

Front Porch Forum

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	INVESTMENT
Front Porch Forum	Front Porch Forum, Inc.	A network of online neighborhood forums in Vermont that allow users to read and share posts with their neighbors	\$220,000

This project involved the scaling of Front Porch Forum, a mission-driven, for-profit business that hosts networks of local online forums. Front Porch Forum (FPF) offers an easy-to-use online platform for communicating with neighbors and keeping up with neighborhood news. The project received convertible debt financing from the Knight News Challenge to: 1) further scale the work of its 25 pilot towns by rebuilding and enhancing Front Porch Forum's proof-of-concept software, and 2) expand to cover each of Vermont's 251 towns.

THE INNOVATION

Front Porch Forum was created to help users meet and get to know their neighbors. By circulating daily neighborhood postings on topics ranging from block parties and lost pets to local politics, Front Porch Forum aims to better inform users about nearby goings-on, strengthen a sense of offline community, and spur civic engagement. Front Porch Forum was the first project to enter the online space of "helping neighbors connect," and since its launch, over 20 groups have started similar projects. Many of these projects, such as NextDoor.com, appear to have been significantly influenced by Front Porch Forum's code and success.

IMPLEMENTATION

Front Porch Forum's pilot had been operating for three years, and was already running in 25 northwest Vermont towns, before the Knight News Challenge award. After the award, FPF used an outsourced tech team to rebuild its web application via Ruby on Rails—an open-source, agile web application development

framework. It then launched the new web application as the open-source OpenPorch on GitHub. In July 2011, FPF also launched a redesigned website. The platform is free of charge to users and allows them to submit postings over email or through FPF's website. FPF employs online community managers who organize and moderate these postings, stopping negative and recursive threads and ensuring a reasonable balance of content from neighbors/residents and local public officials. To help foster a greater sense of offline community, each posting includes the member's full name and street name. Registered members receive these postings through daily e-newsletters and can access past newsletters through the archives on FPF's website.

Eager to expand throughout Vermont and beyond, the project developed a marketing plan that project director Michael Wood-Lewis described as "complex, authentically local, and relentless." FPF focused its marketing efforts on partnering with local groups, including municipal governments, nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, school districts, and other institutions that would market the project to their employees and constituents in exchange for FPF access and ad space. The project also worked to earn media coverage on its expansion and to place subscriber success stories through local newspapers, radio, TV, websites, and newsletters.

FPF has spread around the periphery of its existing communities largely through word of mouth. To keep up with this growth, its platform is currently undergoing another round of development aimed at building out

components of the software that will further facilitate scaling. A number of towns have approached Front Porch Forum, requesting to launch the platform in their communities. In response, FPF has since changed its business model to require a start-up fee for launching into new areas. Communities have paid this start-up fee through their chambers of commerce, citizen fundraising, or municipal budgets.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

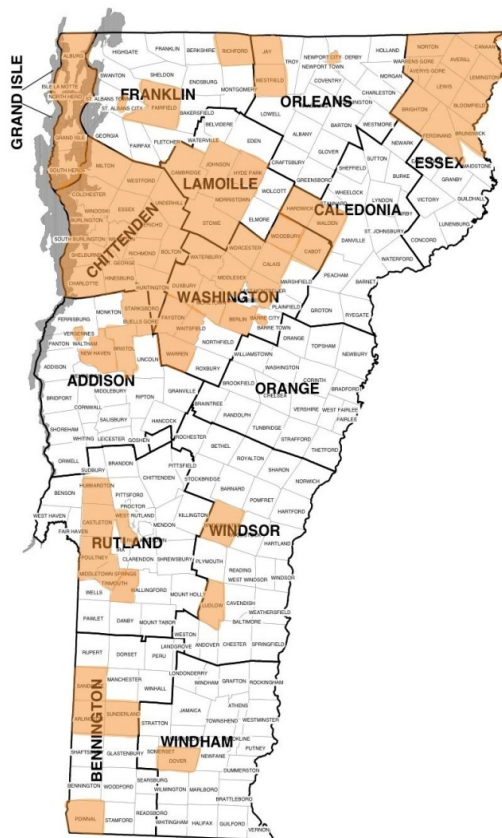
Since receiving funding through the Knight News Challenge, Front Porch Forum has spread from 25 to 84 towns, including 82 towns in Vermont and one town each in New Hampshire and New York. By reaching 82 towns in Vermont, FPF has achieved about 33 percent of its long-term goal for scaling. The project has also spread to the neighboring communities of Stewartstown, New Hampshire and Argyle, New York. One of the key metrics used to measure Front Porch Forum's adoption is its "take rate"—the percentage of registered users within a given FPF neighborhood. As of October 2012, Front Porch Forum's take rate was 38 percent, with 43,000 total members out of a coverage area that encompasses 112,000 households. The project's take rates within individual communities vary between 15 percent and over 90 percent, in communities where multiple registered FPF users exist within the same household.

The project also shows strong signs of user engagement. In communities such as Burlington, more than half of FPF's users actively post to their neighborhood forum. From July 2011 to July 2012, time spent on Front Porch Forum's site averaged nearly five minutes (4:50) across 1.5 million page views, with users accessing an average of 5.7 pages of content per visit (even though most users interact with their local FPF via email rather than the website). Most notably, Front Porch Forum's number of returning visitors over the 12-month period was 57.4 percent, which substantially exceeds the industry average. The project's mentions through Blogger, Facebook,

and Twitter have been growing steadily since November 2011.

Front Porch Forum's ultimate goals were to help inform users about local news, strengthen a sense of offline community, and spur greater levels of civic engagement. Evidence of these impacts exists on FPF's blog (which has been maintained for over five years and includes over 1,500 posts), through the thousands of posts made weekly to the project's forums, and through the outpouring of praise and thanks from users who feel more connected, informed, and involved.

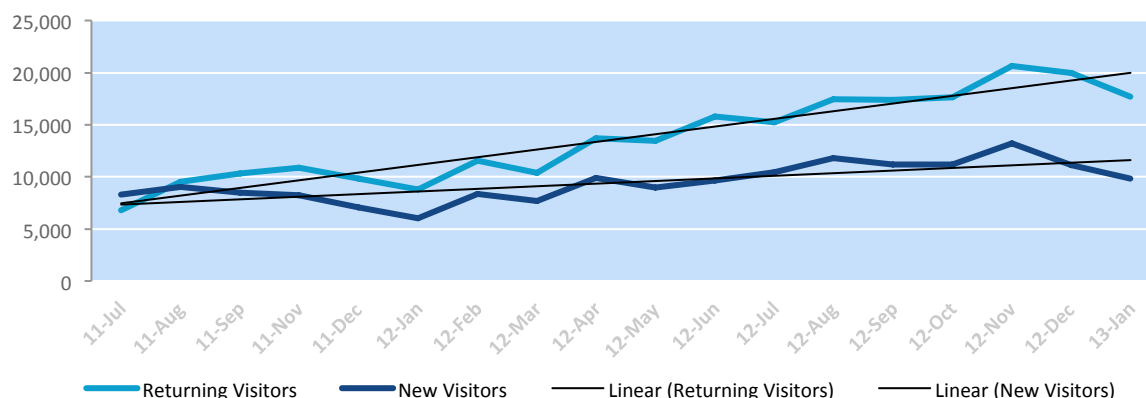
Front Porch Forum has proven to be a powerful tool for community development and building social capital. In the aftermath of Hurricane Irene in late August 2011, FPF was invaluable in broadcasting messages from public officials and in helping devastated Vermont communities coordinate relief efforts. Smaller towns used



Front Porch Forum to post ads seeking emergency housing and volunteers with trucks and chains who were willing to help pull cars from flooded areas. The example of Moretown provides a useful case-in-point. After the

hurricane hit, a group of students decided to offer their volunteer services to ravaged communities. The students traveled from town to town, offering their services. Towns that had not been using Front Porch Forum often were unable to put the volunteers to good use. The volunteers would arrive, ready to help, but residents were insufficiently organized to provide them with meaningful work to do. But residents of Moretown—who had been using Front Porch Forum for a year—knew exactly how they could use the volunteer assistance and had the community networks in place to put them to immediate use.

New vs Returning Visitors



Registered New Users

