

ALUMINATI

The Advantages of Your Own Community Platform

Are **LinkedIn** or **Facebook** groups the best home for your community?



What Is “Community” And Why Does It Matter?

Consider what Dr. Nadya Pohran wrote [on this topic](#):

“

A community is more than a group of people. You might be familiar with the age-old maxim ‘there’s strength in numbers.’”

This saying is often used to convey the power of a community. But anyone who has been in an over-crowded supermarket, or a maxed-out train carriage, knows without a doubt that strength doesn’t come from sheer numbers alone; strength only comes when the individuals involved decide to intentionally work together towards a common goal.

Strength comes from intention, connection, and active engagement.

Let’s say that you have one hundred (or even one million) individuals signed onto your mailing list. That’s a lot of people, but if they aren’t actively engaging with (including both ‘taking from’ and ‘giving to’) others in that network. We’re sorry to say, but you don’t actually have a community just yet. You definitely have the potential of a community, but without a cohesive whole and multiple ways of engaging with others, all you have is a group. And a mere group is not all that powerful, nor is it a driving force toward success. We want to make this very clear: a group of people who work for the same company and who all receive the same company newsletter does not instantaneously become a community. A group only becomes a community when people choose to engage with it beyond themselves and for the betterment of others in the community. Because engagement is so central to a community, it’s important for community leaders to create the structural components for the community members to operate within. Just think for a moment about physical infrastructure.

If a city builds a good network of roads, citizens are more likely to drive along them, going from one place to another, and meeting other people along the way. Infrastructure enables individual movement, but also connection. Likewise, good communities are ones that are strategically built so that individuals will want to actively participate within them. To allow for this, you have to build a community infrastructure that is human-centric, not organization-centric. Human-centered details are truly the driving force that allows for meaningful relationships to form and flourish within a community. In order to create a human-centered infrastructure, you have to make a space where people can engage and connect. We mean connection in the way that leading public figures like Brené Brown speak of connection: connection is when people “feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.



Our Take On The Concept Of A Community

We do not deny the opportunity that comes from social media networks. Indeed the two - a community engagement platform and social media - should co-exist; one approach need not be adopted at the expense of the other.

Your social media channels (LinkedIn and Facebook, etc.) are critical portals for initial engagement, capturing and driving users to their permanent home - your community platform.

We argue, however, that whilst social media can be a great strengthening mechanism, there are real challenges with social media networks being used as the singular home of your community.

In the following sections, we will explore these challenges, addressing serious questions concerning tailoring the community experience, legitimate protection of users, and the growing emphasis on privacy, community longevity, transitionality management, and the best environment for new relationship generation.



A Tailored Community Experience

Communities often form around niches - small spaces that define specific common needs. These spaces are unique and exclusive to that community. Whether physical or online, it is important for that sense of belonging that the community space suits that community’s personality. Communities are often not homogenous and whilst there may be an overarching connecting theme, sub-groups frequently emerge that have needs to be catered for.

Let us look at an example:

Select your store

Learn to RideTest RideDealer LocatorTrack OrderUnited States - English

BIKESH-D1 MARKETPLACEPARTSMENSWOMENSKIDSGOODS & GIFTSEXPERIENCE

Sign inCart(0)

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MEMBERSHIP

HARLEY OWNERS GROUP

Now an integrated part of Harley-Davidson Membership, Harley Owners Group provides access to a world of exclusive benefits to help you get the most out of your ownership experience.

JOIN NOW

MEMBER LOG IN



H.O.G.™ MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS	ASSOCIATE MEMBER £31 PER YEAR	FULL MEMBER £57 PER YEAR
H.O.G.™ Membership Card	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ ABCs of Touring Contest	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Chapters	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Ladies of Harley®	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Insider Email	✓	✓
The Enthusiast Magazine		✓
H.O.G.™ Merchandise	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Customer Care Centre	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ RIDE 365	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Rallies & Events	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Magazine Staff Photographer	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ Safe Rider Skills Programme		✓
H.O.G.™ RIDE! Guide	✓	✓
H.O.G.™ 10, 25, & 35 Year Member Recognition	✓	✓
Harley-Davidson Museum™ Free Admission	✓	✓
Harley-Davidson® Authorised Rentals	✓	✓
Harley-Davidson® Authorised Tours	✓	✓
Hard Rock Cafe - 15% off food only with your membership card. Ask when booking. <i>Ts&Cs apply</i>	✓	✓

(source: Suzi Nelson, the Digital Marketer)

This is the Harley Owners Group (or HOG), an online community for – you guessed it – owners of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. What HOG members share is a lifestyle. Their motorcycles are an extension of their identity. This community does a great job of catering and providing niche spaces for a variety of market segments. For example, they provide unique spaces for different demographics, like an area for women to connect with each other or for riders to find HOG members in local chapters.

If HOG simply tried to appeal to every single Harley-Davidson owner – not giving due consideration to specific customer profiles and the specific lifestyle they share – this online community would fizzle, not sizzle.

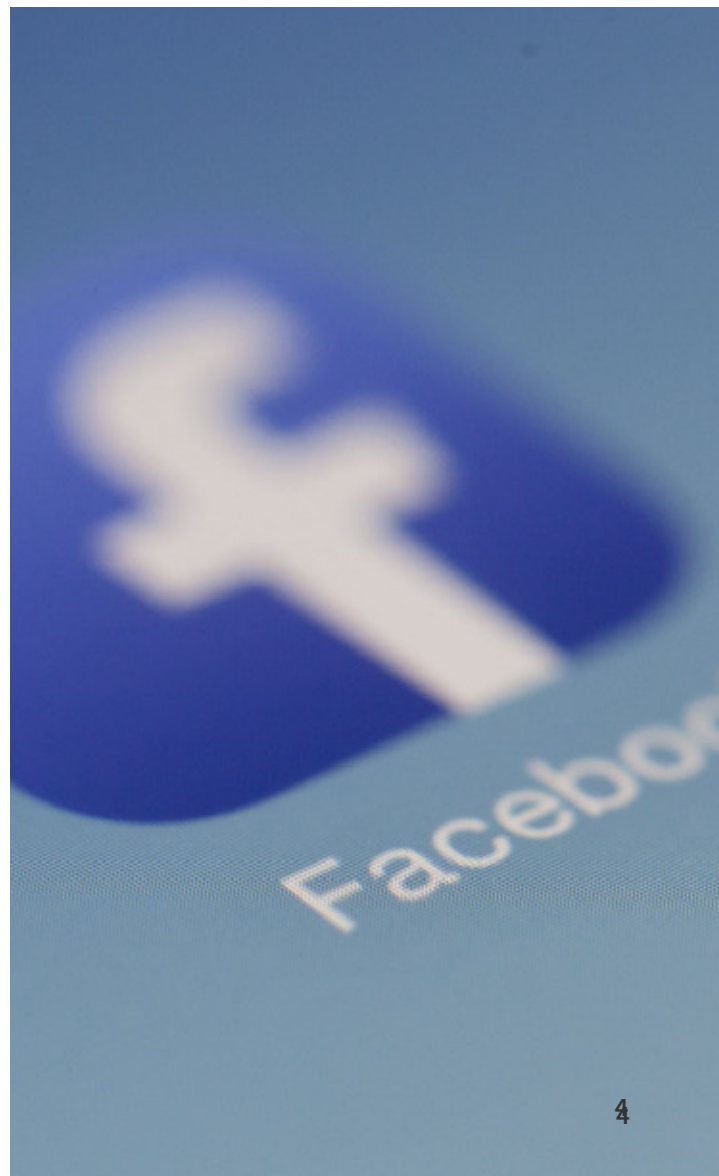
What Does This Mean Within The Context Of Your Community?

Your community may actually exist to serve different purposes for different members of the community and different parts of your organization. Within a university context, community stakeholders may include Recruitment and Admissions, the Alumni Office, Student Experience, Careers, Marketing, and more. Your membership may involve staff, students, alumni, and even external parties such as graduate recruiters. Providing a community space that meets the needs at every intersection between stakeholders and community members is simply not feasible within a basic single-feed social media channel. Having your own platform lets you carefully craft the user journeys for each category of member. Just like with HOG, each member can access the right experience for their personal needs, with the right nudges implemented to achieve organizational objectives.

Data Ownership And The Legitimate Protection Of User Privacy

Recall the story of how Facebook started, as a very private community of users. I was one of the first Facebook users at my alma mater, UCLA, back when you could only use Facebook with a recognized and authorized university email address, and the only people you connected with were classmates.

Fast-forward a few years, and what started out as an exclusive community evolved into a giant global data-gathering machine. There are, of course, still some benefits to social networks like Facebook - the ability to connect with long-lost friends, keeping up with the activities of those across several social circles, distant family, etc. But, as evident from recent history, we have all come to understand that big commercially-driven corporations regularly see data as profit and privacy as a nuisance. By taking the decision to run your community engagement on these social networks, your staff needs to be constantly aware of the various privacy changes and be able to adapt to them quickly. This also brings about the question of using personal social media profiles for work purposes. I have seen this happen in the HE advancement sector, where the administration of various alumni groups is managed by university staff via their personal profiles. This risk here is that your valuable group is now linked to a single person.



There are several issues with this: staff can be uncomfortable mixing their personal profiles with their professional life. If staff create a separate individual “work profile” this is usually explicitly disallowed by social networks. Even if you get away with it, you are putting yourself at risk at the point that the account owner leaves the organization and, for whatever reason, declines to transfer ownership of the account. You might also have problems taking admins that have left your institution off those groups as administrators - opening you up to reputational damage and loss of community control.

On the other hand, if you had a private platform provider, you as an organizational customer have a formal legal relationship with your provider and any changes to privacy or data handling would be protected by contract. By having a private community platform you have dedicated support staff who respond quickly to your needs and keep you in control.

This formal relationship solves the transitioning of staff changes as they can enforce the handover of admin community rights and create new administrators. Unlike large social media companies, which are typically very dominant and tend to have a ‘take it or leave it’ approach with their privacy terms, private platform providers will typically be happy to engage with your security and compliance teams to give you full confidence that your interests will be protected.

Finally, data on large platforms remains the property of those platforms. You are limited, legally, in what you can take and put in your own data systems. Your own platform provider will ensure that the control of community data remains with you.



Longevity And Transitionality Of An Online Community

One big challenge of running your community on social media is the problem of transitionality. Transition problems in the case of your community admin leaving put the longevity of your community at risk. Especially in sectors with high staff turnover, such as some parts of HE, it is important to focus on building a community that can safely navigate these transition points.

At **Aluminati**, we have seen this become a major existential risk to a community - failure to transition community management can severely impact community health - particularly fledgling ones. Mature ones can withstand being 'unmanaged' for periods of time but even they will not sail on, unguided, for long.

The longevity of a community is also connected with its ability to adapt to the changing world around us. If COVID taught us anything, it was that the ability to “pivot” (if we want to use that classic pandemic buzzword) was a crucial survival tactic. Organizations and institutions that were using social media for community engagement

experienced a limit on their ability to quickly adapt. Without the right tools and controls, they could not necessarily optimize their traditional community experience to suddenly very different needs of their members. Whilst such organizations were prevented from deploying new programs quickly, managers who owned their own platforms were able to quickly launch community pandemic-aid programs, sustaining and even growing their community engagement in times of crisis. Restricting yourself from using social media for your community engagement puts you at the mercy of those businesses and the changes that they impose. Rather than your tool evolving around your needs, you are forced to adapt your operation to your tool.

It is the difference between being a user versus a customer. As a customer, you have a much greater influence on the changes that happen to the product you have purchased.



How Large Companies Have Challenged Community Managers

There are some well-known examples where changes by large companies have created challenges for community managers:

- a. Several years ago I used to run international alumni groups on Facebook - we had then created separate “Pages” for each of our geographic locations. When Facebook made a fundamental change to Pages we had to move our community to “Facebook Groups”. The process required each of our members to take action to stay in the new Group. We ended up losing a significant mass of members in the transition. Years later, in 2021, [Facebook was making changes again](#).
- b. Google operated two large social networks: Google Plus and Orkut (particularly popular in Brazil and India). Both networks survived many years but were then shut down in [2014](#) and [2019](#). Any communities built on those platforms would have had to scramble to a new home. Many would not have survived.
- c. Facebook is also getting rid of some other features such as Nearby Friends and Weather alerts. In particular, one that will not excite those running their communities on Facebook is the [discontinuation of their Facebook analytics tool](#).
- d. In 2015 LinkedIn rolled out a sudden change to group visibilities, severely impacting discoverability for community managers who shared articles such as ‘[Coping with Changes to LinkedIn Groups](#)’.
- e. Finally, there is the pervasive [shift to artificial intelligence moderators](#). Without human intervention, this can shut down your group the moment it detects something it deems as nefarious (even if a human would deem it totally innocent). These opaque AI decisions are often impossible to appeal and if they were to happen to you, you’ve likely lost your community, and years of hard work, forever.



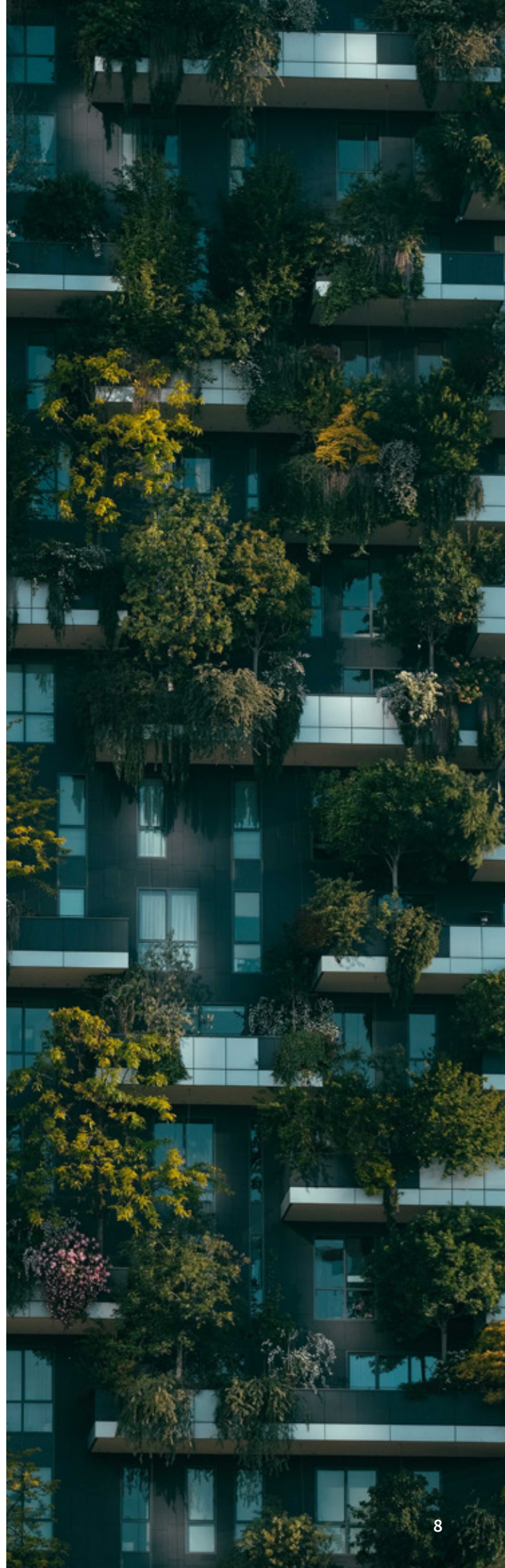
Complex Communities And Segmentation

Many communities are a complex intertwining of many different categories of users and stakeholders. Organizational communities often have multiple interested stakeholders which, whilst a strength, may also create a challenge in community management and prioritization. Social media platforms are better suited to simple 'single interest' and 'single membership' style communities; often with just two tiers of users - admins and members. Specialist community platforms can support more sophisticated hierarchies of users, defining separate user journeys, pages, and content for each category.

Administrators can also be given control over particular functionality and not others. And normal users can be 'elevated' to be leaders of their own sub-sections, allowing you to scale and 'insource' community management via the participation of community volunteers. To give a concrete example, a university using a specialist platform such as [Aluminate Community Builder](#) can assign the Career Department access to posting job opportunities for alumni and running their career mentoring program. The Business School could be given access to connect with their specific alumni groups and run an 'MBA-only' coaching program.

The international alumni team could run its 100 national chapters, nominating one alumni representative to 'lead' each chapter, moderating membership, and promoting local events. And the admissions office could onboard potential student applicants, connecting them with selected 'university ambassadors' to inspire them to attend the university. Achieving anything remotely similar on a social media platform would require setting up multiple groups/pages. And asking the same user to join each of them depending on who they are, losing any visibility of big-picture engagement across the community.

This is besides the absence of the necessary functionality to run something like a [mentoring or ambassadors program](#) which supports that cornerstone to every community - creating new connections.





Social Media Isn't Optimized For Creating New Connections

What is the primary purpose of social media networks?

Their fundamental purpose is not to make new connections but to map your existing social graph. Facebook certainly is a network of 'friends' and sending friend requests to a stranger is widely acknowledged as socially suspicious (or worse).

LinkedIn is clearly more open to networking, however, a great many users will carefully curate their 'connections' to those they've actively worked with and exclude approaches from others. Especially as so many of them cross into the realm of unsolicited spam. Indeed when people think about the parts of social media where you regularly interact with strangers (e.g. Twitter), one could go as far as arguing that this element of social media is optimized for conflict and toxicity!

Clearly the antithesis of the culture you and the community manager are looking to create. In contrast to this, curated communities that run on their own platforms can create a cultural expectation that "total strangers" should and will forge connections with each other. By virtue of being private, and including a high degree of identity validation, these platforms create the ideal trusted environment for relationship formation.

With specialist software, the entire member journey can be designed to set early expectations on both sides - respecting needs and capacities and ensuring the right matches happen.

Is it a careers network? Is it a professional learning network? Does this connection offer a face-to-face coaching element or is informal advice sufficient? The answers to these questions should be clear for all users so that they know that they are using the right platform to suit their needs.

You can see many examples of this within established alumni communities and the **mentoring programs** that they run. Within those mentoring programs, virtually every single pair will initially be complete strangers, happy to connect within the trusted confines of a cleverly designed space that boosts their confidence and trust in the process, and each other.

Functional Advantages Of Specialist Platforms

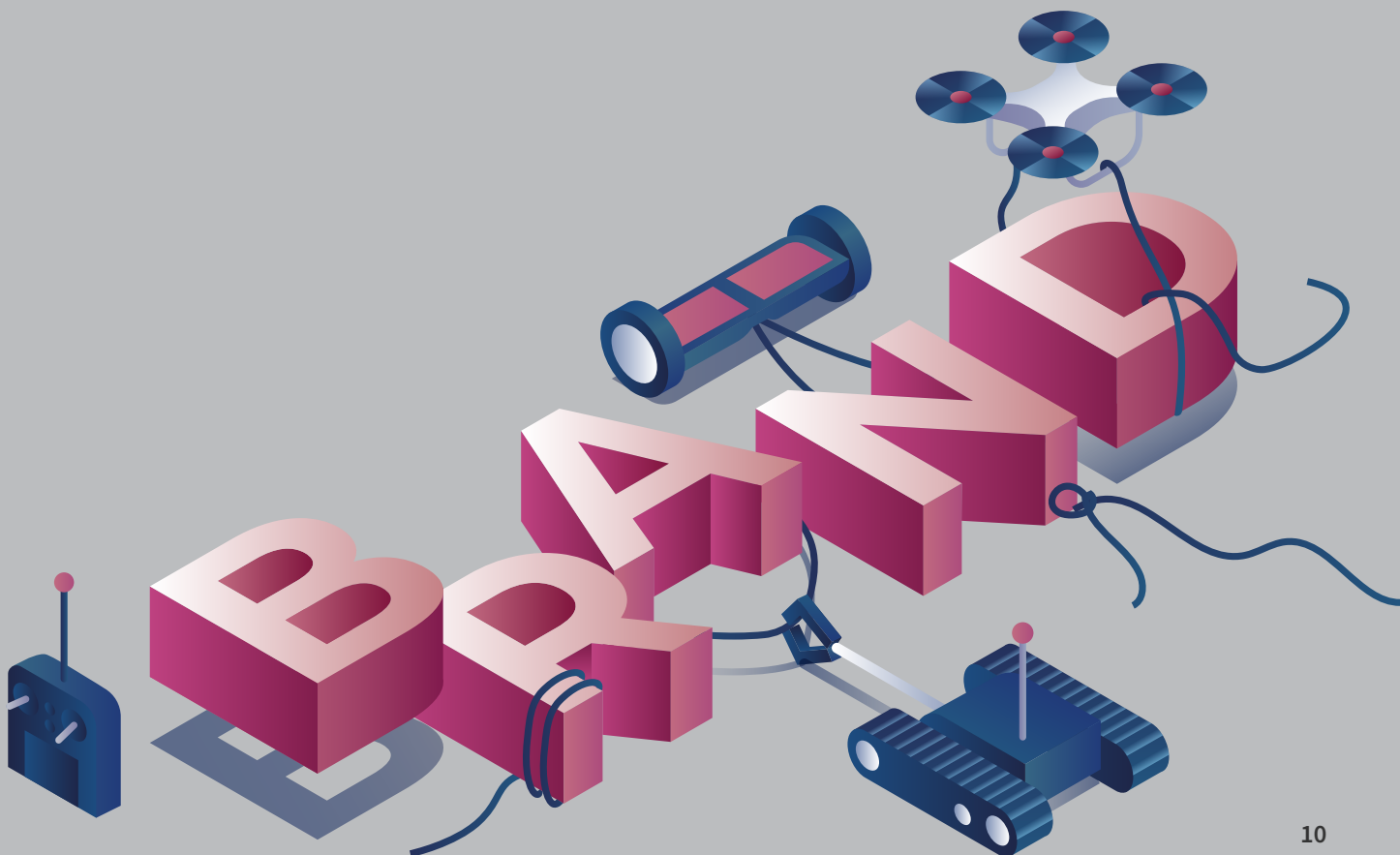
Specialist platforms should come with specialized tools. This is a simple advantage of not needing to cater to over a billion users. When choosing a platform provider, you should find one that has developed a toolkit that allows you to customize your platform to your specific needs. As an admin, you have the ability to analyze rich data.

This is because all the data on your platform is yours to export, align and amalgamate with your CRM intelligence tool. In contrast with the social media network, the data is not yours, and usually exporting and co-mingling data is explicitly against those social media platform terms. Specialist engagement tools such as mentoring, and mentor matching are available from platform providers and are critical in delivering some of the most significant benefits to members - meaningful new relationships. These tools simply do not exist on social media platforms.

Platforms tend to also permit complete branding - giving your users the feeling that their community is not 'off the shelf' but rather, a bespoke experience tailored to their requirements and interests.

This allows you to create positive interactions with other departments, affording them their own branded space. Is your Business School a challenge? Involve them in this process and they will be able to get exactly what they want in terms of the right brand message for their part of the community.

Although this seems like a minor detail, it can make a big difference in achieving cross-institutional buy-in. From the user's perspective, having the right functionality to support their community journey increases the ease with which they can engage with their community. Rather than having to resort to 'clunky' workarounds, the route from registration to [meaningful interaction](#) can all happen in one smooth built-for-purpose process.





Costs And ROI Of A Community Platform

A common argument is that social media is free (for now) - so why should an organization/institution pay for a platform?

Aside from all the reasons mentioned above, you should also factor in the staff time cost as well as the risk in costs of events (such as a sudden closing of your community by an AI algorithm). Indeed, the biggest cost in running a decent-sized community is staffing costs. Not to mention, platform costs tend to be a fraction of the community budget. People are expensive - to maximize their value you should give them the right tools to enable them to do their jobs as effectively as possible. Ideally, tools that are stable and do not suddenly blindsides them with a sudden change. You can quickly recoup the investment in tools through the additional output of your team; especially at the point where the right tools save you from having to expand your headcount.

The costs associated with risks can be harder to assess. Clearly, the sudden closure of your community space is catastrophic and insufficient to persuade many readers of the need for a more certain footing. There are also the more nuanced incidents that impose brand reputational costs - for example, through association with the next [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#). There are also then the delayed but significant financial costs and time costs in migrating a community when you've outgrown your current tool, or some functional change forces you to move anyway.

It is often tempting to downplay risks as something that could happen but probably won't. However, once you factor in the expected lifetime of your community - and for many, it is 'forever' - then every percentage probability becomes an eventual certainty. Once you take a long-term strategic view, it starts to become clear that having control over the foundations of your own community is wise and; that single-homing your community on social media is just not worth the risk.

[Community building](#) takes a lot of effort and time. This process should not be seen as an organizational 'quick-win' but rather an investment to be sustained and protected long into the future.

Final Thoughts

Own your community

If your community is valuable, do not make it vulnerable.

Think Long-Term

Do what it takes to ensure your community stands the test of time. Find a provider you trust that supplies a platform that can grow and evolve with your needs.

Social Media Has A Place

It is the gateway but not the destination. Channel your community members to their long-term home.

Social Media May Not Be Free Forever

These are profit-driven companies - [things change](#), sometimes [even when they promise they won't](#).

Value Your Members

When they join your community, they are giving you their trust. Protect them and keep their data safe. Broken trust is sometimes impossible to restore.

Value Your Team

Factor in staffing costs and price in their time. Give them the tools to do their job. Staff efficiencies, especially when things scale up, provide a significant ROI.

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