Current Practices of Online Community Managers

A Report from Six Interviews

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This report summarizes six interviews with online community managers that are responsible for the social media presence of various personalities, companies, and institutions across different sectors. It aims to serve as a starting point for further research into practices of community management, and to help understand the way in which community managers may be framing and understanding these practices.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: social media, community management

1 CONTEXT

As online social networking sites attract and increasing share of the attention and time of internet users, maintaining a presence in such platforms has become an increasingly professionalized activity. For us, an online community manager is someone who works in building, growing, and/or managing an online community, usually around a brand, person, or cause. Community management typically involves working across different *channels*, which usually correspond to different accounts in various social media platforms.

In September and October 2016 we conducted six interviews with professional community managers with three or more years of experience who were contacted through our professional networks of contacts and through social media. The purpose of these interviews is to frame future phases of our research, by providing some insights into the practices of community managers, and some ideas about how community managers may be framing and understanding such practices.

All interviewees signed an informed consent form to participate in this research. Each interview was conducted by phone and lasted about 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed; anonymized transcriptions are available upon request for research purposes.

Our interviewees work for diverse clients, described in general terms in Table 1. Most of their activities take place on Facebook and Twitter, with some being active also on YouTube, Instagram, Google+, and Pinterest, depending on the client.

Table 1. List of participants.

Code	Main client(s)	Country
CM1	Multiple medium-sized companies.	Spain
CM2	Multiple artists.	Spain
CM3	A newspaper.	Chile
CM4	A university.	Spain
CM5	A mobile app.	Germany
CM6	A library or archive.	Chile

2 QUESTIONS

Our questions were informed by an analysis of commercial, academic, and gray literature on community management. There are many reports about community management, we recommend Cvijikj and Michahelles [2] and Ashley and Tuten [1].

With few exceptions, most of this literature offers advice on how to perform effective community management, but offers little in terms of methodologies to measure effectiveness, or evidence that some actions are more effective than others.

The main areas covered by our questionnaire were the following:

(1) Proactive community management: how community managers grow a community.
(2) Reactive community management: how community managers answer to the community.
(3) Tools: what specific software tools or specific practices they use.

The detailed questionnaire used is included in the appendix of this document.

3 PROACTIVE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Dos and Don'ts of proactive community management mentioned by our interviewees
- Be in a few social media platforms effectively instead of trying to be in all platforms
- Work with an annual strategy and plan
- Find the appropriate tone and personality considering the people you are addressing
- Balance institutional image with behaving according to the customs of a platform
- Interact with other users in a quick, responsive, and nice way, and as a person would do
- Post good contents that are interesting or entertaining to readers and do not look like adverts
- Avoid constantly asking people to click on things, give them something, not just ask for clicks

Having an annual strategy and plan. There were several mentions of the importance of having a strategy. The minimum level of strategy mentioned was an annual plan including key dates during the year, such as anniversaries or important dates. This strategy can be more complex and include coverage of several events and activities, and/or an emphasis during certain periods of specific topics or types of posts (e.g., the first week of every month, every Friday, or during an entire month). An even more elaborate strategy

includes a standard of quality for posts and the equivalent of an editorial line: a concrete description of the tone/register with which it is best to speak to the fans or followers of a brand (in the following, we use the word "brand" to mean in general the product/person/cause for which the community manager works).

Measuring progress. In general, we noted that the community managers we interviewed were deeply aware of a number of performance metrics in social media platforms, and indicated that different metrics might be useful for different purposes. Our interviewees do not guide themselves entirely by a pursuit of increases in these metrics; they see their activities as embedded into the "business" of their client, and thus take into consideration other aspects beyond metrics, including qualitative indicators such as "making sure the community is happy". Most do not have concrete numerical goals, but consider that is is necessary to maintain a general trend of growth on a monthly or yearly basis.

The metric that most emphasized was the number of interactions with an account and/or its posts; they also mentioned the size of the audience (fans or followers), remarking that both need to be balanced:

> CM1: "If you have interaction but you're not growing you're not engaging new people; if you are growing but without any increase of your interaction, maybe the people that you're engaging are not the target that you want."

In other words, the community manager wants more followers (including "fans" and "subscribers") that engage (including "liking," "re-sharing," and "commenting") with the content. If there are more followers but no more engagement, the connection with the brand is too thin, if there are more engagements but no new followers, there is no chance of reaching to new people.

In the case of smaller brands, these metrics need to be translated into concrete business goals such as more purchases or more media mentions, in the case of larger brands, these things are known to have positive effects in other areas of the organization, and/or they can be measured in other terms, such as in the increase of audience of a target website or an increase in brand recognition in surveys.

Finding a voice. An important and perhaps difficult first step mentioned by our interviewees was to find the "right" tone and vocabulary to speak to an audience through social media. Evidently, this requires to understand the specific conventions of a given channel or platform:

> CM3: "I believe things are moving in that direction, humanize a bit brands and communication media and organizations, make them have a kind of personality"

However, this also requires to balance these conventions against the identity of a brand. The account should respect the way in which people speak in each social media channel, but at the same time, it should solidly represent the brand's values and role in society. This is a delicate balancing act:

> CM6: "I have personally witnessed really important cultural institutions postings things that are ridiculous for the role that they play in society. You don't have to be boring … in fact you can be funny, you have to do it, or even maybe make a fuss, but consistently within the role of the institution."

Creating content. One of the main activities that the community managers we interviewed perform is to create content. This is also one of the most time consuming activities for several of them. Ideally, according to our interviewees, this should be new content and it should be created specifically for social media.

> CM1: "if we write original contents, it's more easy to engage new people. Because they like to read information that they haven't never read before."

> CM2: "it's better to create new content for your reputation and your brand"

Audiovisual content was considered as "king" among the possible contents that can be posted, particularly videos that are created for consumption on mobile. A good content was described as something that is new, interesting, and that ideally advances the objectives of the brand without mentioning it prominently (or sometimes not mentioning it at all), to avoid being seen as "another advert." Content from brands is always at risk of being perceived as spam, and the community managers we interview see this as an obstacle:

> CM3: "I hope one day Facebook allows you to have different timelines, two columns, I don't know, where you could see your friends and the pages you like so that brands and media don't appear as a kind of spam"

Clickbait content that piques the interest of readers without giving away the content (e.g., "you would not believe this photo" was mentioned, but as something to be used with care, particularly being careful not to deceive readers: if something spectacular was promised, something spectacular must be delivered.

Adapting content. The content posted by the community managers that we interviewed was often an adaptation of contents created for other purposes. This adaptation may go from creating a new headline following conventions of social media, to basically re-writing the entire content. This highlights the idea that social media is a new communication medium with its own characteristics:

> CM3: "Every day it is harder to be interesting, you compete with many; but because of this, one cannot just share what is done for other formats, one has to do things in a social media format."

> CM4: "Most of my work is to try to adapt to a channel and an audience the contents we have, plus deciding if that content is going to work"

The process of adapting content is very varied and depends on the market of the brand. In the case of news articles, it may involve including platform-specific conventions such as hashtags and user mentions. In the case of library/museum objects handled by one of our interviewees, it involves a complex process to highlight why an object might be of interest to a broad audience, or why it is significant.

The interaction between choices of contents and metrics is such that experienced community managers sometimes can guess quite precisely if a content is going to work well with their audience or not. One interviewee advised against overemphasizing contents that were known to work well:

> CM6: "you know which tweets are going to work but I don't think you need to play so safe always … you have to take the risk and make new posts … that not necessarily are going to be that popular: maybe through them you can get to some specific audience."

Sharing content. Though it was not mentioned as a main activity, the community managers we interviewed sometimes share other contents or see it as a positive activity. This may be done in some cases with the purpose of "giving" content that has entertainment value, and in other cases in a very deliberate way, with the interest of performing cross-marketing among brands.

Interacting. Respecting the conventions of a channel was also mentioned: if people talk to each other instead of simply posting content, the brand should be the same. This poses challenges to community managers, because each social media platform is not only a channel for communicating information, but a channel to interact with people, and these two activities sometimes require different sets of skills.

Posting frequency. This was seen as something that depends strongly on the type of account and the expectations of the users, it needs to be set appropriately and maintained consistently:

> CM5: "It's important to give them enough but not too much to feel as you are spamming … it very much depends on the platform, on the type of content you're sending "

Some of the interviewees reported posting around once per hour, or more (on Twitter) while others have a posting frequency closer to one post per day; in all cases they insisted in the importance of avoiding being seen as spam. One mentioned avoiding being repetitive with content as more important than frequency.

4   REACTIVE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

Dos and Don'ts of reactive community management mentioned by our interviewees
- Answer quickly and always in a nice, patient, and polite way, no matter what
- If not available 24/7, indicate in which periods the account is available to respond
- Create a second account for questions and complaints, if needed
- Consider an interaction in social media as important as a phone call and act accordingly
- Keep the conversation inside the platform or follow-up outside the platform, as appropriate
- Use the feedback from users to improve your product or service, do not ignore it
- Anger and frustration at your brand are legitimate feelings, address their causes, but …
- Learn to identify trolls that are not interested in having a productive interaction

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Responding quickly. All interviewees recommended to answer quickly to everyone who addressed them:

> CM5: "Be available and respond quickly, as responsive as possible and as nice as possible"

> CM6: "[W]e have this policy: every mail, post or message we answer, no matter if it's good, bad or whatever."

In some cases a specific response time was indicated, such as "within one or two hours." The interviewees recognized this as an activity that was quite time consuming.

Responses were in general given to direct messages and interactions that are specifically addressed to the social media account in the brands. Some interviewees also monitor other contents to find mentions of their brands, using specific online software tools. In that case, they are more selective with respect to when to engage, such as when they have something relevant to contribute, or when someone is reporting an error or complaining about a problem.

Using social media as a customer service channel. Some of our interviewees used social media as a customer service channel, one of them strongly recommended for large accounts to have a separate account exclusively for customer service, and indicate what are the service hours for that account.

Some interviewees expressed the importance for their business of the information that is communicated by these interactions, and advocated to follow-up negative feedback not only with a message, but with actual changes that improve the product or service itself. Many complaints can be an alarm call that something needs to change immediately, such as a website responding slowly or having parts that are not working:

> CM1: "If the company is doing not a good job, it's a matter of time before the problems explode … [often] community managers consider as not important what the people are saying: they answer because they have to do, without changing anything, thinking that everything passes."

Following up inside or outside the channel. Interviewees expressed several ideas about how to follow-up. In some cases they advocated to try to have a first reaction in public and then follow-up through private online communication channels, in other cases suggested to keep the conversation in public, and in other cases follow-up through other channels such as phone calls.

> CM4: "Twitter doesn't end in Twitter."

The right communication channel(s) to follow-up seems to be an important parameter that should be decided in advance by the brand.

Answering to angry users. Some interviewees noted that anger and frustration are bound to be present in some cases. One interviewer noted that, despite the legitimacy of these feelings, people expressed them using language that they would not use outside social media:

> CM3: "Users attack each other, insult each other, insult you, insult any of the public persons that are being mentioned in a news, and discuss in a tone in which, I suppose, they wouldn't speak face to face."

The same interviewer indicated that this also translated to attacks towards the account of the brand, but that the tone tended to become much calmer after being answered in a way that showed that a person was behind an account and was responding in good terms:

> CM3: "comments are so negative, are so aggressive, but they're aggressive when they believe they're talking to a wall … we respond in good terms, giving information, trying to answer to doubts, and people change their tone immediately. I think it's a good policy to

> answer 'humanly': I'm not a robot but a person at the other side of the computer, trying to help you."

Another approach mentioned was to consider any meaningful interaction online as important as a phone call, and thus treat an angry user online as you would treat an angry caller:

> CM4: "to a person who is complaining, you don't hang up the phone, then in Twitter, you don't leave him hanging"

Answering to trolls. Trolling, e.g., inflammatory, disruptive behavior in an online community was not mentioned as a problem by all interviewees, but only by some. Some types of social media account may tend to attract more of it, while for others it is just a very occasional problem. Trolls pose a challenge because reactive community management aspires to answer to everybody, except to trolls.

> CM4: "You need a criteria to separate trolls for non-trolls. It is not easy always, but it is a mistake not to have these criteria, because there is nothing worse in Twitter than listening to a troll, because the troll has all the time in the world to bitter your day, and it is sterile, you are not going to arrive anywhere, and everybody knows it's a troll. "

One interviewer described to assume people are not trolls, but avoiding engaging with obvious trolls:

> CM6: "sometimes we receive very strong aggressive mails giving us really bad opinions ... I try to let them know that in order to establish a fluent communication, we should respect the limits of good behavior, ... we're open to check every content that we upload ... but each suggestion has to be done with proper respect. If you can't talk normally with someone, I write 'I'm sorry, if this how the conversation is going to be, we are not going to keep it on' "

5 TOOLS AND SPECIFIC PRACTICES

Software. In addition to the standard software interfaces offered by social media platforms, the extra functionalities that the community managers we interviewed most often required were related to scheduling posts, having a way of monitoring the competition, and having more advanced metrics.

- Hootsuite (https://www.hootsuite.com/) was used and mentioned spontaneously by several interviewees.
- Google Analytics (https://www.google.com/analytics/) and Chartbeat (https://chartbeat.com/) to monitor the impact of social media on a website.
- Buffer (https://www.buffer.com/) for scheduling content in Facebook and Twitter
- Audiense (https://audiense.com/) for Twitter and Instagram
- Tweet Binder (https://www.tweetbinder.com/) for Twitter
- Bitly (https://bitly.com/) for Twitter
- FanPage Karma (https://www.fanpagekarma.com/) for Facebook pages
- vidIQ (http://vidiq.com/) for YouTube
- TweetDeck (https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/) for tasks including monitoring the competition

- Feedly (https://feedly.com/) and Google Alerts (https://www.google.com/alerts) to monitor external content
- Alexa (https://alexa.com/) to compare traffic againt competitors

Social media optimization. Several interviewees reported using the functionalities of each platform intelligently to make their content more visible. This includes using keywords and hashtags that may help to maximize the exposure of a content. Some reported small "experiments" that they sometimes do to see what types of content perform better in a platform, but had the impression that gains are short lived as algorithms change constantly. None of them indicated a careful quantitative evaluation of these experiments, but some expressed interest in pursuing that, given enough resources.

One of our interviewees indicated that s/he tries to optimize for "micro-moments" which are instants in which a person wants to find out information about their brand because of a concrete information need.

Additionally, there is a kind of "prime time" during the day in social media; this is when users are more likely to see a message, and it depends on the type of brand; some systems can suggest the best time for a post based on data about the impact of posts at different times of the day.

Contacting trendsetters. In one case the interviewee mentioned specifically that they contacted influencers to help them promote a brand, but considered that this was helpful only when a long-term relationship was to be created, not for short-term engagements. Another interviewee indicating interacting with influential people on a constant basis.

Paid advertising. This was seen as a necessary evil. While preferring "organic" growth, i.e., having people spontaneously start following a brand, several interviewees indicated that the use of paid advertising in social media tends to yield good results in terms of audience growth. Some observed that platforms push them towards needing to pay for advertising in order to reach a large audience. In some cases, paid advertising was not used due to policies of the brand.

Trends. Some community managers noted that there is more competition today, and that some social networks will be eventually replaced by others.

6   ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOL

This appendix contains the opening and closing statements and the questions used during the interviews.

Interview opening

The purpose of this interview is to understand the current goals, practices, and methods used by community managers. We are computer scientists and know very little about community management. Feel free to answer or not answer to any of our questions.

We will be taking notes and recording this interview, you can ask us to stop recording at any time. We may quote from your responses, but we will identify you in our research reports only if you ask us to do so, otherwise we will keep your responses anonymous.

1. Context

Our definition of community management is someone who works in building, growing, and/or managing an online community, usually around a brand, person, or cause.

   (1) Have you been a community manager according to this definition at some point in the past 3 years?
   (2) For which kinds of brands, persons, causes? We will not mention individual brands/persons/causes in our report, just general descriptions of them.
   (3) In which online platforms have your activities been centered on?

2. Proactive community management

The next questions are about proactive community management (e.g., activities such as "building brand awareness"). Later we will speak about reactive community management (e.g., "answering questions" or "dealing with complaints").

   (1) Have you been given a set of explicit objectives or performance indicators?
       • Which objectives or performance indicators are you given, usually?
   (2) What do you think should be the objectives or performance indicators of a community manager?
       • Can you prioritize them, if possible?
   (3) What are the most common things you do to reach these objectives?
   (4) What do you think are effective practices in proactive community management?
   (5) What do you think are common risks, errors, or mistakes in proactive community management?

3. Reactive community management

Reactive community management involves answering questions, dealing with complaints, answering to positive/negative feedback, or in general reacting to what the public says in social media about a brand, person, or cause.

   (1) Have you been engaged in "reactive" community management activities in the past 3 years?

- What are common types of activities of this kind you have performed?

(2) Do these activities involve reacting to messages directly addressed to the entity's account, not directly addressed, or a mixture of both?

- If a mixture, in what proportions, roughly?

(3) What do you think are effective practices in reactive community management?

(4) What do you think are common risks, errors, or mistakes in reactive community management?

4. Activities and tools

(1) In addition to the standard interface of the platforms you have named, are there other tools you use?

- What do you use them for?

(2) What do you think about the following kinds of tools for a community manager? [the ones not mentioned by the interviewee]

  (a) Schedulers such as Buffer
  (b) Automated sharing software such as IFTTT
  (c) Analytical tools such as Bitly
  (d) Social media dashboards as Hootsuite
  (e) Threat Intelligence Platforms as DigitalStakeout
  (f) Monitoring or Listening Tools as BrandWatch
  (g) Monitoring or Listening Tools as Social Mention or Google Alerts
  (h) Automation Tools as Marketo or Hubspot
  (i) Conversion Tools as Google Analytics (Free) or Marketing Software (Hubspot and Engage)

(3) What do you think about the following goals or activities for a community management [the ones not mentioned by the interviewee]:

  (a) Performing Social Media Optimization (SMO), i.e., understanding and ensuring the algorithm of a platform shows your content first and/or prominently
  (b) Gaining measurable Return on Investment (ROI) from your activities on Social Media
  (c) Measuring the goals defined before a campaign
  (d) Identifying trendsetters or influential people and reaching to them (advocacy)
  (e) Spacing content in time, or avoiding sending too much content in a short time
  (f) Sending relevant content, or avoid sending irrelevant content
  (g) Maintaining lasting relationships with your "followers"
  (h) Making followers interact with each other
  (i) Using paid advertising in some platforms

5. Open comments

(1) Do you have any further comments that can help us understand community management?

(2) What was your background before being a community manager?

Interview Closing

Thank you for your time. Our intention is to offer you priority/early access to our research results as they are produced. Also, we will do some measurements and experimentations on real social media platforms, if you want to be contacted for that, please let us know.

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