Simply put, on-line discussions can be used for a variety of purposes (e.g., in place of, or as an addition to meetings, as a component of professional development, to develop a product or idea, etc.) The success of any online discussion rests on the involvement of an online discussion moderator.

At a tactical level, the moderator promotes the discussion and ensures that the online discussion remains a place that is participatory, collaborative, dynamic and most of all, responsive; timely responding to discussion posts where appropriate, working to grow discussion threads, steering the discussion and finally capturing the heart of the conversation and providing closure.

Fortunately moderating online discussions builds on many of the same principals of moderating face to face meetings and discussions. The online format does have subtle nuisances and to that end here we offer some quick tips on moderating online discussions.

Promoting the discussion, setting the stage and expectations
Considering many persons are still unfamiliar with online discussion format, getting a good online discussion going takes some promotion and participant education.

For starters, as opposed to inviting everyone you know, try targeting your invitations to persons and groups to whom the conversation may be appealing. This will ensure the conversation is more relevant to participants and will ensure persons on mass lists are not saturated with irrelevant invites.

Take time to provide a clear message, to invitees. Each message should include:
- The purpose of the discussion (why the participants are doing it).
- What participants should do and how they can go about doing it. (e.g. post a comment or reply, share a resource, check back often)
- How long it should or could take as well as when the discussion starts and when it ends (optimal length for online discussions is 2-3 weeks).
- How the participants should collaborate / work together.

Moderating
Online discussion moderators help motivate the action and interaction of discussion participants and build group trust while actively participating themselves.

- Encourage people to participate. For example, when others want to engage you offline, where appropriate, try inviting them back online; let them know it’s o.k. to post what they are raising in the online discussion.
- Ensure some members, as well as yourself, do not dominate the discussion.
- Keep discussion focused (if need be, re-clarify discussion purpose; also monitor for drift).
- Bring out multiple perspectives (ask leading questions; also, a mix of probes and supportive comments can help grow and extend conversations).
- Summarize highlights of the discussion (e.g., in the form of a final post).
- Show your gratitude; be sure take time to thank others for posting and participating at the end of the discussion.
Netiquette

Establishing good online etiquette is key for online discussion moderation. The degree of connectedness, social signals, peer recognition and perceptions of impact on others all drive the social context and outcome of discussions. With online collaboration, these social factors are not typically perceived as manageable as they are in face-to-face settings. However, with practice, one can learn to moderate and facilitate online discussions in just a lively manner as in traditional settings. Here are some tips on moderator "netiquette."

- Use opening and closing greetings (e.g., Hi, Hello and Cheers, Bests, or All the best).
- Acknowledge others (you cannot look or point at others, but you can refer to them by or name, or by referring back to their individual idea).
- Refer back to prior messages when possible (build on the thread; be inclusive).
- As a moderator, avoid cynicism and sarcasm.
- Give gentle reminders/invites to others to join and/or rejoin the conversation (via off-line mechanisms cast your discussion net via email, phone, meetings and in person).
- Avoid typing in UPPERCASE (which is typically perceived as shouting).
- And, always remember, just as with a meeting or workshop discussion, it’s O.K. to be personable and even informal at times; as a discussion moderator you set the tone and norms for the group; so, let the group know early what is an appropriate way to comment in the online discussion by commenting yourself.

Outcomes

Discussion outcomes can vary. The discussion may be directed and applied, or formative and exploratory. One author puts the overarching goal of online discussions like this:

- The ongoing goal is civil discourse: all kinds of people having conversations and arguments about a variety of subjects and treating each other decently.
- A feeling of ownership. You want participants to own the topic and become ambassadors of the topic.
- A spirit of group creativity, experimentation, exploration, good will.
- A place where everybody builds social capital individually by improving each other’s knowledge capital collaboratively. (Rheingold: 1998)

Good on-line conversations go beyond having passive participation (e.g., by merely pushing and pulling ideas) to enabling and encouraging participants to network with each other and exchange ideas and knowledge.

In summary, the online discussion moderator’s role is much like a good event host…to draw persons out of the shadows, get people talking, recognize and embrace ideas, facilitate the networking and exchange of people and ideas and honor what emerges as belonging to the community.
Recommend Reading
Rheingold. (1998). The Art of Hosting Good Conversations Online

References and Readings


Accessed February 9, 2009 at: http://www.sonoma.edu/users/n/nolan/501/powerpoint/moderating_facilitating/sld001.htm


Rheingold. (1998). The Art of Hosting Good Conversations Online

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