Best Practices for Online Community Engagement

A successful community is fostered by these best practices:

- **Membership** aims to create a sense of belonging and make people feel like insiders
- **Fulfillment** means that community members find immediate value in participating
- **Gratitude** to show appreciation for community members
- **Influence** is gained by showing how members’ input influences decisions
- **Connection** is established when the community supports shared experiences

1. **Start with Relevant, Compelling Content**
   Seed your community with high-quality content. Put yourself in your members’ shoes and think about what information they need. Which commonly-asked questions can you make available? Monitor how content performs and prune and add as you learn. If your content isn’t relevant right out of the gate, members who show up aren’t likely to return.

2. **Keep Content Fresh and Interesting**
   Establish a process for creating and maintaining a dynamic community. Think of your community as an ever-changing environment where you are always adding new content. Make a practice of analyzing what members are searching for and proactively create that content. Look for themes and trends that merit more information. Devise a strategy for how you can provide better help. Build a community that members trust to help them with more nuanced interactions or special cases.

3. **Offer Exclusive Content**
   One way to condition members to keep coming back is to share content they can’t get anywhere else. Whatever you use to draw members in, be sure that the surrounding content they see is also engaging and reinforces your community’s overall purpose.

4. **Give New Members a Warm Welcome**
   A new member in the community is cause for celebration. Reach out and give them a warm welcome. Start by introducing yourself and sharing the overall purpose of the community. Explain how to get started, including instructions on how to complete a profile, search, navigate, and post. It’s a great idea to ask the new member to take an action so they are quickly oriented toward participation.

5. **Reward Members for Contributions**
   It’s important to reward members for weighing in, especially if it’s their first time. Watch and see who jumps in and thank them. You might entice those who have not yet engaged with a “question of the week.” Ideally, you can encourage certain individuals to contribute based on their unique knowledge or perspective (i.e., single out subject-matter experts using the tagging feature and invite them to share their experiences. Most importantly, make giving thanks a daily practice. Showing appreciation for community contributions is one of the best ways to reinforce the kind of behavior you are after.
6. **Crowd-Source**

Leverage the power of the crowd to solve issues, provide insights, and share ideas. Inviting members to weigh in produces far more powerful results. Post a question that your community has been wrestling with and see what the community has to say. This is an excellent way to inspire high value peer-to-peer interactions. There's no shortage of ways to foster a lively and collaborative community culture. Like any relationship, you get back what you put in. Make those who come to your community feel welcome, important, knowledgeable, and imaginative and your community engagement will surge.