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ISGweb NEWS

CASE STUDY:

Dramatic Improvement in Online Experience Benefits Independent Schools



How to Make Your Discussion Forums a Success

Discussion forums offer a powerful way to expand the reach of your association. With forums on your website, you can:

- Extend networking opportunities to members who are unable to attend conferences and meetings.
 - Keep your finger on the pulse of your industry so you can be even more responsive.
 - Enhance your website with member-generated content.
 - Strengthen your ties with members, particularly those who do not participate actively now.
- Add value to your annual conference and other events.

But more than half of all discussion forums fail. Here are some tips to help ensure that this doesn't happen to your forums.

1. Make sure your forums fill a need.

Sometimes discussion forums are introduced as a result of a mandate from senior management or the board. But before you invest in the software, devote some time and resources

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) acts as the voice of independent pre-collegiate education, representing nearly 1,300 U.S. independent schools, including day and boarding schools; elementary and secondary schools; and boys', girls', and coeducational schools.

One of the most important member benefits NAIS offers is research and development, through its statistics gathering, independent research, and surveying functions. The StatsOnline survey collects data on admissions, annual giving, financial aid, financial operations, salaries, schools, students, staff, and tuition. Member schools update this information on their school rosters each year. They then can use reports generated from the data to provide their school boards with the information needed to set policy and make decisions in a wide range of areas.

"The driving force behind acquiring ISGweb was the need to manage the school rosters," says John Rodrigues, director of information technologies at NAIS. "We had to get the rosters fixed by the middle of

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Discussion Forums Continued

to determining whether forums are viable for your organization.

Identify types of networking and collaboration that can take place in your forums. What kind of questions are members likely to pose—that they can't get answered easily in other ways? See if you can draft 20 types of questions members might post to the forums. Optimally, you're looking for peer-to-peer discussions that benefit from the involvement of a group of people who do not already gather in other places.

Do focus groups or get members involved in planning discussions. No matter how well you know your members, they are likely to come up with ideas you haven't thought of yet. Make sure to get feedback from student members—they will probably have very useful insights.

Then estimate traffic on the forums. Do you have enough members to create lively discussions? As many as 90% of your visitors are likely to lurk. Relatively few people will post frequently—and although some will be association stalwarts, you may be surprised to see that a significant number of forum regulars will have not participated this actively before with your association.



2. Seed the forums so members see activity from the beginning.

Many members will visit shortly after you launch your forums, and if the forums are bare when they arrive they are less likely to return.

Line up as many members as possible to post thought-provoking questions in the early days and respond to posts from other members. Ask a few

members to greet and thank newbies who post their first message. Receiving a warm welcome will encourage them to return and make lurkers less hesitant about posting themselves.

You'll also want to upload useful

documents to the forums, both so members see value and so they get an idea of the type and quality of content you'd like them to add.

3. Create events and content that draw people to the forums regularly.

Plan a 6-to-12 month schedule of activities for the forums, preferably with some new activity every week or two.

Some of the activities can be provided by extending conferences, meetings and other offline events. For example, you could ask popular speakers to hold a post-conference chat on a topic related to their session. Then add the recording or transcript of the chat to the forum archives.

But include online-only activities too. Podcasts or live interviews with experts take minimal time and resources from both your staff and the expert. Discussions on hot topics that involve groups of members, vendors and other associate members can have great value to all participants.

Contests, polls, and holiday-related activities make the forums fun places to hang out.

4. Promote forums on an ongoing basis.

You can't simply announce that discussion forums are available and expect huge volumes of traffic. Integrate promotion of your forums with all of your online and offline communications. Every magazine, newsletter, e-mail newsletter, and marketing mailing should include a mention of upcoming activities in your forums.

You can also promote your forums at conferences, with an insert in product shipments, on letterhead and business cards, and even in your voice mail recordings. The more deeply you integrate your forums into your association's mission, the more successful they will be. 🙌

CASE STUDY: *Continued*

February, which is when we ask the schools to do their annual update, so we could avoid getting hundreds of phone calls – similar to the difficulties we have had in previous years – from people who were having problems managing their rosters.”

Five months to launch

“We went live with the school rosters five months from the date we started the project,” continues Rodrigues. “That’s actually very good.” The launch included ISGweb’s Company Profile Management, Buyers’ Guide, Product Catalog, Unified Login and Update Profile modules.

“John did a great job of managing the project. The whole group at NAIS stayed on task and kept their focus on the end result,” says Debbie Chmara, senior consultant with the ISG Group.

“Debbie was absolutely phenomenal,” says Rodrigues. “She knows both *iMIS* and ISGweb very well. She never gave up trying to find solutions for our business requirements. For the most part she came up with really creative solutions. But if there was no solution she told us straight off; she didn’t try to sell us something that didn’t exist. That makes such a great working relationship. We always knew exactly where we stood and we always felt she was doing the best possible thing for us with ISGweb and *iMIS*.”

Fewer tech support calls

The new roster system has eliminated a lot of calls, according to Rodrigues. Although there have been some calls from people who had questions about the new approach, the total volume of calls is well under what it was last year. “There have been far fewer calls requiring second- and third-tier support,” says Rodrigues. “The first-level customer support staff has been able to handle most of the questions.”

More robust directory search

The new roster system is also allowing NAIS to collect additional data about member schools, including information on language pro-

“ISGweb wasn’t a minor change that happened in our organization—it was revolutionary!”

grams, offerings for the disabled, before- and after-school programs, and summer programs.

“We are going to have a much more robust search capability,” states Rodrigues. “Parents will be able to use this to find our member schools using all kinds of criteria they’ve never had before. Everyone here is very excited about that.”

More accurate buyers’ guide billing

“We’ve had comments from our vendors that they’re really pleased with the new buyers’ guide. They like that it has more information than it did before and that they can update much of it themselves online,” states Rodrigues. “From our perspective, we like that the only people in the guide are those that have subscribed and are paying. Before, it didn’t always match up.”

Unified login controls access to career center

“The unified login, together with the ISGweb security groups created to match NAIS business rules, have eliminated non-member schools and corporations from posting jobs on

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NAIS' members-only career center," says Rodrigues. "This, along with the limiting of buyers' guide participants to paid corporate subscribers, have resulted in increased revenues for NAIS."

Online orders double

With the introduction of the online product catalog, NAIS has real-time e-commerce for the first time. Rodrigues believes the ease of ordering online has encouraged many members to make the transition. "The number of online orders has doubled since we launched our new product catalog," states Rodrigues.

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Measuring lifetime value of customers

NAIS has also been able to forge a better relationship with its fulfillment house. Previously, the association was not able to capture any data about who was buying its products. But the information from online orders now goes directly into *iMIS*. Since fewer orders come in by phone, fax, snail mail and e-mail, the fulfillment house agreed to provide a data export (with *iMIS* IDs)

on any orders it receives directly. This has allowed NAIS to start tracking the lifetime value of customers for the first time.

"We're going to be able to target marketing efforts to customers based on what products they purchase and what events they register for," explains Rodrigues.

More than half of attendees register online

A month after the new school rosters were introduced, NAIS went live with ISGweb's Conference Setup & Registration module. "We do about a dozen workshops a year and everyone wanted to have online registration," says Rodrigues. "Even without any real marketing, 60% of the people who have registered since March have registered online. It saves a lot of time and is convenient for our members."

"Our meetings and accounting staffs have commented several times about the reduction in their workloads, given that more registrations are being received online," adds Rodrigues.

"I'm really really pleased with ISGweb," Rodrigues concludes. "ISGweb wasn't a minor change that happened in our organization—it was revolutionary!" 🙌

Core Modules

Unified Login & Create Account

Update Profile

Administrator

Additional Modules

Membership Directory

Leadership Directory

Buyers Guide

Find a Professional

Company Profile Management

Membership Application

Dues Renewal

Events Calendar

Meeting Setup & Registration

Product Catalog

Communities

Donations



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