

# How to start and run a successful Internet community site.

My name is Rob Kennedy and I've started, run, and eventually sold Internet community sites. I never intended to sell them, but as they got more popular they were more difficult to find the time to run unless I took them over as my full-time job.

The longest running site we had was PWCToday.com. It is a PWC/Jetski community website that we (my wife and I) started in June of 2000. Five years later we found that we had to make a choice of either me quitting my regular job or selling the site. It had grown so large that it needed more time than we had hobby-wise to put into it. It was and still is the most popular jetski website on the Internet! That's a great sign from a website – meaning that you could depend on it for daily income and replace your current job with something that you're excited about! We took the low road and sold it to a company that was in the industry. I was itching to try my hand at other things after seeing how well we did with that one!

## **Choose your topic for your site:**

The most important part about your website is that it is something you are passionate about. Don't try putting something together that you think will be popular – that may work in the short term, but you'll find yourself getting disinterested in the topics being discussed in your forum and you really want to be at the center of all of that.

For example sake – let's say you wanted to start a motocross site. You're involved in racing, you know a lot of people in your area, and you're passionate about the sport and you'd love to have your own website about it.

There are two key questions that you need to ask yourself at this point:

1. Is my topic popular enough to warrant its own website? (Are there enough people to keep the topics flowing in the forum? Is there enough happening around the industry to keep a news section current?)

2. Are there already too many xxxx sites out there? (If the web is already overflowing with community sites with your topic, chances aren't as great for it to take off and be popular)

Cruise around the web a bit until you're sure your topic is something that you think will be popular enough to feed a website but not too popular that other sites will overshadow yours.

## **Internet hosting:**

A very important part of your site is your hosting provider. They will be the ones to provide you space on an Internet server for your site. You want to make sure you choose a company that you can trust and also be able to build a relationship. I've tried all sorts, and 4-5 years ago found a great small hosting company that could meet my needs and were small enough that we know each other on a first name basis. The company I use and have been using is Doreo (Doreo.com). I suggest looking around at different hosting companies, calling them to test their support, ask them questions about where their servers are located, etc.. until you are comfortable with one. Also ask around and see who other sites are using and who they could recommend.

While shopping around for a hosting provider, look at their pricing and decide which hosting plan you want to start with. Any good hosting provider will let you start small/cheap and let you build up to larger plans as your site grows.

If you want to skip this step, head over to [Doreo.com](http://Doreo.com) and look over their hosting plans. 😊

## **Community website Breakdown:**

Your website will be made up of a couple different sections to start with. You will likely add things as it gets more popular. The main two sections are the News and Forum sections. There's TONS of software out there both for free and commercial (fee). Whenever I start a site, I always start out with the free forum software called phpBB (PHP based bulletin board) located at [phpbb.com](http://phpbb.com). It has all the great features of the fee-based forum software packages but costs nothing. If you're comfortable with editing the coding in the software, you can even add other modifications that people

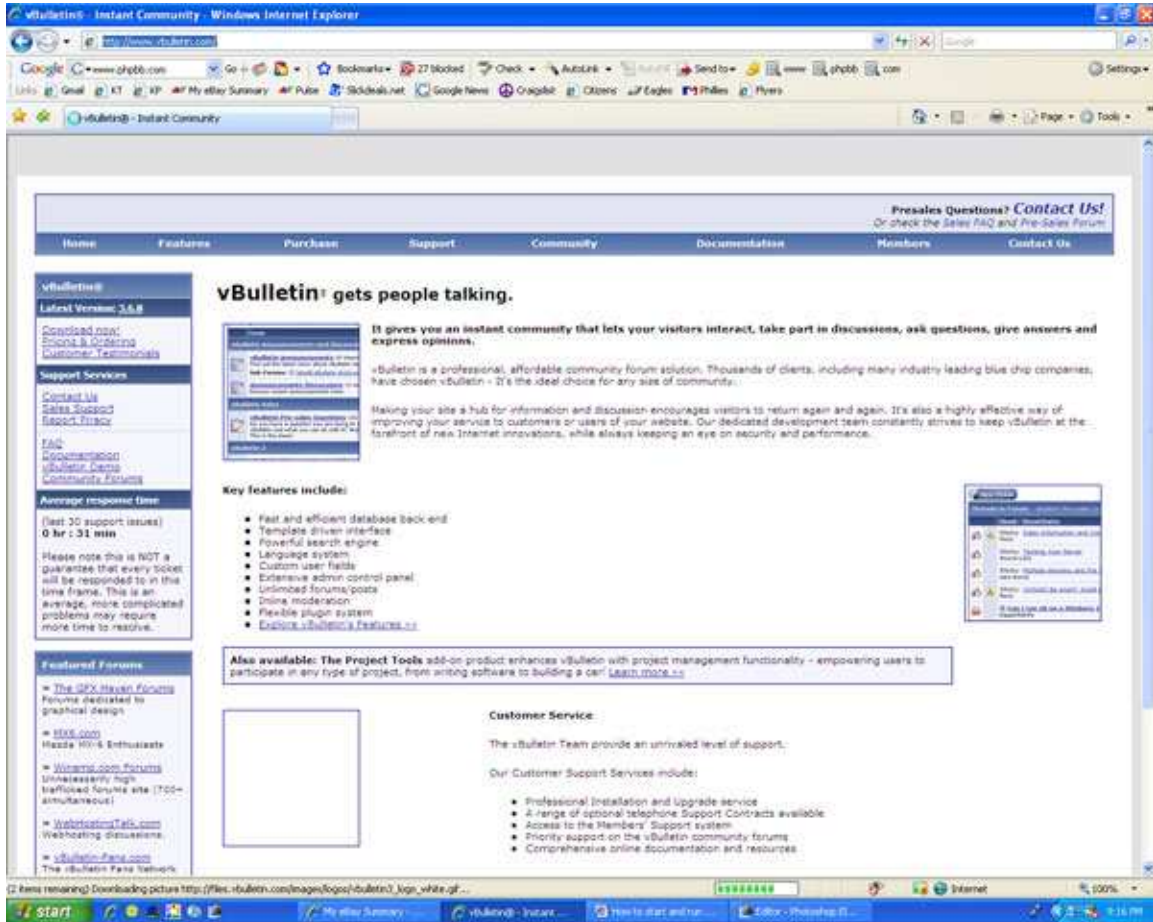
have created to give your forum that extra function that your competition doesn't have. If you aren't comfortable editing code, then there are always people out there that will do it for you – for a fee of course.

The phpBB software can be installed by downloading it from phpbb.com or by using something like Fantastico (a software installer located on web based admin section of your hosting location). Either way, make sure you keep phpBB updated with the latest software release to ensure you have a secure installation and are kept relatively bug-free.



phpBB has been around for years and has a huge following of programmers to keep things interesting. If you start looking around the web, you'll see that a large amount of sites are using this software.

If you want to pay for software – I'd suggest Vbulletin (vbulletin.com) as it is probably the most popular pay forum software out there and also has a multitude of add-ons.



Either way, you'll be fine with either software package no matter how large your site gets.

Once your forum site is up and running create a couple key forum sections. Start out with a news forum for posting things that are going on within the industry of your topic. Next, create a general section and some other sections that you think will be popular.

Don't forget the off-topic section so that your users can talk about other topics amongst each other. That is an important section of any website.

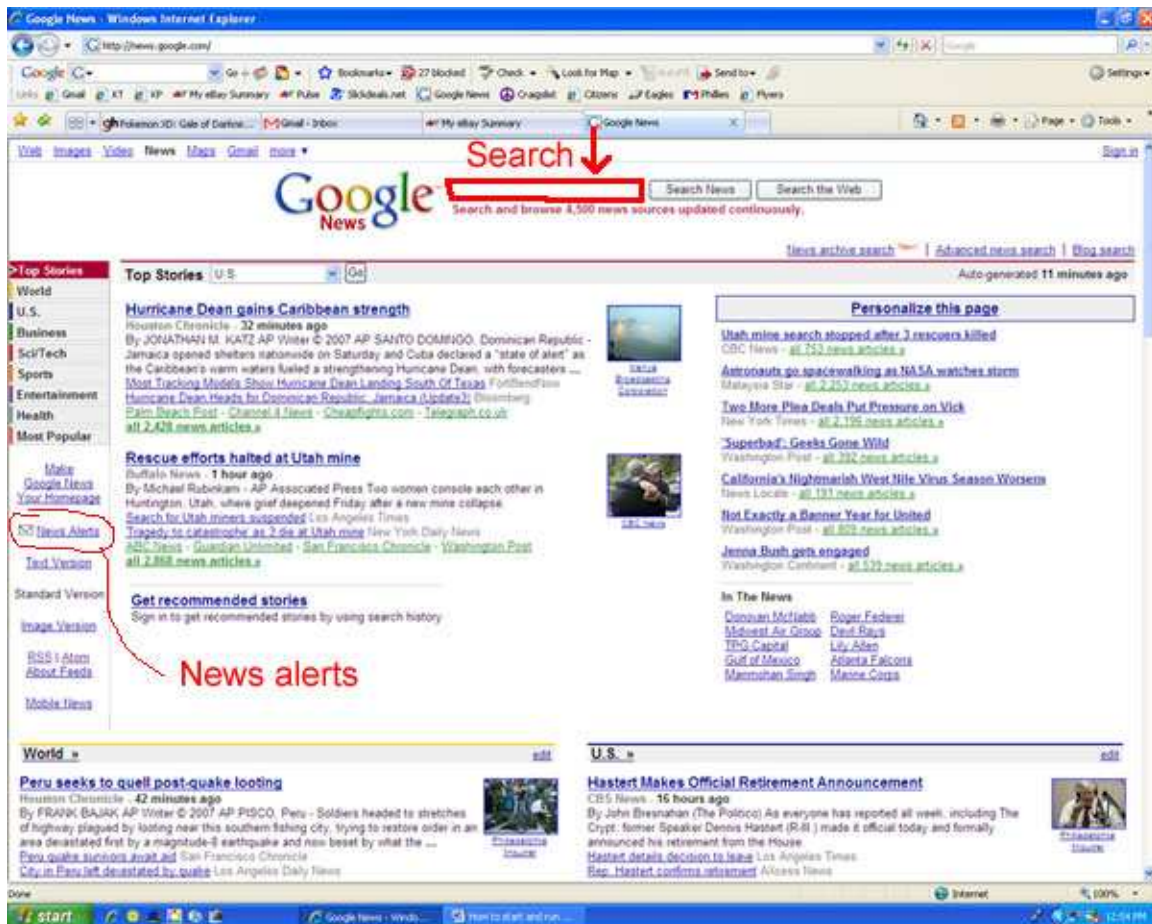
Head over to news.google.com and create a couple news alerts that will email you with news stories about your topic. You can search through and use those as your news topics also. Here's an example for a motocross site:

(Title) Motocross ride benefits sick children

(Lead in) John Smith of super cycle is putting on a ride where the entrance fee will be given to the hospital of saint Rob to help pay medical bills for children without insurance. We met John at the race in NY last year and he's great for our sport!

(link to full article)Read more: <http://motocross-info-site>

The full story was posted on motocross-info-site but you're alerting your members to the info so they don't miss out on it. Make sure you get to know 'John Smith' well so next year you can interview him for your site.. possibly get some sponsorships going with him, etc...



Now – you found a story using news.google.com and didn't copy and paste it into your site since that's illegal, but you are alerting your readers to the story and also giving your own spin on it.

One of the most important things when running a site is not to be afraid that your users will leave your site because you or someone else posted a link/story to another site. That could have very well linked them over to

your competition site – but if you don't alert them to things going on within your topic then your users won't be as informed as they could be. They'll see you are giving them more info than any other site and will stick by you and tell their friends about your site. Why call any other site home if they can get all their info from you?

You don't want to rely on google though for your news. You want to make sure you know what's going on in the industry – sign up for press releases and news updates from all of the companies – contact the companies and let them know you have a news section and you'd love to post their news announcements for them..

## **Get people on your site!**

Word of mouth: Call and email all of the people you know that are interested in the topic of your website. Tell them about it and what your plans are for the site. You will need a couple administrators so pick 2 of your friends that you can trust and make them admins on the site. This will give them the feeling of ownership and they will be proud to help you recruit users for the site.

Word of mouth: Let some friends moderate the different sections and that will in turn give them the feeling of ownership and they too will feel the need to promote and help to grow the site by recruiting new members to the site.

Advertise: If you have some money to spend on the site, the best place to start is on Google.com. I've found it's the best place to keep an advertisement going and will help to send traffic your way. They have different plans so whether you wanted to spend \$10/month to \$1000/mo they can take care of you. Of course the more you spend, the more people will get directed to your site.

Sponsorships: If your site's topic deals with people that can be sponsored, create a section for your sponsored members – sponsor them so they tell others about your site and in turn show off their talents in the sponsored section.

Use other websites or newsgroups to announce your new site for free. Have friends post on competition websites about something they read on your site.

## **Start the advertising:**

You eventually want to get advertising going on your site to pay the monthly hosting bill, travel bills, phone bills, etc...

Start by giving away advertising to companies who you think can help you later on. Right now your site is small and no one is going to want to pay to advertise to the few people on your site. Tell 4-5 companies that you will put up their banner advertisement free for 6 months. It's not going to cost you money, but it will help those companies – and other companies will see the advertisements and want to get on board! They don't want their competition advertising somewhere if they aren't.

This is when you start charging. Start out small – say \$50/month for the first 6 months, then increase it by \$25 each 6 months to a year thereafter until you feel it's a fair price.

Don't make it too expensive – concentrate on trying to get as many advertisers as possible instead of how much you can make from a handful of advertisers.

As far as software goes, I've always used phpadsnew – which is now called openads and can be found either on OpenAds.org or through Fantastico on your hosting provider's server.

It allows you to set up any number of advertisers with their own login information so they can log on anytime to see their statistics. You can also set up timed emails with the stats to the advertisers. OpenAds can do anything the pay software can do – it is all I'll use.



## Maintaining the site:

- Each day look through each section on the site to see how things are going.
- Post up a couple news items to keep the topics flowing and start a couple topics in some of the other forum sections.
- Converse back and forth with members of your site within topics they have started.
- Help the moderators and admins to do their job. The moderators' job is to keep order within their forum section. The admins' are there to help the moderators if they have a problem user if you are not around.

Don't sit back and let the admins/moderators do all the work, but give them space to let them police their sections how they see fit. Also, allow the admins and moderators to help post up news stories or original content if they like. The more authors the better!

Again, don't worry if members post up links to competition sites. You'll cause yourself more of a headache if you try to curb that stuff. Let them speak their mind on the topic at hand and in the end, you're the home for most people interested in that topic. This is really important and can make the difference of your site taking off or not.

Follow my information, throw in some of your own ideas, and with some luck, you'll have yourself a decision to make in a few years ;)

I hope this e-book has helped to give you some direction in your new endeavor – If you have any questions while setting up or maintaining your site please email me and I'll do my best to help you out.

Also, if you have trouble along the way, by letting me know, I'll be able to update this document to help out others in the future.

Good luck!

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