

## CASE STUDY

Improving Community Sentiment:  
Taking a Community from Hostile to Happy



THE COMMUNITY  
**ROUNDTABLE**





# Taking a Community from Hostile to Happy

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## The Challenge

In 2013, The Community Roundtable was tasked with figuring out how to turn a well-known brand’s community from an overwhelmingly unfriendly and hostile environment to a constructive and welcoming resource. It was no easy task with a launched community that got off on the wrong foot.

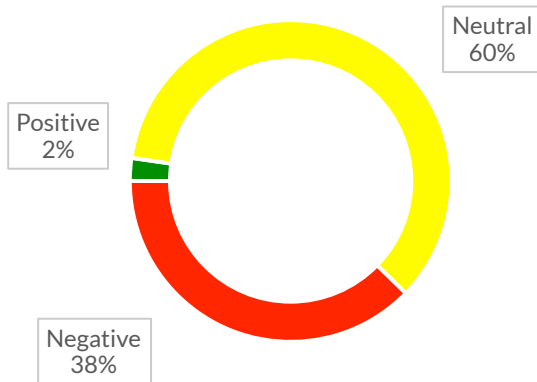
**The community** was founded six months earlier as a place for customers to ask questions, share best practices, and learn from subject matter experts within the company, with an ultimate goal of year round engagement. Soon after launch, customers began to pull the organization in a different direction and the community evolved into an alternate support resource.

**The organization** knew from the start it was undertaking a difficult task. To begin with, the subject matter was a high stress topic. Customers often ended up in the community when they were already frazzled and bewildered - and therefore not at their most pleasant. The community was a last resource after customers had been unable to find answers elsewhere or stressed after waiting in the customer support call queue.

**The community staff** themselves had a number of hurdles. The subject matter was vast and complex, making it challenging for a small team to address and secure other resources to assist with complex questions was also proving difficult.

📷 SNAPSHOT	
TheCR Advisory Services	
<b>The Challenge</b>	A well-known brand launched a community to connect with customers, but the sentiment among users was overwhelming negative.
<b>The Goal</b>	Turn around the community from hostile to happy through thoughtful advisory work.
<b>The Outcome</b>	The community grew in size and became a welcoming and helpful place for customers to connect online.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Season Sentiment



*At random, we selected 10% of the community topics each month and assigned a sentiment to each. This evaluation quickly confirmed our initial observations that the community had an unacceptable percentage of negative posts.*

In addition, team members frequently ran into questions that could not be answered due to company policy, leaving them feeling helpless and backed into a corner by frustrated customers. They felt like there was nothing they could do to make the customer experience more constructive.

### Where Did We Start?

In order to determine the overall state of the community, we evaluated sentiment based on a sample of community activity.

At random, we selected 10% of the community topics each month and assigned a sentiment to each. Topics that included welcoming, constructive, or appreciative dialect were rated as positive. For example, discussions that included phrases such as “Thank you so much” or “This really helped”. We also looked for topics that included examples of hostile or unhelpful language such as “You are useless” or “I hate...” Everything else was classified as neutral. Neutral included nonaligned statements such as “I need to know” or “How do I...?”

This evaluation quickly confirmed our initial observations. The community had an unacceptable percentage of negative posts. If we were right that behavior mirroring was to blame, new members of the community were picking up and mimicking the hostile, unconstructive, and unwelcome behavior of existing members. In some cases, it was likely because it was the first thing they saw and it set the tone. In others, new users may have observed that angry topics saw more views and customer engagement.

Regardless of the cause, we knew a community where negative sentiment was 19 times higher than positive sentiment needed to change – and quickly.





**PRO TIP:**  
**Make Success Simple**

Categorize the language you want to encourage and discourage, making it easy for staff members to identify behaviors.

**Examples:**



**Positive:**

- "Thank you so much"
- "This really helped"
- "Problem solved! Thanks!"



**Neutral:**

- "How do I...?"
- "Where do find...?"
- "Can anyone help...?"



**Negative:**

- "Stupid #\$\$%^ing..."
- "Ugh. This #\$\$%#s"
- "Go to #\$\$%^"

## The Principles at Play – Behavior Mirroring

What is behavior mirroring and how does this affect sentiment in communities? Do you ever notice how some of us tend to take on the quirks and mannerisms of others – or mimic each others words? This behavior is known as mirroring in which we subconsciously imitate expressions, speech, or actions of others. It is a thoroughly studied psychological concept, so we know that such behavior often manifests as a way to learn vicariously, build rapport and facilitate interactions in unfamiliar environments. Essentially, we are acting as chameleons – blending into our environment to observe, increase our relatability and keep safe. (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999)

Given that this behavior can be found in abundance in all sorts of daily interactions, it comes as no surprise that the "chameleon effect" is observed in online interactions as well. For example, we see mimicking in social networks with the rapid adoption of jargon as participants use hashtags and acronyms. It explains why acronyms such as "bae" (before anyone else), "smh" (shake my head), and #tbt (throwback Thursday) quickly spread and are adopted as common expressions with unprecedented speed online.

Communities also see mirroring, but the effect is more subtle. Have you noticed that once one person starts ranting, it feels like the rest of a group joins in? Or when one person posts a complaint, suddenly a dozen more appear? It is mirroring, and it becomes a feedback loop. The more people exhibit a behavior, the more it is copied.

But what if you could use mirroring to your advantage? That's exactly what we did to turn this community around.



**PRO TIP:**  
**Plan for the Future**

*“We also had a long-term strategy in mind. Everything we proposed and enacted would become part of the community maintenance plan, and would be carried out every single year.”*

Setting goals and identifying benchmarks builds in the opportunity to check on your year-to-year results.

## Plan of Action

In order to turn the sentiment of the community around, we knew we had to change the behavior of both customers and staff, which was no small task.

We developed a strategy comprised of three sections:

1. Community clean up
2. Guidelines & enforcement
3. Modeling constructive behavior

Each component of the community turn around was designed to have an immediate impact on sentiment. Cleaning up the community would help prevent negative mirroring. Guidelines would help prevent abuse and empower community staff. Setting an example would begin to show members what behavior was expected of them and provide positive behaviors to mirror.

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## Community Clean Up

By the time we were tasked with turning around the community, the active season for the community had already passed and our goals were entirely focused on making sure the next active season would go better.

Knowing this, we set out to clean up the community. To start, we set up an “archive” category. This was a place for community staff to move topics and posts that shouldn’t be in the public setting but retained for future reference or metrics.



**PRO TIP:**  
**Establish Guidelines**

Guidelines are often viewed as a secondary task in a community, but research and practice shows that well formulated guidelines can be the difference between mayhem and harmony.

First, decide what behavior you want to encourage and prohibit in your community, then develop a list of specific rules and very clear consequences.

**Guidelines & Enforcement**

The structure of the community was not our only concern. The community staff was growing weary and frustrated with the unwelcome behavior of many users, but they didn't feel like there was anything they could do about it. We knew we had to give them tools and approaches that allowed them to proactively create a constructive environment.

Our first order of business was to rewrite the community guidelines. Guidelines are often viewed as a secondary task in a community, but research and practice has shown that well formulated guidelines can be the difference between mayhem and harmony. After evaluating months' worth of bad behavior, moderation flags, and complaints, we developed a list of specific rules and very clear consequences. The impact was twofold. The rules informed visitors and members what behaviors were expected and those that would not be tolerated. They also provided community staff the justification needed to say "No, you can't do that here."

With these new rules, we also developed processes for community staff to follow:

- First- and second-time offenders were informed of their transgressions, but not necessarily banned from the community until their third offense.
- Intentional offenders were subject to immediate banning.
- Unpleasant but not clear rule breakers were assigned to a "troll" group for further observation.

*“The shift in sentiment was a pleasant surprise. We really wanted to create a positive environment that encouraged engagement and was beneficial to our members.*

*One of the biggest fears of our senior leadership team was that the community would turn into a disgruntled client rant channel dominated by brand bashing members. Once they saw the sentiment shift to positive or neutral they were intrigued about the community potential.”*

*- Community Manager*

In addition, we tackled the “smut” filter or blacklist. New unacceptable words were added to the existing list for automatic removal. (We won’t list them here, but you could probably guess a few.) We also added alerts for words that could be problematic, but were open to manual interpretation such as “I’m having a hell of a time installing [product name]” or “I’ve searched every damn place, but I can’t find...” These alerts let community staff know a post needed to be evaluated and potentially edited depending on the intended sentiment.

Even with these tools, some community staff still hesitated as concerns about moderation versus censoring arose. In order to empower community staff to moderate freely but prevent blatant censoring, we developed three rules to keep in mind:

1. Angry posts are allowed as long as they do not break any other rules regarding harassment, unhelpfulness, or swearing. Posts aimed at the company as a whole or a specific product are allowed.
2. Even if valid and not breaking any existing rules, angry posts or complaints aimed at a specific user or employee are not allowed. These posts are archived and the poster is informed of how to get their concerns or complaints to the right person or department so that action can be taken.
3. If a topic becomes a long threaded rant, users are told that the topic has exhausted itself and will be locked from future contributions. The topic is archived at a later date unless the thread has clear value.

Once we started cleaning up, there were many questions as to why we did not remove all the negativity. The answer was simple: Do you trust a product with only positive feedback? Of course not. Allowing a healthy amount of honest negativity helped customers see that we were making a sincere effort to be trustworthy.



**PRO TIP:**

**Want to see results? Model the behavior you want to see in your community.**

Harness the power of mimicking and make it work for you:

- Create a short list of ways to model positive behavior and distribute to your team.
- Look for jargon specific to your community and use it to connect with your members. This makes you appear more relatable and approachable.
- Ensure that you and other visible users set a behavior worth mimicking. Behave how you want others to behave.

## Setting an Example

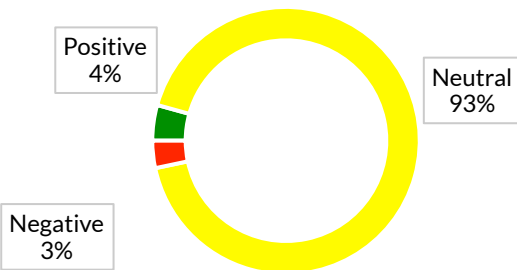
Throughout the entire process of turning the community around, we also encouraged community staff and other employees to interact with members in a positive way. We employed three simple techniques:

1. Posting in the tone you want to see from others. This means maintaining a positive and neutral tone whenever possible even when the conversation is frustrating or confusing.
2. Saying thanks. If you see a member posting a great question or providing an answer, let them know you appreciate it. Say “thank you” for good contributions to the community.
3. Freely giving likes to those who deserve it. Thrilled to see a “thank you” or “that helped”? Like it. Like an answer provided by a peer or customer? Like it.

The techniques proved to be good practice for community staff, but more importantly, they set a good example for members. We started to see more and more positive member interactions with community staff, which in turn led to more positive interactions by employees. Instead of a negative feedback loop, we created a positive one.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Season Sentiment



*“The community management team had to continually evaluate how best to respond. We had to remind each other take the high road and stay positive and helpful. We empathized with those clients who were sincerely struggling and needed help.*

*It took some convincing to assure our leadership team and other associates that if negative comments about our products and services were properly addressed the brand could gain credibility. If it truly was an error on our part we needed to publically own it and resolve it to the client's satisfaction.”*

*- Community Manager*

## Outcome

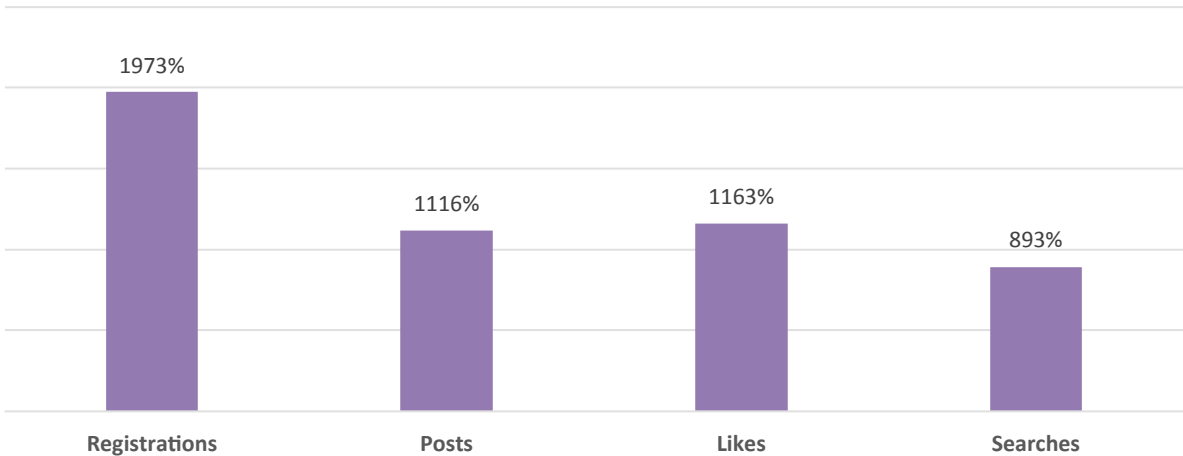
By the time the second season arrived, the community had a different feel to it that was far more welcoming, constructive, and interactive. It wasn't perfect, but that was never the intention. We simply wanted members to feel comfortable asking questions, suggesting improvements, and letting the community staff know what was needed.

More than anything, we wanted new members to understand how to interact with each other and the company. With positive and neutral examples front and center, the “chameleon effect” was evident. For example, it was more common to see “Hope this helped” and “Thank you for your assistance” exchanges throughout the community. Good questions and answers almost always had likes. Members were clearly mirroring the behavior of others, but now it was constructive and resourceful. Positive sentiment rose, and we measured a stunning and significant decrease in negative sentiment.

We also observed some indirect effects on the community. We saw more questions and fewer statements – a welcome change for community staff as they had more opportunities to respond to customers. We also began to notice clear “super users” emerging, which we attributed to the change in sentiment and engagement. These super users provided clear value to the community, and much-needed support for the community team, and we made sure they were appreciated.

By the end of the second season, we had achieved our goal of creating a constructive tone in the community. The effect of that was a massive increase in member registration and volume far beyond what we believed likely.

**% Growth from 1<sup>st</sup> Season to 2<sup>nd</sup> Season**



**Today, the community is thriving.**

It continues to maintain a primarily neutral sentiment with rapidly growing registrations and healthy volume. Most impressively, the community staff has observed a maturation, from a community dominated by redundant questions and one-time visitors to one with high search rates and impressive successful search results. In short, what was originally an unfriendly forum has transformed into a functioning and healthy community.

## Literature Cited

Chartrand, Tanya L. & Bargh, John A. (1999). The Chameleon Effect: The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 76(6), 893-910.

## Community Posting Policies

Looking for a place to start drafting your community posting policies? Check out this sample list from the case study community.

Wondering what you should do? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Read and learn! More than anything, this community exists to be an interactive and ever growing resource.
2. Ask questions! It can be to satisfy your own needs for knowledge or to propel a conversation further.
3. Answer questions! Think you know the answer to a peer's question? Give it a shot and share your experience.
4. Encourage others! Be free with 'thank you', 'good job', and kudos.

The following behaviors are not acceptable and may result in content removal or being banned from the community:

- Posting messages that are inflammatory, unconstructive or at odds with the aims of the community.
- Posting messages that contain offensive language or references or personal attacks against other forum participants, including staff and moderators.
- Posting messages that advocate illegal actions.
- Posting the same message in multiple threads or forums.
- Posting unconstructive messages about the company and/or other products and services.
- Promoting or soliciting for your own business
- Posting unsolicited messages (including "spam").
- Posting irrelevant or off topic subject matter.
- Posting to 3<sup>rd</sup> party websites outside of official sources.



## Are you ready to take your community to the next level?

**TheCR's Community Performance Benchmark provides a valuable assessment of where your community actually stands now – and sets you up for success in the future.**

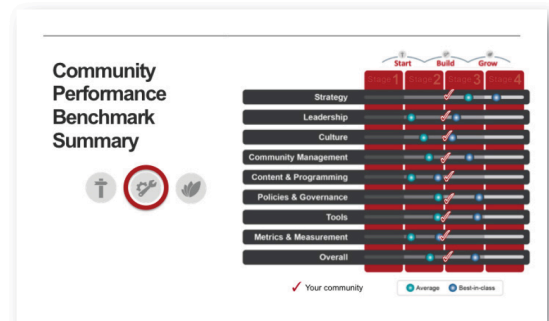
You can lay out your goals, draw up your roadmap – but do you really know where you are on your community journey?

- Are you embarking on a strategic planning and budgeting exercise and looking for an impartial assessment?
- Have you started your community journey but not sure how to prioritize what's next?
- Do you need to have a better tool for educating your stakeholders on what is required to build a successful community?
- Are you keeping pace with your plans – or your competitors?

TheCR's **Community Performance Benchmark** can help. It provides a valuable assessment of where your community actually stands – benchmarking your management processes against our database of 500+ companies and providing you with recommendations. It's information that gives you the ability to set priorities, make decisions and manage budgets with confidence.

You'll walk away with a definite view of where your community stands today and a tactical plan for taking your community to where it needs to be.

Start your benchmark today, call or email Tracy Floyd at 603-661-4884 or [tracy@communityroundtable.com](mailto:tracy@communityroundtable.com).



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2. Championing individuals and organizations working to advance the business of community.
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