community, and how each type of key member comes into play.

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## So, what's your opinion on this topic?

Best,

Jamie



[scott palmer](#) 10 posts since

Sep 5, 2008 4. Re: **Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 5, 2008 8:10 PM

Firstly, I like your blue guitar---looks like the guitar that Jimmy Hendrix burned on stage at Woodstock in the 60's.

Secondly, I work for Intel and Josh works for Intel (full disclosure).

Thirdly, Josh taught me most of what I needed to know to start our first "channel (partner) community (private community called "Channel Voice") for about 200,000 partners.

Now that I got the admin duties out of the way...

I like the concept of, to steal the term from Peter Drucker, "information broker". Currently, I have about three different community managers and none of them are "deep" experts on almost any related topic (including me;)). Just to be clear, they are incredibly smart, but not "deep subject matter experts" regarding our customers needs. That said, they are incredible "brokers of information". Simply put, they find informational gaps and find experts to fill them. We have found with our channel customers that they are very patient and kind to "information brokering"...essentially "hey, that is a great question and i will help get a detailed answer...back soon". This model presumes that the broker can identify and persuade the "expert" to participate wether directly (i.e. answering the question directly to the customer in the discussion area) or indirectly (providing the answer to the broker). Most of the time, we find that the expert is more than interested in directly participating (now they are hooked). There is something very, very compelling about asking a person for help to solve an "actual" customer problem. The directness and transparency of the relationship

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is incredibly compelling. In some cases I have had VP's participate in an answer--all too delighted to truly connect with a customer.

In summary, we have found that information brokers are a necessary and valuable part of our team solution and can generally "manage" a community, understanding that the "health" of the community is a huge team effort involving brokers and experts...and others.



Josh Hilliker 4 posts since

Aug 2, 2008 5. Re: **Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 5, 2008 8:38 PM

Thank you all for the great responses.. My very strong opinion when I started this journey was that if you are running a community you should be heavily vetted in the technology, (live it, breath it, .. you get the point). However after the last year and half on the vPro Expert Center I have networked far/wide with other community managers and realized the exact point that scott mentioned. I think the " Information broker " for a community is very critical to build, grow, foster & in the end self regulate itself. What I have seen with folks inside (Intel corp) is that these information broker roles are very effective in getting answers, bringing technologist together and also influencing changes to our internal programs (technology, marketing, engineering, etc.). so while I started from a position on the extreme end of the spectrum I believe I have moved to the other side and that while I feel i'm a pro in my community, I don't think you need to be a SME (subject matter expert) to make a community powerful. If I were to ever move to another community that was not in my domain I think I could still be successful in running it to the potential.

So.. if your not a SME on the topic, you can be a community pro and be the best at what you do. Build, Grow, Foster. One of the things we do @ Intel is do informed risk taking, where we try something with full disclosure and if it fails we learn from it, well. after my community hit one year I posted a blog which highlighted the top 5 things of the site and bottom 5 things that I wish were not so.. here's the posting.. <http://communities.intel.com/openport/blogs/proexpert/2008/08/27/bring-out-the-cake-and-candle-1-year-anniversary-is-here>

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Changing topics a bit.. 😊

One thing I wish was available for community managers was a forum to talk about the good, bad & ugly of community management. Best type of tools, indicators, collaboration options, points systems, failures, etc.. I wonder if we could start that dialogue here?



[Jamie Pappas](#) 307 posts since

Aug 27, 2008 6. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 6, 2008 6:15 AM

Hi Scott,

I absolutely love the use of "information broker" in this discussion! It encompasses all of the right imagery for the role of the community manager's engagement with the community.

You summed it all up perfectly!

We too experience what you do at Intel when it comes to helping people. People just really enjoy and gain satisfaction from helping others, whether another employee at EMC, a customer or partner. It's a very neat thing to see.

Thanks for your thoughtful and thought-provoking response!

-Jamie



[Jamie Pappas](#) 307 posts since

Aug 27, 2008 7. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 6, 2008 6:32 AM

Hi Josh,

Do you need to be a subject matter...

Thanks so much for sharing your story. It's interesting to see how things evolve as we get into it more and more.

I had a different impression at the beginning than yours, but have still learned a whole lot along the way. Not only am I not an SME about *any* of what EMC sells, but I also didn't know the key players that *did* know. So, I have been on an ongoing treasure hunt for the key players for the past year and have met all sorts of wonderful new people at the company, which has been great!

It's also been a bit of a challenge at times at EMC "selling" the idea of a community and collaboration platform to a whole lot of folks in the organization. It's hard to break the "our information is *all* confidential - we can't share *any* of it with anyone" mentality at times. So that has been a fun and interesting challenge that I've enjoyed. I am constantly gathering tidbits of information for the value of our platform and posting "success stories" for people to read and contribute to based on the collaborative efforts and wins on our site.

I've been doing this for a year, as well, and I very much like the idea of the top and bottom five, so thanks for that! I'm sense a blog post coming on reflecting on our own efforts over the past year 😊

Regarding your question of the good, bad and ugly of community management - I think that's a great discussion for Clearstep! And I'd love to participate in it! 😊

Best,

Jamie



[scott palmer](#) 10 posts since

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Sep 5, 2008 8. **Re: Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 6, 2008 11:36 AM

Hello Jamie,

Per your post, I have a couple of recommendations that may or may not be useful, and that you may or may not have already tried.

The first issue you mentioned (that comes to mind) is trying to "sell the community". I have lived the issue for 2 years now and I have found (probably after lots of wine and speaking with Josh Hilliker) that it is not about "selling the community". Yes, I am being dramatic for theatrical purposes...here is what I mean by that strong statement.

We human's (7,500 generations and 85 billion people later) are still quite simple emotional creatures;) Thus, we have a very hard time imagining/comprehending "abstract" ideas and "believing" in their usefulness (i.e. utility). Typical analogies are folks with horses and carriages trying to imagine a car. Or, in 1993 trying to explain that 65 million searches will be done each hour on a thing called Google, on a thing call the Internet. My point is, the idea or concept of community is simply too vague, abstract and utterly useless to most folks on the pilot (except for perhaps a quarter of a percent--you and I are in that category).

So, switching to tactical and practical methods, I don't even mention the word "community". Instead I use very, very simple techniques to "entice" Intel folks to participate in "community activities". As alluded to in a previous post, as an information broker (there are probably 5-7 on my team that fulfill this role), we identify questions and issues from customer and then the magic happens.

For example, just last week, I found a question about our new "services" for channel customers. It had been about 24 hours since the question was posted, so I stepped in and took action. Once I understood the question, I identified two folks at Intel that were experts (in some cases I have to find folks that know folks that are experts). Then, I email the question to the expert. It goes something like this...

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"Hey Glen, it has been a long time since we have connected, but I have a customer with a really interesting question and I thought of you. I have also sent this same question to another team mate in case she has other perspectives to the customer question. I have attached a PDF of the discussion with the customers question, but to make it even easier, the URL link is right here [insert URL] (Clearspace does both of these rather easily). All you have to do is click on the link, read the question and provide an answer. I know this customer is anxious to better understand your "product services". Lastly, I have also asked your manager to post a blog as well. As a VP in the group, her views and opinions are really valuable to our customers."

Of course, with these subtle, but persuasive "sales techniques" I have yet to be ignored. How many folks are going to ignore a plea from a customer, particularly when I sincerely ask for their help and make it incredibly easy to participate...AND BY THE WAY, I never mention that this was a community and that they need to participate. The COMMUNITY IS A MEANS TO AN END. The real story is simple, Glen is a hero for helping a customer.

This is the short story of one way we gain support for our community (over 125 Intel folks participating in the private channel partner community--we can it Channel Voice).

In most cases, once the Intel person has answered a question for a customer, and the customer is grateful, they are hooked, and of course, begin to fully understand the richness and value of the other community features. I call this bottom up sales not top down. Sell the idea of participation one customer at a time, not "hey communities are important, you need to get involved (blah, blah, blah). Communities are not important they are just features, but the "benefit" is to help real customers with real problems, it just happens that the means to this end is "enterprise social media features" (ouch my head hurts just saying all those words together;)).

In summary my most successful method for getting support (after much trial and error and guidance from folks much smarter than me--not hard to do) is emailing one Intel "expert" at a time, with the URL (and couple other tricks) and simply stating that a customer needs help. Any of us that worked in retail (or any sales for that matter) instantly appreciate the value of helping a customer. We intuitively know that helping customers lead to sales. In a sense, the most compelling ROI model is that "business" social media is most importantly a sales activity--duh. Helping customer before, during and after sales is as basic as it gets. The fact

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that we can now (with social software features) help more customer more often with minimal effort...that is a heck of a deal.

So back to your main point, don't try to convince EMC folks to join a community, simply ask them to help with a customer issue. I hope this very simple concept help.

Oh, by the way, once that employee is hooked, they becomes loyal sales people for you as well and hence the "network effect" (aka geometric growth). One of my favorite dynamics, is that that new "born again" employee will tell their boss how cool and effective the experience was--to help a customer. Then the manager will begin to see value. So eventually VP's (for example) will also be involved and in this case (a true story), Glen (a team mate) was so excited, he asked his VP to get involved, then that VP (very smart women) evangelized to another director...pretty fun to watch.

Notice, i haven't mentioned anything about training large groups. I have found that to be nearly useless. The lowest common denominator generally kicks in. Specifically, paranoia and fear of a few start to invest the larger group and it moves to gossip of abuse issue and "what happened on Facebook last week". Total was of time.

cheers,

Scott



[Jamie Pappas](#) 307 posts since

Aug 27, 2008 9. Re: **Do you need to be a subject matter expert to run a subject based community?** Sep 8, 2008 7:46 AM

Hi Scott,

Thanks for your story! I had to smile when you referred to people as quite simple emotional creatures. Very, very true.

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It's funny you say that you don't mention the word "community" - I don't either when talking to people about EMC ONE (our instance of Clearspace).

I find that the word is an instant turn off to a lot of people, and so instead I refer to it as a collaboration tool or environment for collaboration.

The particular platform I manage is for employees only. We started internally first, because the entire concept was so new for EMC, and have made great strides in introducing employees to the concepts and technology that support them inside the firewall in a "safe" environment before we venture outside and engage with our customers and partners.

Everyone is excited about it at first, until they learn that it's accessible by all employees - eek! Then they tend to shy away for a few reasons - being afraid of the perception (is this *really* a business tool?), being afraid of making a mistake (and *everyone* will see!), or wanting to keep their efforts to their small and well-known group (we only want our group working on this).

Before I talk with people, I do a bit of research on their roles in the organization so that I can discuss tangible examples of how they might use the "tool" for their needs. Then I help them to work through what they're comfortable sharing with the larger EMC group, and then we put a plan in place for doing so. Generally, it's a little bit at a time. But once they take that first risk and it's successful, they're generally hooked to go a bit farther.

I do like the idea of emailing folks individually and asking them to weigh in on a particular problem. Sometimes it's just that extra effort of reaching out to someone that makes them feel like they have the right knowledge (and gives them the courage) to share and help solve the problem or concern.

Our growth has been entirely viral on our platform - no marketing, no announcements, no mandates to join. It's purely voluntary and nearly all word-of-mouth growth. It's exciting to see others so excited about the site that they recommend it to fellow employees!

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Thanks again for sharing all your insights!

Best,

Jamie