



eBook

Your Playbook for Online Community Moderation

13 Tips to Effectively
Manage Engagement



The best manifestation of your brand isn't your logo, or your colors.

It's the community you build.

Bringing everyone all together and engaging with them through ongoing, meaningful interaction can create moments of surprise and delight you'd never expect, and go beyond what your organization can do alone.

Ongoing engagement with that community is the foundation for your success. Making sure your online platforms feel safe and enjoyable for all of your participants is essential for the function of your community.

That's where community moderation becomes so important.

All it takes is two or three trolls to ruin even a 40,000-user community — trust us, we've seen it before. Fortunately, with over 11 years of experience in the community space, we have tips and best practices for you to follow to ensure you can effectively moderate your online community.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- What community moderation is — and how to do it well
- How to write a community code of conduct you can enforce
- What you should and shouldn't moderate



What is Community Moderation?

Community Moderation (n):

The practice of managing comments and discussions from members on your platform so it aligns with your Terms and Conditions and/or Code of Conduct, usually done by a human community moderator or team of moderators.

WHAT MODERATION LOOKS LIKE WITH HIGHER LOGIC

Full Moderation requires every post to be approved by you. We recommend this setting for the first 24-48 hours after launch, to develop trust and get your community off the ground. The downside of this approach is that it can hinder engagement by removing the instant gratification of seeing your post live - which is why once your community is stable, we recommend switching to...

Self Moderation gives you the flexibility for your community to moderate itself, with the help of a team of online community moderators. There's no time lag when community members post, but they can mark certain posts as inappropriate, which notifies admins and temporarily removes the post for moderation. This is the sweet spot for the majority of our customers.

Higher Logic also offers **No Moderation**, which is a hands-off setting that gives community members freedom to post with no time lag and no flags. We recommend this type of moderation for committee communities or a product advisory panel, since admins can still remove or delete posts.



What does moderation mean in practice?

A large part of becoming a good online community moderator is knowing how to strike the balance between controlling conversations to maintain order, contributing to keep conversations fresh, and giving members, employees, or customers enough freedom to feel like they can express themselves. You don't want mayhem, but you don't want to discourage discussions before they even get going.

Moderation typically involves three elements:

- Curating the user-generated content on the online community to ensure quality and alignment to the organization's rules of engagement
- Maintaining a climate that encourages open but appropriate conversation
- Participating in an online environment where the rules of engagement are established and protected

7 Essential Steps for Community Moderation

Community moderation is a skill, first and foremost. Take these seven steps to effectively moderate your community.



ESTABLISH CLEAR GUIDELINES FOR MEMBER CONDUCT

Your first step should be to create a written, downloadable guideline reviewed by an attorney that will be ready before launch day.

- Members should genuinely feel like the online community is a place where they can express their knowledge and opinions without being stifled.

Your guidelines should:

- Clearly state expected behaviors as well as behaviors you don't want to see
- Define who the community is for and not for and what community means to you
- Outline unacceptable content and materials, such as those of an obscene, graphic, or pornographic nature
- Ban inappropriate behaviors, such as hazing, bullying, defamation, and intolerance
- Describe unacceptable community usage, such as commercial advertising or overt self-promotion, or improper posting practices, such as thread hijacking, spamming, going off-topic, and incorrect content placement

- Provide guidance for how community members should handle complaints between one another
- Define key post types that aren't allowed, like spam or solicitations

Make this document easy to find, such as a link in your site footer or on your community homepage. We recommend forcing acceptance of terms and conditions when users are first asked to login.



ONE LAST TIP: If you make your online community's moderation guidelines overwhelmingly lengthy, not even your most emphatic community member will feel inclined to read it. As a rule of thumb, try to stick to one page (or under 500 words). You can place the community guidelines at the top and then add the necessary legalese at the bottom to ensure members notice the guidelines.

CREATE A CLEAR ESCALATION PATH FOR MODERATING

Now that you've written the guidelines, it's your job to know them inside and out. By choosing to maintain an account in the online community, members agree to abide by these policies.

So what happens when they don't?

We recommend a **three-strike rule** to protect your community and to give your users the benefit of the doubt.

"My assumption is that people just don't know better until they prove otherwise. Honestly with some heated topics, people just feel passionately and get out of hand and it's not their true nature."

Cindy Taylor

Systems Coordinator for the Association of Independent School Admissions Professionals

If you have it from the beginning, you always have your policy to rely on when you need to back up moderation decisions.



Implementing a Three-Strike Policy

STRIKE 1: EDUCATE	STRIKE 2: MODERATE	STRIKE 3: REMOVE
<p>Provide a written notice to the member who violates the guidelines. It's likely they didn't know what they did wasn't allowed (yes, even if they signed the Code of Conduct when they joined).</p> <p>Educate them on what happened, why their post was flagged or removed, and guide them towards positive engagement.</p> <p>Example: A user posts promotional content for their business, when that's against the guidelines.</p> <p>Response: Send a direct message to the user explaining why it's not allowed and include a link to a relevant topic to their business, asking them to offer advice without selling.</p>	<p>At this point, there are no excuses. But you should still hear the user out. Place them on full moderation and send a second written notice of the violation, offering to talk on the phone or via videochat about the infraction and what community means to you.</p> <p>Have the template all set up in your email – keep the process clear and concise.</p>	<p>Suspend access to the community and send a final notice to the member in question.</p> <p>Three strikes — you're out.</p> <p> TIP: Keep a spreadsheet with a list of people with moderation issues in the past and how many strikes they've received, clearly documenting these issues so you can back up your claims when you do remove the member.</p>



Dealing with Violations Publicly

You don't want to publicly shame members, but if everyone has already seen the flagged post before you could remove it, here's what to do:

1. Respond to the thread, saying that the post was in violation of the code of conduct, stating the specific reason why and linking to the guidelines.
2. Close the thread.
3. Remove the thread, if necessary. It's up to you whether you want it to remain as an example for transparency and accountability or if it's better off removed. It depends on the type of infraction and your guidelines, of course.

3

ENFORCE INFRACTIONS CONSISTENTLY

Even if all of your community members signed a clear terms and conditions document, you need to have a plan in place for when you see a violation. Who will respond and how will you tell the member that they broke a rule? It's not enough to just know what a violation looks like — you need to have a clear course of action outlined for a swift response that's consistent.



DID YOU KNOW?

With Higher Logic's Watch Words, you can automatically flag and manage language deemed inappropriate, insensitive, or incendiary. Learn more about our **Community** software.

Enforcing is easier said than done — telling passionate people they're acting out of line can be hard. But it's critical for maintaining the community's integrity.

4

SET THE TONE AND LET CHAMPIONS LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Moderation is more than just knowing the rules. As a community manager, you're pretty much a living, breathing example of them. If someone wonders, *"How should I start a conversation?"* or *"What should I say in response to X?"* they can look to you.

But a community is so much bigger than that. A great online forum moderator builds a community that eventually moderates itself, letting community members feel as if they have some control and pride in what they've built.

Before you swoop in — provided it's not too inflammatory — let the comment sit for a few minutes. Your community should lead by example, marking it as inappropriate or responding to the troll themselves. If no one takes action, then you can model the right behavior.

5

RECRUIT AND TRAIN VOLUNTEER ADMINS

As your community grows, creating its own social norms and expectations, learn to trust them. Part of being a good moderator is training members, employees, or customers to moderate discussions themselves.

If you did your job well — wrote an excellent guideline and modeled good behavior — your members, employees, or customers should be well trained, able to keep valuable discussions alive and self-police unproductive behavior. It will be easier for new folks to get up to speed, since they'll have so many positive role models to emulate.

Once your moderation team includes members of your community, and not just employees, you know your community is on the right track — they're finding value in the community and taking ownership of how it's used.

6

LISTEN TO YOUR COMMUNITY

When something does go wrong, rather than shut down, listen.

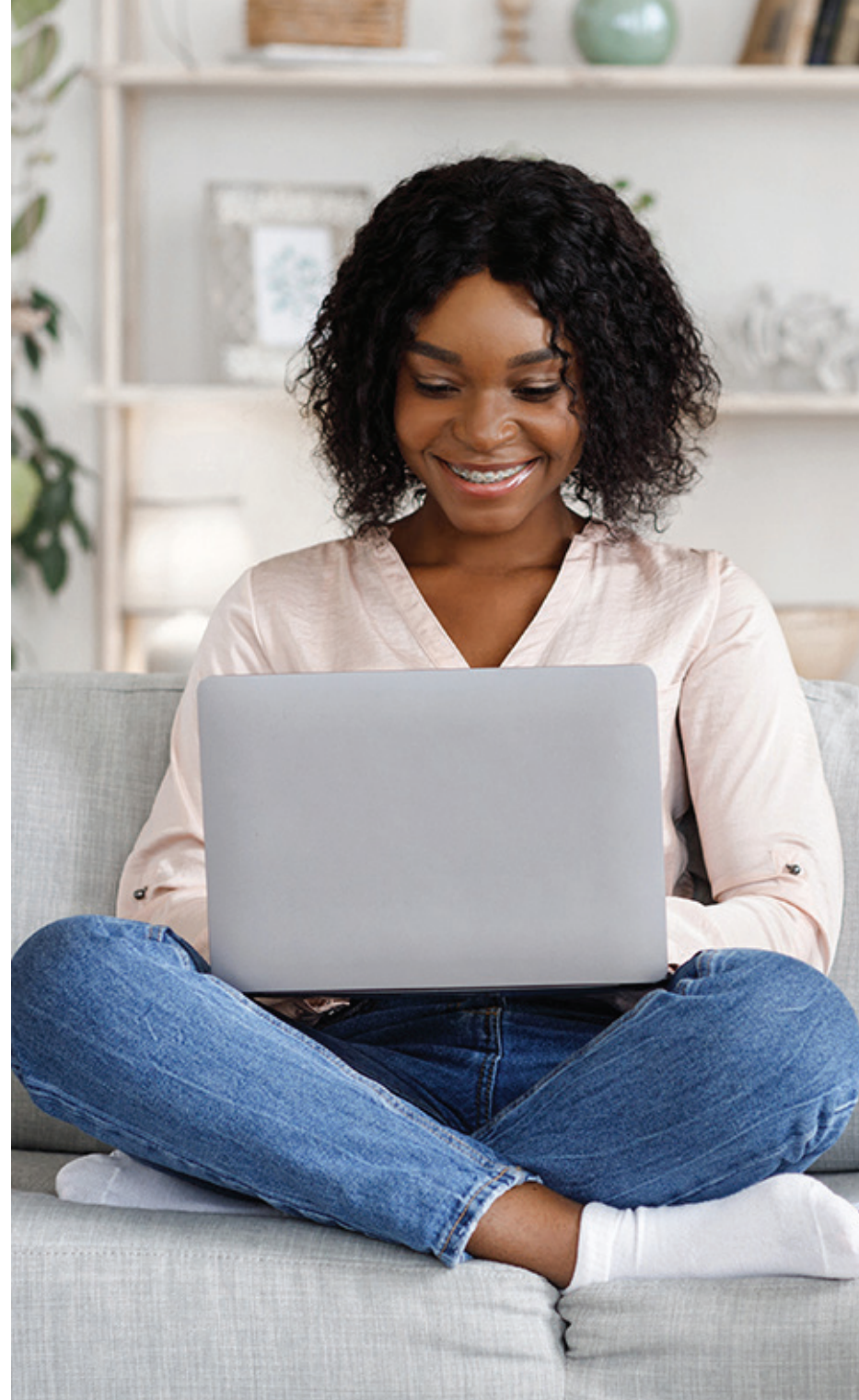
Reaching out personally shows vocal or disgruntled users you do care, you are listening, and you're working to solve the problem. If it doesn't feel appropriate, then have a manager or executive reach out. This simple gesture will go a long way.

If you're hesitant to be very communicative with members during a crisis, remember that silence can be your worst enemy. Don't just passively listen and churn out disingenuous responses — truly listen to what people say, let them know they're heard, and try to learn from their dissatisfaction.

7

RE-EVALUATE AND ASSESS GAPS

Finally, don't be afraid of change. Your guidelines were never meant to be static. Your community norms, mission, and goals will evolve as more people use it, and if you need to change your Code of Conduct, do it. If you do, make sure you let your community know, either through a general announcement, email, or both.



6 Do's and Don'ts of Moderation

Now that you're well on your way to successfully moderating your community, you're probably wondering: What should and shouldn't you moderate? Here are our do's and don'ts of great community moderation.

✗ DON'T: FORGET DEBATE IS GOOD

Remember that debate and tension are a sign of community maturity and trust, so don't rush in and shut down a discussion just because it's getting tense. That's where the learning and sharing can happen. Differing opinions and debate make a community more lively, engaging and worthwhile for everyone.

✓ DO: DEAL WITH TROLLS

It's important to differentiate between someone who is toxic and someone who is angry. The angry member may have a valid point that needs to be addressed. The toxic member is one that continually practices divisive behavior. It's these trolls that need to be dealt with quickly and efficiently.

All it takes is one or two trolls to take down an entire community. If that happens to you:

1. Reach out to the problem member privately to see if there are any specific issues you can help with.
2. Other community members need to know that you will take action to ensure the community remains a place of open collaboration and engagement. Consider posting (or reposting) moderation guidelines in areas affected by the toxic member, reminding people of the rules.
3. If toxic users continue to lash out, don't be afraid to revoke their posting permissions. Your online community software should make it easy for you to control who can post to forums, publish blogs, and connect with other community members. Use your security settings and permissions and your three-strike system to control the situation.

✗ DON'T: IGNORE FEEDBACK

Feedback is an opportunity to build customer loyalty and deepen trust. Perhaps every organization's worst fear is having customer criticism front and center in a public place.

Odds are, you will get negative feedback in your community. And that's okay!

It's better to have occasional cranky comments on your own platform rather than letting it spiral out into the Twitterverse. When it's a complaint in your community, you have direct access to the individual and the problem, so you can address it immediately.

Rather than moderate, make your user feel heard.

This is also a situation where you might see that community members will come to your defense or offer up solutions when a user is complaining. So while it may feel uncomfortable, let the comment sit for a while before jumping in with an official response.

✓ DO: MODERATE POSTS THAT HINDER COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Certain posts can make it more challenging to interact with your community, whether that's because it's not real (in a spam situation) or because it doesn't facilitate discussion

(we've all been there for long-winded, rambling posts that go nowhere).

You should moderate:

- **Spam:** Every platform has a different definition, but you'll know it when you see it, especially if it's inappropriate or clearly written by a bot.
- **Promotional posts:** This could include vendors or partners soliciting and/or commercial posts that do not facilitate conversations.
- **Job promotions:** Unless your community is strictly for job seekers, you should set aside a separate thread.
- **General announcements:** Create a dedicated thread, especially if it's related to administrative work.
- **Long-form posts:** If you have a user that's going into too much detail, ask them to write a guest blog post or other long-form engagement, rather than via community thread. This also a good teaching opportunity for the community manager to help our long-winded friends by sharing a "how to create an effective discussion thread" post.
- **Thank you posts or personal messages:** It can be easy to mix up direct messages and public posts. Show users who do this how they can reply directly to a sender so as not to clog up the community digest.

✗ **DON'T: IMMEDIATELY ANSWER EVERY QUESTION**

It's tempting to answer every question, especially if it's been sitting unanswered for a few hours or — gasp — a couple days. Resist the urge!

Answering every single question sets a precedent for your community members to be inactive and passive. To facilitate active conversation, you need to let questions breathe. Rather than jump in right away...

1. Wait. Someone may surprise you by chiming in.
2. Reach out behind the scenes to respected community members and ask them to answer.
3. Find people within your organization you can impersonate (with permission) to promote diversity of voices.

✓ **DO: SHOW SOME PERSONALITY**

Is your profile picture still a big grey box?

As the community manager, you're the driving force. You (and your team) should let your personalities shine in your writing — write like you talk! — so you come across as more human, relatable, and trusting.

This doesn't mean you should go posting photos of your last vacation or what you ate that day, but you can relax and be personable in your replies and questions, which is much more likely to build community. That's the goal at the end of the day, right?



TIP: Higher Logic Community has widgets you can use to direct specific admins or super users to help surface unanswered questions that need their expertise.



The Community Moderation Tools You Need

The best online communities are thriving, engaging destinations that people want to return to again and again. And this can be the reality for your community, too, with the right tools at your disposal.

Higher Logic's Community Platform has everything you need to manage and moderate a successful, thriving online community. Set up a demo where we can talk about your needs and show you the platform's capabilities.

[LET'S CONNECT](#)