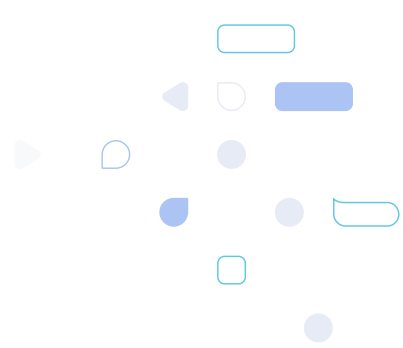# How To: Structuring Your Long-Term Community

Planning for a long-term or ongoing community can look similar to the steps you would take to run a short-term study but there are a few additional things that need to be considered along the way.

Getting Started!

In this article, we will discuss the following steps and how they are similar/ different to conducting short-term online communities:

1. Community Planning

2. Recruitment

3. Content Creation

4. Community Programming & Launch

5. Ongoing Execution

Step 1: Planning

Like any project, it's important to have clear vision of what you want to learn or what you are looking to accomplish by creating a long-term community. Unlike shorter projects, there tends to be a greater upfront investment of time to work out logistics to ensure long-term communities are successful. Consequently, we recommend taking the time to conduct initial brainstorming or working session(s) with your clients and stakeholders to discuss the vision for the community.

Within these session(s) you should define roles, responsibilities and objectives that need to be met (just like any other project) but it is also essential to establish a framework for the design and structure of your community.

Alignment

The first thing to do in the working session(s) is align on the purpose of the community and overall objectives. By the end of the session you should be able to answer the following:

- What is the overall purpose or mission of the community?

- What is your organization hoping to accomplish?

- How do you envision using the community?

- What initial questions need to be answered?

- Who will be involved (i.e. research team, stakeholders, partners, etc.) and what will be their roles and responsibilities?
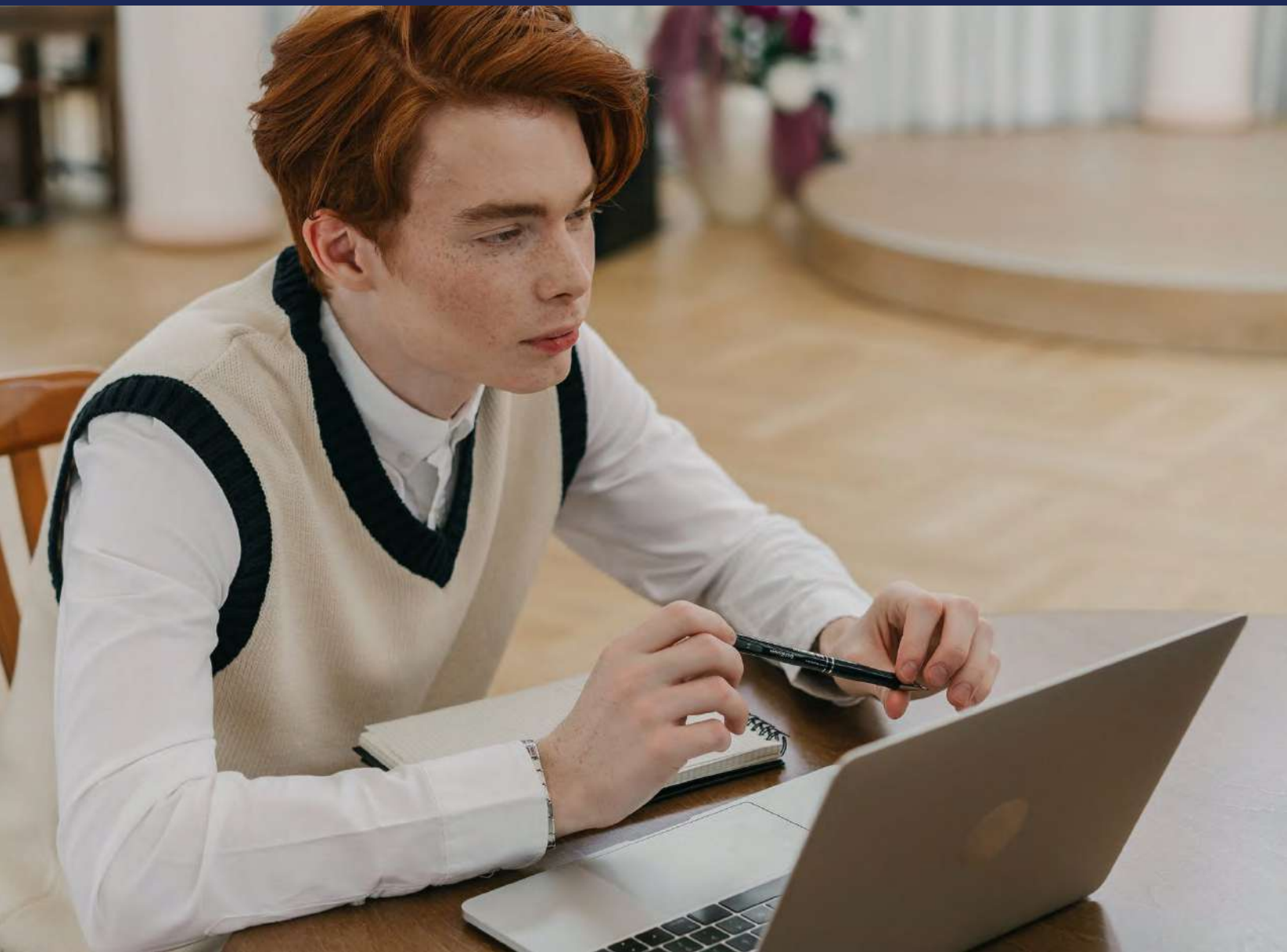
Community Design and Structure

Once you are aligned, you can then shift focus to determine how the community will be structured. This will enable everyone to get on the same page, brainstorm ideas and talk through different options of what the community could look like and become. There are three main areas to consider during this portion of the planning process; community composition, look & feel, and research & engagement.

Community Composition

You will first need to decide how inclusive or exclusive you want your community to be. Based on what you are looking to accomplish, ask yourself the following questions:

- Should this be a community for everyone?

- Should it only be for customers? All customers or just a select group of customers?

- Should it include potential customers or intenders?

- Should competitive customers be able to join?

- Are there different subgroups or segments that need to be targeted?

Community Look & Feel

Next, focus your attention on the "community brand". The most successful communities create an inviting environment that actively coveys their message or mission while also appealing to the target membership base. To do this, you will need to:

- Decide if the community will be branded or blind

- Create a name for your community

- Design a logo

- Decide on a colour scheme and imaging for the community

Resrach & Engagement Plan

The final part is to outline your research and engagement plan. This doesn't mean drafting the research itself! But instead, just identifying your community's parameters, for example:

- What type of activities and research you will be doing?

- How often will you reach out to members?

- How often they will be expected to participate?

- Approximately how much time it will take to complete the activities? Do they need to complete everything, or will activities be targeted at different groups?

- Will they be able to interact with each other? If so, how?

- What type of incentives will members receive for their contributions?

As you can see, there's a lot of upfront thought and planning that goes into designing your community and you will need this foundational groundwork in place before moving on to the next step.

.

Step 2: Recruitment

After establishing who you want to include in your community and what it will entail, you're ready to move on to recruitment. When recruiting for long-term communities, you will first need to determine how you plan to find your members and if you need to partner with a company to help.

Participants can be recruited from a variety of different sources so it's important to have a game plan on how you prefer to target them. Common sources can be anything from customer lists, social media or panels databases.

The Recollective platform has a built-in screening tool that you could leverage to recruit your participants or we have a network of Certified Recruiting Partners that we can recommend if you need additional assistance.

As you can imagine, the cost per recruit will be much less if you partner with someone who provides standard completes but you will then need to recruit a lot more of those participants to hit a target number of members logged into the community (and participating!). Whereas, if you opt for a partner that only considers someone a complete after they are logged in and have participated, you will not have to over-recruit as many people but you can expect to pay a much high cost per recruit.

During your assessment, it's also important to disclose that you're recruiting participants to become members of an *ongoing* community because some recruiting companies do not allow their participants to be recruited for other long-term engagements. Others will simply charge an extra "retention fee" when recruiting for these types of projects.

Profile Screener

The other key part of the recruitment phase is to draft an initial qualification screener. When creating your questionnaire, start with the basics similar to what you would use for any other project. Make sure you're including questions that capture the member information you need, alongside questions that screen participants in or out of the community based on your target profiles.

In addition, you should include questions that verify each recruit as a good fit for ongoing online engagement. For example, ensure they have the necessary devices to participate in activities on a regular basis, that they're comfortable sharing pictures or videos online and are willing to share their thoughts with other members, etc.

Once a person qualifies for the community, reconfirm that they're willing and able to participate over the long term. To do this, we recommend letting them know that they qualify to participate in a long-term community project and clearly lay out the expectations of the community that were defined during Step 1 of the planning process. In this blurb, you can include information on:

- What the community will be about - its mission

- A description of what they will be asked to do and how often they will need to participate

- The time it's expected to take and what they'll receive in return for their contributions

You can then finish with a question to reconfirm that they are interested in participating in the community and agree to the terms. This should lead to a higher proportion of engaged members that want to participate over the long term.

Step 3: Content Creation

While you are recruiting, you can start drafting the initial content for your community. Every community will be different but at minimum you should consider creating the following:

- Community Guidelines - Community Rules/ Regulations, Code of Conduct, Terms & Conditions, Privacy and Cookie Policy, etc.

- FAQ - You might not have any questions yet, but try to anticipate what you would want to know if you were a participant and create a section on your site that includes this information so it's easily accessible.

- Reward System/ Incentive Structure - We recommend clearly laying out the community's reward structure so that it's transparent how participants will earn incentives and what they can expect to receive in return for their contributions.

- Welcome Invitation - Beyond the initial screener, this will be the first interaction you have with your members so make it count. The first email must not only welcome them to the community but also outline what they can expect once they log in.

- Home Page Content - Think about what you would want to see if you were a community member logging in for the first time. It's always great to have pictures and videos from the moderator, suggested ways to meet other members, along with important information front and center.

- Welcome / Engagement Activities - Don't forget to include activities on the site that members will find entertaining and can do right away - this will keep them coming back. Have a few topical discussions posted, along with a getting to know you activity so participants can share a little bit about themselves before diving into research driven activities.

Step 4: Community Programming & Launch

Now that you have the initial content drafted, it's time to bring your community to life.

Depending on your choice of platform, there will be different features and functionality that you can leverage along the way. Recollective makes it easy to customize your community yourself or you can leverage our team of in-house experts to program it for you.

If you decide to adopt a DIY approach, here's the path we recommend when creating a new community:

1. First task is to confirm settings in the Site Settings, adjust the automatic email notifications and add any agreements members must accept before they are able to join.

2. Then move on to updating the site's appearance by adding a logo, favicon, adjusting the colors and adding a background for the login page.

3. Next, adjust any other settings and configurations that are specific to the study space and add my content to the Home Page before moving on to activity guide programming.

4. Finally, you can then program your initial Activities and Discussions.

Once everything is programmed into the site, we recommend a quick preview of it as a participant. You can also give clients, observers and research team member access to review the site before you welcome participants.

When satisfied with the setup, it is officially time to invite your members into the community! If you're using Recollective, schedule the welcome email to send automatically at any time. It will direct members to the site, prompt them to upload a profile picture, change their password and agree to any terms and conditions that you have predefined.

Step 5: Ongoing Execution

Once you get your community off of the ground there is going to be an ongoing element of repetition. While you won't go through the same exact process that we outlined above, there are aspects of each step that you will need to work through at different intervals over the duration of your community:

1. Planning - with respect to community objectives, ensure that you're aligned with your clients and stakeholders as their priorities evolve to plan out fresh content, activities and discussions. While you won't be redesigning and restructuring your community very often, it is also important to keep the look and feel of the community fresh by changing up your Home Page. For ongoing communities you might even want to do a full redesign at some point by changing up the logo, background or colors.

2. Recruitment - it's important to keep a pulse on the overall health of your community by actively monitoring participation and engagement. If you notice a dip in response rates, it might be time to consider a refresh to replace inactive or poorly engaged members with new participants. How often you refresh will all depend on the topic, branding, frequency and type of activities along with incentives.

3. Content Creation, Programming and Fielding - you will be developing content and activities on a frequent basis which will need to be programmed, reviewed and fielded to your community members.
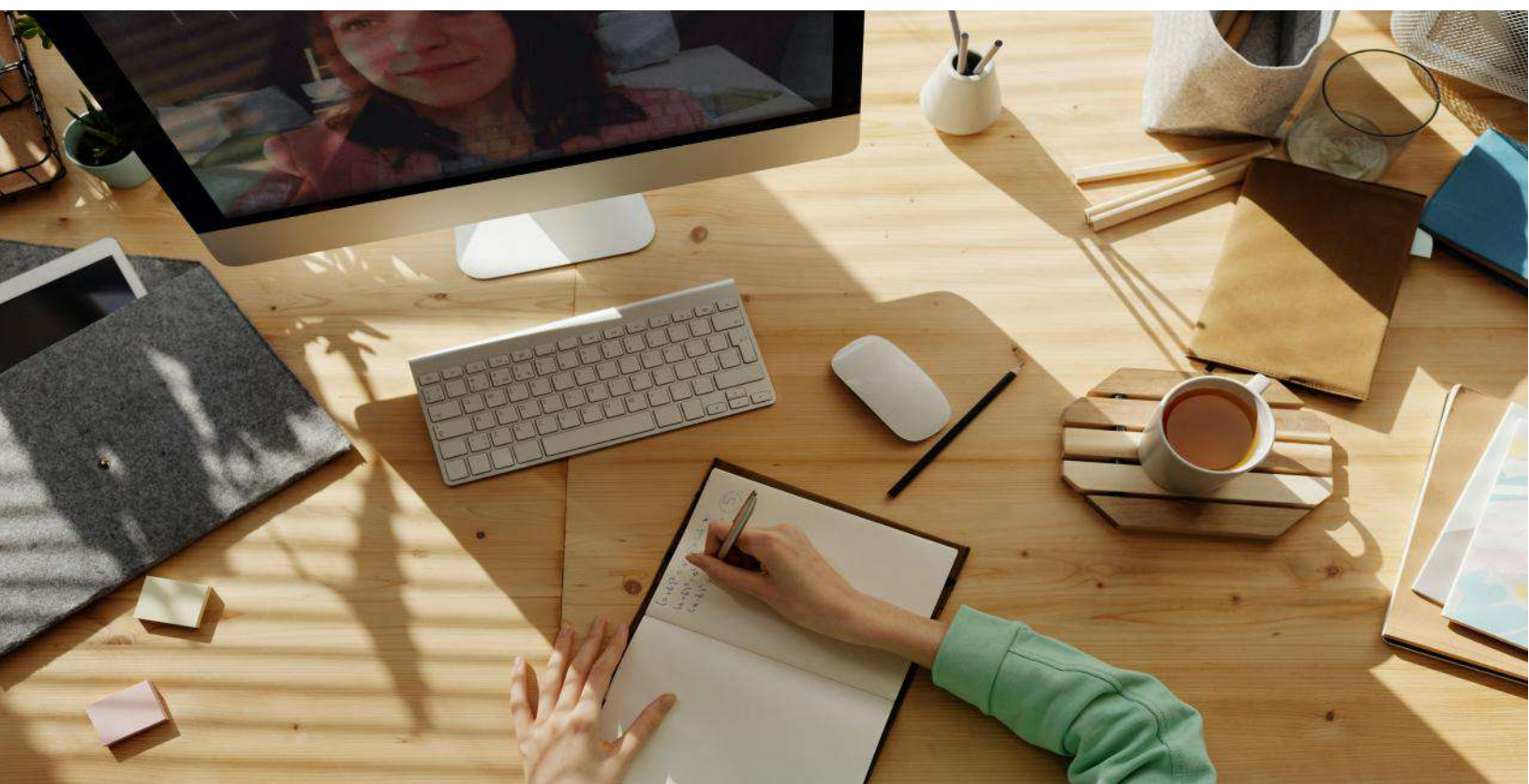
Conclusion

You did it! You made it to the end of this *very* long article. If you're still with us, it's safe to say that you have an interest in long-term community creation and the mechanics that go into the structure and design.

Keep a look out for the next article in our long-term community series which will look to explore best practices for designing, targeting and executing your community. If you have any questions in the meantime, please don't hesitate to reach out to our team.

Contact Us

Website: recollective.com
Email: sales@recollective.com