



ONLINE COMMUNITY — PLATFORMS — **A BUYING GUIDE**

Here's what your organization should look for when selecting and implementing an online community platform.



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When your organization implements an online community, it is making an investment with major sales, marketing, revenue and customer service implications. In order to maximize the value of that investment, it is important to understand how to select an online community platform that best addresses your organization's business needs and feature requirements.

This guide is designed to help your organization gain a better understanding of these issues and select the online community platform best suited to your needs. It will explain:

- How to determine your organization's **online community software needs**;
- The various **online community platform choices** that are available to meet these needs;
- The **key features** to look for in an online community platform; and
- How to **map these key features** back to your needs – allowing you to select a platform and begin the implementation process.

Our goal is to give your organization the information required to select the most suitable online community platform – one that will meet your current needs, grow with your organization and deliver consistent, long-term value.



STEP 1

Determine Your Online Community Software Needs

The first step in selecting an online community platform is to identify and articulate your business needs.

First, define your community's chief objectives by focusing on two questions:

- What are the **key audience needs** you expect an online community to address? A consumer technology firm, for example, might focus on providing product support information (one-to-many communication). A manufacturing firm, on the other hand, might want to give its distribution and channel partners a place to network and exchange ideas (many-to-many communication).

- Who are the **key stakeholders** within your organization? Will your online community be managed exclusively by a customer service team, or should it also provide value to your marketing, sales, product development and other groups?

Second, harness your organization's understanding of its target audience to determine how the audience is likely to use your online community:

- Some audiences are likely to prefer **static content**, such as product specifications and how-to guides that they select and consume on a one-on-one basis.

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- Other audiences will seek out advice and recommendations from their peers – an environment where **interactive and user-generated content** is especially important.
- Still other communities will demand a **full range of capabilities** for finding, creating and consuming content.
- Some audience groups may prefer **special content capabilities**, such as gamification features, that encourage and reward participation, and help members identify key contributors.

Third, decide how you will **measure the impact and effectiveness** of your online community efforts. Many online community platforms can track and report key performance metrics, such as audience participation, registrations, page views and resource downloads. In order to evaluate these features, however, you'll want to create a list of prioritized requirements.

Finally, your organization will want to capture the answers to all of these questions in a **requirements document** – a formal profile of your business needs, audience requirements, content and community-building priorities, and success metrics. This profile will give you a consistent starting point as you evaluate various online community platforms.



STEP 2

Understand Your Online Community Platform Options

One of the challenges of choosing an online community platform is the broad range of available options. These options vary widely in terms of their cost, capabilities and complexity. They also differ in less obvious but often more significant ways, including your ability to measure results, to customize your community, and even to control the content your community creates.

Here's a rundown of the most popular community platform options, along with their key benefits and drawbacks:

1. Social Networks. Social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn are, in fact, a type of online community platform. Their

simplicity, low cost and wide appeal make them a tempting option, but one that can have notable drawbacks.

Pros: Social networks offer a variety of options for creating and sharing content, they are easy to use, and your target audience is likely already comfortable and familiar with them. Social network-based communities are also extremely cost-effective – and often free unless you purchase optional premium-tier services.

Cons: Social networks are a take-it-or-leave-it choice – your ability to customize them or to integrate them with your website is very limited. The same is true of a particular

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site's content creation and sharing options. Perhaps most important, the social network – not your organization – owns your customer data and content.

2. Entry-Level Community Platforms. Many blogging platforms offer plug-ins or templates that support some of the capabilities associated with online communities.

Pros: Certain platforms support particularly rich developer ecosystems with many community options, from content-submission tools to wikis and threaded comments. Like social networks, these plugins are typically free to use or inexpensive to license.

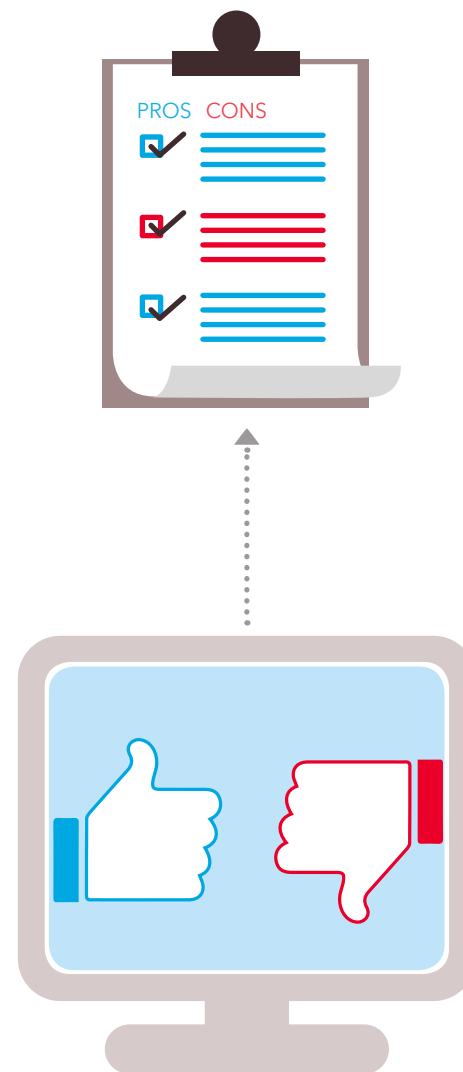
Cons: These plugins can be very inconsistent in terms of their quality, reliability and support options. They also tend to create a patchwork of disconnected capabilities, rather than a truly cohesive community with a consistent look and feel. As a result, these options can be difficult to manage with very limited analytical capabilities.

3. Fully Featured Online Community Platforms. These products are dedicated and fully integrated solutions with varying levels of

cost, complexity and functionality. Some are comprehensive and scalable enough for even the largest enterprises.

Pros: These platforms offer a wide range of content creation and content sharing capabilities. They typically also include excellent analytics and reporting tools, multiple options for customizing a community's look and feel, cutting-edge gamification features, collaboration capabilities, social features and many other options – all in a single integrated platform. The most complex solutions are highly extensible, with features such as multi-lingual support that make them suitable for global organizations.

Cons: Many of these platforms offer excellent value given their capabilities, but they are often a step up in terms of cost, with the most sophisticated options priced appropriately for enterprise customers. It is important to look at a platform's exact capabilities – especially in terms of customization, scalability and the ability to integrate a community with an existing website and internal systems.



STEP 3

Understand Key Online Community Platform Capabilities

Depending upon where you look in the software ecosystem described above, online community platforms can have a wide spectrum of capabilities. Most organizations, however, will want to focus on six core capability areas.

1. Audience-facing features. As we discussed above, the ideal feature set for your organization's online community platform will depend heavily on the needs and preferences of your target audience. Some of the key features to consider include:

- **Core content features** that put key reference, support and other information assets at a user's fingertips. A resource

library or a wiki, for example, can be extremely useful for organizing a collection of technical specifications or product-support best practices; an archive can capture previous discussion threads and Q&A sessions; and a user directory can help community members find and network with their peers.

- **Interactive community content capabilities** that support online discussions, polls, blogs and other user-generated content. These capabilities should make it easy for community members to post and share content with their peers in a variety of formats. These capabilities also include tools for rating and recommending

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content – a vital feature for identifying and promoting high-value contributions – along with live activity feeds and email notifications to keep community members informed about topics of interest to them.

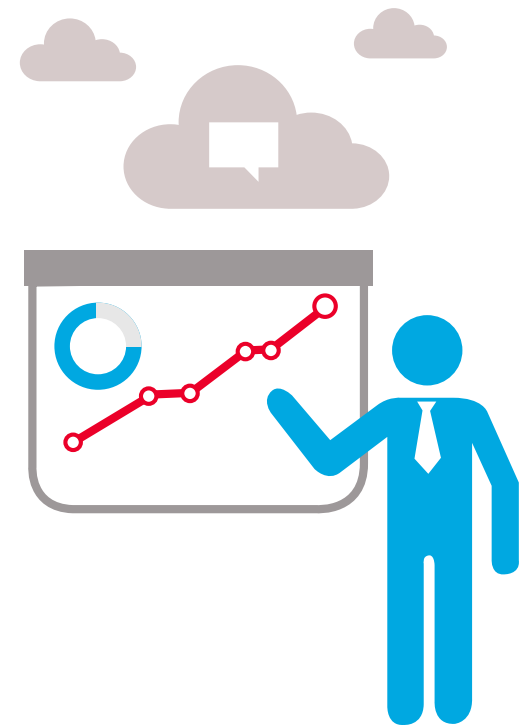
- **One-on-one support and communication capabilities** that enable community members to get timely and targeted help. These may include tools for providing product feedback and feature requests, and private networking options, where community members message one another separately from group discussions.
- **Social and gamification capabilities** that reward community participation, highlight key contributors and promote connections between community members. These may include features like leaderboards and badges that identify a community's "power users" and establish the credibility and reputation of a community member with his or her peers.
- **Mobile readiness** that supports access to the community via tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices – now a critical selling point for many online customer communities.

2. Inward-facing features. Your online community software should also provide features that serve your internal business stakeholders: customer service managers, salespeople, product development teams and marketing staff, among others.

The key is to look for capabilities that support and reinforce your organization's goals, success metrics, business processes and workflows. Some typical examples include:

- **Tracking and analytics tools** that are intuitive and comprehensive. These give your organization the ability to set specific and measurable community goals, and to demonstrate accountability for those goals.
- **Customer feedback and contact capabilities** that make it easy for community members to engage in conversation with your internal team members and to get timely answers to their questions.
- **Content creation capabilities**, such as blogging tools, which allow your internal subject-matter experts to share their knowledge with the community.

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- **Community management features** that allow your community managers to monitor, moderate, filter and (when necessary) remove or close conversations.
- **Content management system (CMS) capabilities** that make it easy to manage and organize large bodies of content, such as document libraries, support Q&A collections or knowledge bases, articles and blog posts.

3. Cloud versus on-premises solutions.

An organization's target audience and internal business stakeholders are often the most important constituencies when evaluating online community platforms. Yet it's also useful to consider the needs of your organization's IT team – especially when it comes to your system implementation options.

As a rule, online community platforms can be implemented in two ways. Some solutions support both of these implementation methods, while others provide just one option or the other.

On-premises solutions require an organization to install and manage the community platform software. As a result,

they must also consider their server, storage, networking, backup and recovery, and other supporting IT capabilities.

Pros: On-premises solutions give an organization the maximum amount of control over the platform they choose, and these solutions may be highly customizable with the assistance of in-house or outsourced developers.

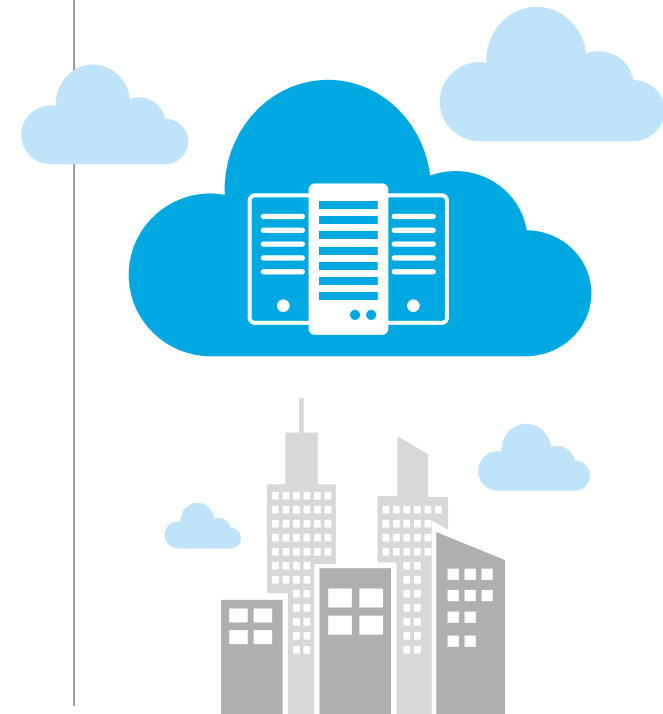
Cons: These solutions can be very expensive, both in terms of up-front licensing and capital costs, as well as ongoing support and maintenance costs. They also tend to be complex and potentially very difficult to implement and manage.

Cloud-based solutions are hosted by the solution provider. The provider manages the solution for you.

Pros: Cloud-based solutions are quickly becoming the norm for most organizations due to their flexibility, simplicity and reliability.

Cons: Organizations should carefully investigate a cloud-based solution's reliability record, SLA terms and customer service capabilities.

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4. Advocacy marketing features. The ability to harness the power of your most vocal and passionate customers – advocacy marketing – has become so important that it merits a separate category for consideration.

Advocacy marketing is simple in practice: It's based on the principle that happy and enthusiastic customers can have a dramatic impact on your marketing and sales efforts – if your organization gives them the right kind of support and enablement.

One way to accomplish this is with a standalone advocacy marketing platform. Yet it's also possible to implement advocacy marketing within an online community platform, which makes it easy for your organization to identify, engage with and motivate potential brand advocates among your target audience.

The key features to look for to enable advocacy marketing include the ability to:

- Give users incentives to share content (from the community), promote new member sign-ups and amplify the contributions of their peers;

- Create special groups (such as beta testers) and support them with feedback and content-sharing tools; and
- Leverage gamification capabilities to issue “challenges” to community members that recognize and reward them for actions – for example, assisting a certain number of members with support questions.

5. Customization features. The ability to customize an online community platform is extremely important to most organizations. As a result, your platform evaluation process should focus on two key capabilities:

- **Customization of the platform's look and feel** to match your organization's branding guidelines, as well as your visual and aesthetic preferences. Your online community will be a vital part of your overall marketing and customer service presence; the site should integrate seamlessly with your organization's website and with its overall brand strategy, rather than looking like a “bolt on” application or an afterthought.

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- **Technical customization options**, usually delivered via application programming interface (API). An API will be directly relevant to organizations with the means to develop their own custom features. (It is worth noting that many cloud-based solutions now offer this capability.)

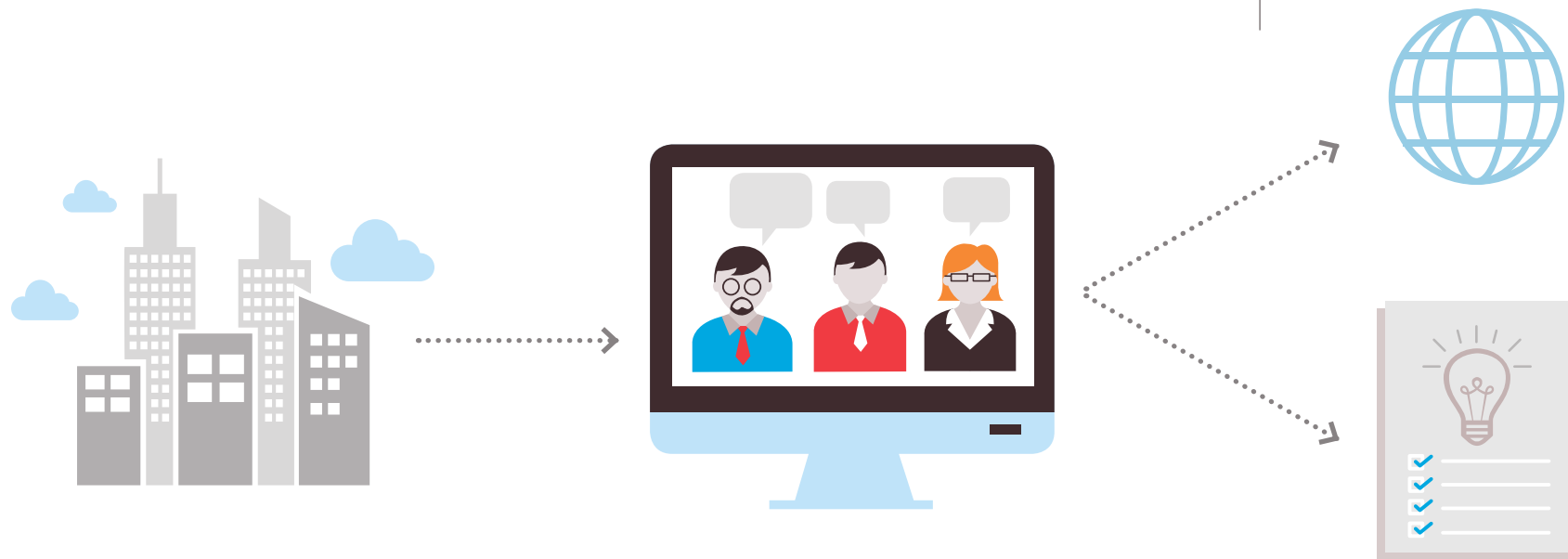
6. Flexible and secure sign-on capabilities.

Application security should be a given when evaluating an online community platform – in today's online threat environment, security is a non-negotiable feature, not a point of comparison.

A related capability, however, is worth noting here: the ability to join and log into an online community using an existing set of social network (such as Twitter or Facebook) credentials.

This “social sign-on” support can address a major source of frustration for community users: the need to create and keep track of yet another password, and to go through another membership validation process. Many potential community members will refuse to join a community that lacks social sign-on options.

Your online community should integrate seamlessly with your organization's website and with its overall brand strategy, rather than looking like an afterthought.



STEP 4

Map a Platform's Capabilities Back to Your Business Needs and Make a Decision

At this point in your journey, you will have a good understanding of the available online community platform types, features and capabilities, and implementation options. How should you approach the challenge of taking all of this information, distilling it and analyzing it to make the right platform decision?

1. Consult the requirements document you created in Step 1. As you review it, consider the major choices that will affect your business and your community strategy – for example, using a social network to build your community versus using a dedicated

platform, or selecting an on-premises versus a cloud-based solution.

2. Review the features and capabilities of your short list of potential platforms, and assess them with the following criteria in mind:

- How well they address the traits and preferences of your target audience
- Your internal stakeholder requirements
- Your impact and effectiveness metrics

How should you approach the challenge of taking all of this information, distilling it and analyzing it to make the right platform decision?



3. Match your requirements document to your short list of platforms

to determine which platforms are most likely to address the needs of your organization. If no single platform addresses all of your needs, consider the trade-offs you are willing to make, and which platform meets the greatest number of high-priority needs. Then, place the platforms on your short list in order of interest.

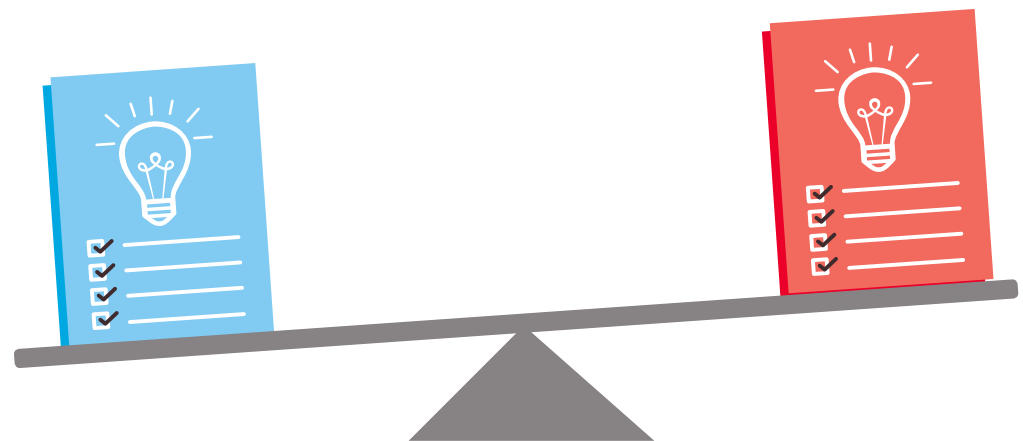
4. Contact vendors to schedule product demonstrations, starting at the top of your short list. As you proceed through the demonstrations, make sure each platform delivers the capabilities you expect. Ask detailed questions of the vendor if you do not see a feature that you need, or if a set of capabilities does not exhibit the depth that your stakeholders require.

5. Compare the demonstrated features and capabilities of each platform with your requirements document

to select the most suitable solution for your organization. This ensures you choose an online community platform that is right for your target audience, your business needs, and your organization's budget and technology requirements.

Following the above steps will not only yield the best possible solution, but will also create built-in documentation of your decision-making process – essential for when it comes time to seek approval for purchasing your chosen platform. Rather than having to justify your selection to management, your choice will already be clearly understood.

Compare the demonstrated features and capabilities of each platform with your requirements document to select the most suitable solution for your organization.





Conclusion

An online community platform has much to offer your organization, from lower-cost, more efficient customer service delivery to expanded opportunities for your marketing team. The benefits can only be realized, however, by fully understanding your options and following a defined process for choosing the platform that will meet your organization's strategic and technological requirements.

Taking the four steps outlined here will ensure that no matter what type of community platform you select, you will be more confident that it will deliver its expected value and support your long-term community development goals.



About DNN

DNN provides a suite of solutions for creating rich, rewarding online experiences for customers, partners and employees. DNN products and technology are the foundation for 750,000+ websites worldwide. In addition to our commercial CMS and social community solutions, DNN is the steward of the DNN Platform Open Source Project.

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