

## TIP SHEET: Blog and Online Discussion Facilitation

Blogs and on-line discussions can be leveraged for a variety of purposes, including pushing or pulling information to/from others, networking, collaboration and the exchange of ideas and information. The success of any blog or online discussion depends on the involvement of a *facilitator*. At a tactical level, the *facilitator* promotes the discussion and motivates the action and interaction of discussion participants. Fortunately, facilitating blogs and online discussions builds on many of the same principals of facilitating face-to-face meetings and discussions. Here are some tips on facilitating blogs and online discussions.

### Promoting and Facilitating

Many audiences are still unfamiliar with blogs and online discussion formats. So, getting a good online discussion going takes steady promotion, as well as audience support and coaching.

When promoting blogs or online discussion, take time to provide a very short, clear message to invitees.

Invitations should include: the title of the discussion, a short description of the purpose and any timing factors (e.g., how long audience participation will take, when the discussion starts and when will end). The invitation should also include a quick call to action; for example, a starter question the invitee can quickly respond too.

Once invitations are sent, the real work begins. Online discussion facilitators motivate the action and interaction of discussion participants. Here are some quick blog and online discussion facilitation tips:

- **Encourage Online Exchange.** Encourage people to participate online. For example, when others want to engage you offline, invite them back online. Let them know it's o.k. to post online. Offer support to those who are unfamiliar with online participation.
- **Make Linkages.** When replying to comments, refer back to prior comments and ideas from other people.
- **Monitor.** Ensure some members, as well as yourself, do not dominate the discussion. Keep the discussion focused, monitoring for drift. If need be, re-clarify the discussion purpose.
- **Remind.** Send gentle on-line and off-line reminders to others to join and/or rejoin the conversation (e.g., via email, phone, meetings and in person conversations).
- **Extend.** Bring out multiple perspectives. Ask leading questions. Consider a mix of probes and supportive comments to help grow and extend conversations.
- **Be Thankful.** Take time to thank others for posting and participating before during and after the discussion.
- **Create Tangibles.** Whenever appropriate, create a tangible outcome by summarizing the discussion in the form of a final post or write-up. This helps provide social proof to the group that the online effort was productive.

### Netiquette

Establishing good network etiquette (*netiquette*) is an important aspect for online discussion facilitators. 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 communication, these *nonverbals* and *social factors* are less manageable than in face-to-face settings. With practice, however, one can learn to facilitate online discussions in just a lively manner as in traditional settings. Here are some tips on facilitator "netiquette":

- **Use greetings.** Use quick opening or closing greetings (e.g., Hi, Hello, Cheers, Bests, Thanks).
- **Acknowledge others.** You cannot look or point at others, but you can refer to them by or name and/or acknowledge their individual ideas.
- **Avoid cynicism and sarcasm.** As a facilitator, you set the tone. Model positive tone early and often.
- **Be brief. Be conversational.** Conversations are usually short bursts of one person talking and another talking. If possible, avoid typing everything in one post or reply. Be conversational.
- **AVOID UPPERCASE.** In the online world, typing in uppercase is typically perceived as shouting.
- **Be personable.** Just as with a meeting or workshop discussion, it's o.k. to be personable and even informal at times. As a discussion facilitator, you set the tone and norms for the group.

## Goals and Outcomes

Blogs and online discussion goals vary. Discussions can be leveraged as a way to *push* or *pull* information to/from target audiences, *link* people and ideas, or as a basis for collaboration and *exchange*. Their use depends on the need and desired results. One author puts the overarching goal of blogs and 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)*

With facilitation, blogs and online discussions can go beyond having passive participation (e.g., *pushing* and *pulling* information/ideas) to enabling and encouraging participants to *link* (network with as well as be resourceful to each other), as well as *exchange* ideas and knowledge among and between participants.

In summary, the discussion facilitator's role is much like a good event host...to draw persons out of the shadows, get people talking, recognize and embrace ideas, facilitate networking and the exchange of ideas while honoring what emerges as belonging to the community of participants.

## Recommended Resources

- All Things in Moderation. (2004). Building e-tivities - key principles. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: <http://www.atimod.com/e-tivities/extracts.shtml>
- Australian Flexible Learning Framework. (2003) What have we learnt about Effective Online Facilitation. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: <http://pre2005.flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/facilitation.html>
- Bhargava. (2006). The 25 Basic Styles of Blogging ... And When To Use Each One. Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: <http://www.slideshare.net/rohitbhargava/the-25-basic-styles-of-blogging-and-when-to-use-each-one>
- CommonCraft. (2003). Blogs in Plain English. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: <http://commoncraft.com/blogs>
- Nolan, T. and Whitaker, R. (2002) Moderating and Facilitating Online Discussion. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: [http://www.sonoma.edu/users/n/nolan/501/powerpoint/moderating\\_facilitating/sld001.htm](http://www.sonoma.edu/users/n/nolan/501/powerpoint/moderating_facilitating/sld001.htm)
- Rheingold. (1998). The Art of Hosting Good Conversations Online. Accessed November 24, 2010 at: <http://www.rheingold.com/texts/artonlinehost.html>