

What is Community Engagement?



“Community engagement” is the fancy industry term for ‘starting a conversation’.

You would have seen a lot of these online - things like:

- What is your opinion on x?
- VOTE: Do you prefer x or y?
- What is your take on the latest news about z?

These are designed to do a few things -

- These help build community. Having rich and deep conversations about the topics which are important to your brand helps people feel connected.
- If people comment on a post, it can be shared with their network, increasing the reach of your post
- The more often people interact with your brand, the more frequently they will be served your content.

In many cases, this is why things like memes are shared as well - funny photos or videos. The goal is the same thing - to spark and inspire conversation, connection and community -- and perhaps get a little love from the algorithm which serves your content to people.

When choosing topics for conversation, remember that you’re opening conversations to help your audience connect with you and your brand and trust you. Keep conversations thematically aligned with your business and its values.

Keep in mind your brand tone-of-voice too: is your brand formal, or informal? What conversation topics are appropriate for the demographic?

It’s useful to follow these rules of thumb when creating conversation starters:

- **Ask one question only:** humans will have a meltdown if you ask too many questions at once (anyone who has ever had to remember the coffee order of

'a small soy vanilla double-shot cappuccino' knows how hard it can be to juggle too much information in your head at once!)

- **Create a low barrier to entry:** make the conversation starter something that 99% of your audience can answer. It's easy to answer 'How's the weather where you are?' because everyone has a reference point to answer this (although, it's not the most interesting question!). 'What are the property prices on your street?' is much harder, and only people who have an interest in property will be able to answer. Find the equivalent in your community of a question everyone can answer. 'What tv show are you watching now' is a better sweet spot where people can easily answer, but it's likely to lead to some interesting conversations off the back of it.
- **Close the loop:** if you ask a question, pop back in and *respond* to people to keep the conversation going. If you're scheduling the question in a social media scheduling tool, pop a reminder in your calendar to get back to anyone posting comments. There's nothing more awkward than someone pouring their heart out in response to your question... which is then met with silence. Don't do that to your community. Your objective is to foster these connections. For example, if someone lists a tv show they like - ask them what's awesome about it.
- **You are responsible for the answers to the question you are asking:** if you're asking a personal question or something which is likely to bring up trauma, be prepared for the answers people give and be prepared with appropriate responses. If you're asking 'what's the worst thing that happened to you this week?', be aware that answers can get very serious very quickly. But remember that when this happens, you're not an expert. It's best to point people to experts and services like Lifeline or BeyondBlue (if you're Australian-based) if things get heavy.
- **Know your tribe:** You will always have some people who are superfans of your business. They always answer questions. They always share your posts. Encouraging them to answer questions from other community members, or giving the community time and space to answer each other's questions is a great first step to building a stronger, richer community which can eventually lead to less hands-on management.

In the world of social media marketing over the past decade, we've seen versions of 'engagement' morph from real conversations to engage the community to the simple "do you prefer this or that?" with the goal of gaining and gaming reach. While this can be fun for the community occasionally, it's really not *true* engagement, especially if you want a real connection with your community.

Focusing on conversations that are drawn on your values are much more important. Let's imagine a craft store that could be superficial and ask "Is blue or red your favourite colour of paint?" Yes, they'd get engagement, but that isn't a way to build a community.

To build trust and a community, I recommend something a little deeper: "What's the first piece of art you remember creating in school?" It is more in-depth and will elicit more personal responses to help bond that community.

However, for people to answer these more intimate questions, there needs to be a foundation of trust first: the craft store staff might begin by sharing posts of *their* first messy artwork. And of course, building trust doesn't happen overnight.

Neither of these approaches are incorrect - it's more just about knowing what you're posting and why. If you want to get people to engage with a like or a simple comment to get the ball rolling, great. Then, over time, look for opportunities to create more in-depth conversations.