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How to set up a successful online community

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At the beginning of the year, Facebook announced it wanted media organisations to use its group feature more.

As the social media editor of a local news website, that responsibility fell to me – but as it was uncharted territory and there was little advice out there, I set up a group with next to no idea of how to do it.

A few months down the line, alongside my colleagues I'm running a Facebook group called Kent Traffic and Travel which boasts more than 37,000 members. Here's what I learned along the way.

Find a niche

Before setting up your Facebook group, come up with a plan. Firstly, consider what your aims are. If you're a journalist running a student magazine or website, are you looking to find contributors? Create another forum to share your stories in? Generate discussion and therefore ideas for stories?

Then, do your research to see what's out there. Why would someone join your group if a similar one already exists? Find something that's missing. My colleagues and I noticed there was no county-wide group for traffic and public transport, which suited our aims perfectly for getting people to read our breaking news stories. But you might notice there is no residents' group for a certain area of where

you live or for a hobby you enjoy.

Set some rules

Once you're set up, it is recommended you decide on some rules which members should abide by. There is a part in the 'About' section of your Facebook group which helps you do this.

Common rules include no bullying or abuse, no spam, no adverts, and no irrelevant posts. This should encourage smoother running of the group and allows you to direct members to the group rules if things go off track – or even ban them from the group if they do something unacceptable.

Get people engaged

Of course, you now want people to join your group so you can start using it for its purpose. But that's the challenge – getting people to find it. So get creative! Share it from your Facebook profiles and invite friends who might be interested. If you have a Facebook page, you can share it on there, and if you have a website, you can link to it from relevant articles, and perhaps write a story about it.

Once you've got people into your group, encourage people to interact with others by posting in the group, asking questions, and writing about relevant things which are of interest. As your group grows people should start to post

themselves and invite others to it, helping it grow organically.

You can minimise the number of spammers and trolls getting into the group by requiring people to answer questions before they will be accepted, and you can look through members' public Facebook profiles before accepting.

Monitor it

This, in many, ways is the hardest part – as your group gets bigger it can become harder to control. The Kent Traffic and Travel group now receives 700 posts and comments a day, and it is impossible to read every comment, so we usually rely on people reporting inappropriate posts so we can delete them.

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Provide updates

As the administrator of the group, people will look to you as the person in charge of the group, so it is good to remain active so people are aware of your presence. If people start moving off track in the

comments, remind them of the group rules to steer them back in the right direction, or if things get out of hand you can switch comments off or delete the post.

I often provide updates on how the group is growing and remind people to read the rules of the group again to keep it all running smoothly. It's also great to comment on posts in a personal capacity too and remind people you're an actual human being!

Reap its rewards

As your group grows you should see your aims achieved. Perhaps someone posted a great story in there you can write about, or maybe you got more writers for your student magazine. Great work! Make sure you post positively to highlight what people are doing or comment back to thank them and encourage more of the same thing.

Take a step back

Sometimes, taking care of a Facebook group can just become too much - having to accept people into the group all the time, checking people haven't been posting appropriately and deleting spam posts. Personally, I've also had people messaging me in the middle of the night complaining about arguments.

So it is important to put your phone down and turn it off or leave it

downstairs for a while. Forget about your social media responsibilities. I promise they'll be fine without you for a few hours.

If you've set up a Facebook group I'd love to hear from you! Email sian@kettlemag.co.uk to let me know all about it, or ask for any advice. 📧



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