

# Building a Community: Incorporating Discussion Groups and Chat

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**B**efore a World Wide Web existed, clever individuals had already figured out how to congregate in a virtual space for discussion and socializing. These places were called *news-groups*. They still exist today as part of the Usenet system. You can use this same concept — of enabling people on your site to talk to each other in a structured setting, or a real-time version of this concept — to develop a virtual community on your page.

When you put a threaded discussion group into your Web page, you won't use any of the Usenet newsgroups that already exist. Instead, you'll create a threaded discussion group. This chapter explains how you can use threaded discussion groups and real-time chatting to make your site interactive and vital.

## Introducing Threaded Discussion Groups and Chat

Newsgroups are like bulletin boards. You can post messages that anyone else in the world can read, and then anyone can respond to your messages either on the bulletin board or by e-mail. Over 28,000 newsgroups are on the Web today that are part of the Usenet system. They have names like `comp.lang.java.beans` and `misc.kids.pregnancy`. Both major browsers



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have newsreaders built into them (in Netscape Communicator, it's called *Netscape Newsgroup*, while in Internet Explorer, it is called *Outlook Express*).

When you post a message on a newsgroup, if that message doesn't directly relate to what others have been talking about (although it should be related to the broad topic of the group), that is called a new *thread*. Most people want to read newsgroups by threads. This way, they can read the messages only in the threads that interest them.

**Definition**

Threaded discussion group. A *threaded discussion group* is like a newsgroup except it runs off your Web server, instead of running as part of the Usenet. Your visitors don't need any special software to participate in your threaded discussion group (also referred to as a *forum*).

*Chatting* is the real-time equivalent of newsgroups. Unlike newsgroups, where messages get posted to a virtual bulletin board for anyone to see, with *chat rooms*, the message is addressed to someone else in the room and scrolls off the screen in a short time. In chat rooms, anyone else in the room can see what you are saying, even if it is addressed to one specific person. While threaded discussion groups usually maintain the messages for a few days to a few weeks, chat discussions go away within minutes.

## Applications of threaded discussion groups

Why would you want to add a newsgroup to your page? For many reasons. By creating a newsgroup, you can have a place where people can come and discuss your product or service, or tangentially related topics. The newsgroup you add to your page won't be a Usenet newsgroup (such as `misc.legal.computing`), but a threaded discussion group of your own creation.

What you do when you create a threaded discussion group on your site is create a community on your site. You give visitors a reason to return. They know information might change daily, even if you aren't the one changing the information. You enable your visitors to contribute to the content of your site.

## Applications of chat rooms

Chat rooms are better suited to highly subjective, emotional discussions with strangers than to sorting out the facts in a clear, rational way. Thus, you are more likely to see chat rooms on political or news sites, where everyone is entitled to an opinion and no one cares who's right.

The MSNBC news site uses chat rooms to hash out breaking political stories. Discussions can be heated, so if you want to maintain a semblance of control over the discussions on your site, be advised to stick to threaded discussion groups, where you can even pull threads that wander far afield.

## Adding Threaded Discussion Groups to a Web Page

Adding a threaded discussion group to your Web page requires special software. The software interacts with either a database, where messages posted are stored, or a flat file, with an index. You can write your own threaded discussion group or purchase an off-the-shelf product. Forums, by Allaire, is one product that can add a threaded discussion group to your site. Check with your systems administrator to see if Forums, or some other software that provides threaded discussion groups, already exists on your server. Each package is different but, generally, you should be able to modify the following settings to customize the interface so the discussion group page matches the rest of your site:

- ♦ Background color or graphics
- ♦ Button color or graphics
- ♦ Fonts

In addition, you want to administer the discussion group, so if someone begins a thread that bashes your site or your product — as opposed to asking questions — you can pull that thread or, at least, pull those messages. Here are some settings you want to make:

- ♦ Number of threads permitted
- ♦ Number of discussion groups permitted (so you can have more than one newsgroup — perhaps one for each product you produce)
- ♦ Ability to moderate the threads and pull inappropriate threads or messages
- ♦ Password protection for administrative privileges

## Adding Chat to a Web Page

Several products are on the market that enable you to add chat rooms to your Web page. In most cases, chat rooms require more client-side processing than do discussion groups. Discussion groups are entirely server-based activities. Chat rooms are usually Java based. This means they rely on your visitors to have Java-compatible browsers.

### Text chat

The usual kind of chat room is text based. Each person creates a nickname before entering the chat room, and that nickname precedes all the comments made by that person. When you want to say something, you type your comment in and press Enter. Immediately, that comment appears in the chat window of everyone who is

“in” the chat room. Other people, of course, are talking concurrently. By the time you finish answering a comment made by someone else, that comment may have scrolled off the screen.

## Visual chat

With graphical chat-room software, when you sign in, you select an avatar that represents you in the room. You can be a beautiful woman or Pinocchio. When you enter the room, you see the avatars of everyone else in the room with their names under them. When you speak (which is done the same way as in the text chat), your dialogue may appear in a bubble over your head or in a scrolling text box, as with a text chat. In either case, the dialogue disappears in a short time.

### Definition



Avatar. An *avatar* is a graphical representation chosen by the user as a representation of him- or herself. It can be an animal, person, or any object of the user's choice.

When you first enter a chat room, it takes a moment to get your bearings, figure out what everyone is talking about, and decide who makes any sense to you. Some people live in chat rooms and spend all their time there inciting riots. You want to avoid those people. You also want to avoid attracting those people to your site.

## Creating Community

One way to create a loyal following of visitors who return to your site with regularity is to create a sense of community. Adding discussion groups and chat rooms to your site are the tactical methods of creating community, but you need to think back to the strategic goals of attracting a crowd.

Will people come to your Web site because you have fancy features like a discussion group or a chat room? Probably not. Heck, the Web is full of fun places to waste time. You need to find a way to set your site apart because of something visitors can only get from your threaded discussion group or chat room.

Your first thought may be that people will come to your site to talk about your products, but this may be a bit optimistic. Look at the Gund site ([www.gund.com](http://www.gund.com)). The discussion group there is about collecting teddy bears (and other stuffed animals). Gund happens to make teddy bears, but they don't limit discussion on their site to their own creatures. The Gund site is a general meeting place for collectors of stuffed critters.

## What can you offer?

What can you offer from a discussion group or chat room? In the case of Allaire, all free customer support is offered only on their forum. This certainly attracts a crowd. They make sure every question is answered in short order. They also offer

an archive of old questions for searching, if you don't feel bold enough to post your own question or you don't want to look stupid.

Can you offer a service that is only available from a threaded discussion group or chat room? Some of the parenting sites on the Web have chat rooms and threaded discussion groups where parents ask questions of other parents. How to get their children to sleep through the night? Which brand of stroller is best? How to get the kids to stop fighting? Parents flock to sites where they can share their concerns and get their questions answered quickly by both experts and peers.

## A big-name columnist

Perhaps you have a celebrity who could publish a column on your site, such as Danny Goodman, author of *JavaScript Bible* (IDG Books Worldwide, 1999), who publishes the JavaScript Apostle column on the Netscape site. People know of Goodman, own his books, and visit the Netscape DevEdge site to see what he has to say about late-breaking technologies.

Celebrities can attract people to your site because people already feel they “know” them. Visitors come to learn more about their area of expertise and to get closer to them.

## Talk with a professional

Perhaps you can offer a certain number of hours a week when a professional in your field will be online taking questions. Whether your field is cooking, car repair, quilting, or oncology, people will be delighted to have a chance to get their questions answered by a real professional.

This type of discussion doesn't lend itself to a chat room, but by taking submitted questions and answering them in real-time, publishing the answers right to the Web site, you can create a vibrancy and interactivity that people will return for again and again.

# Beyond Chat and Threaded Discussion Groups

Another way to create a community on your site is to offer resources that are hard to find elsewhere. Many people make the mistake of offering links to resources rather than offering the actual resources. When you offer links to resources, you give people a reason to leave your site. When you offer resources, you give people a reason to come to your site and stay. A threaded discussion group can be a resource — for example, if visitors can actually get samples of code, get answers as to why their specific problems are happening and how to fix them, and get these answers and solutions in a timely manner, then you have offered a real resource and these visitors will return.

An expert in the field, who can give tips on how to use your technology in ways others hadn't considered, can be a valuable resource. A regular column that keeps visitors to your site apprised of how new developments in technology will affect your products and services is certainly a valuable resource.

What kind of services can you offer that attracts your visitors? Perhaps you can create instructions for doing slightly less than your product does at little or no cost. This way, when your visitors are ready to buy or need the extra features your product offers, they will already feel favorably disposed because of the free resources you have offered. One resource — nearly pervasive among software developers — is offering a lite version of the software at no charge.

## From Here



Proceed to Chapter 47 to learn other ways of enhancing your site.

## Summary

Creating a community on your Web site is an excellent way to develop a dedicated following of site visitors. Creating a community is not particularly difficult but, unfortunately, few sites take advantage of this avenue of increased traffic.

Web site development is frequently left to the techies who know how to do fancy things with technical tools. They get bogged down in the tactical side of assembling a Web site without giving much thought to the strategy of creating community as a means of developing a loyal following. Threaded discussion groups and chat rooms can help enhance traffic on your site, but only if you are truly offering the visitors something they can't get otherwise. Celebrity columnists and area professionals can help create a vibrant community on your site.

