Wonderly

Inspiring
communities

The Community Growth & Benchmark Report 2026

Building trust in tumultuous times

Discover how smart brands and member organisations are using the power of community to grow

In partnership with hivebrite

Executive summary

Community management has never had more to prove. Organisations are investing more, expecting more, and relying on their communities to deliver something no other channel can: lasting trust with the people who matter most.

89.1%

of respondents expect community projects to become more important in the next 12-24 months

This report is built on 186 survey responses from community professionals, collected early 2026. It captures how communities are structured, how they are resourced, what is driving participation, and where the gaps remain.
The direction of travel is clear. 89.1% of respondents expect community projects to become more important in the next 12-24 months. 36.1% expect spend to increase, 42.4% expect it to stay the same. Most leadership teams no longer need convincing that community matters. The harder job now is showing them specifically what yours delivers.

The data paints a consistent picture of what organisations actually want from community. More than half of respondents (56.5%) say “stronger relationships and trust” is the primary benefit they want from their community, ahead of retention and lifetime value (38.1%) and learning and knowledge-sharing (37.4%). Notably, only 5.4% cite revenue influence as a primary goal, a striking reminder that community professionals are building something qualitatively different from a marketing channel. When trust between organisations and the people they serve is under pressure, this is work that matters.

77.6% say they can explain community’s value to senior leadership. The data to prove it is another matter.

53.7% of community managers do not compare outcomes between members and non-members, and 19% do not track metrics consistently at all.

Confidence is running ahead of evidence. That holds until budgets tighten and someone asks for proof. The communities that come through the next cycle strongest will be the ones that can demonstrate the difference they make, not just describe it.

This report gives community managers the benchmarks, the context, and the practical recommendations to help close that gap.

Rise of the brand community

Community has always been important for brands, but several factors have pushed it up the corporate agenda.

Perhaps the most significant of these is the collapse of organic reach. As social media algorithms increasingly deprioritise brand content, email inboxes become more crowded and digital advertising costs rise, organisations are finding that owned communities offer something no platform can take away: a direct, trusted relationship with their audience.

> "A community is a social contract. A community can't disappear if you undergo a reorganisation or the brand manager is fired"

Start-ups and members' organisations are especially likely to have a heavy focus on community. Those figures tally with existing research. Recent research in the First Round Capital 'State of Startups' report shows that four out of five start-ups see community as a primary marketing strategy, with 28% seeing it as the factor most critical to their success.

However, Mark Schaefer, author of 'Belonging to the Brand: Why Community is the Last Great Marketing Strategy', says community remains an overlooked strategy: "Traditionally, marketing is often viewed in terms of annual campaigns. You fund a project, execute and, when the money is gone, you start over... But a community is a social contract. A community can't disappear if you undergo a reorganisation or the brand manager is fired. A community must be an organisational commitment."

Establishing trust is a key goal for these varied players who are building communities. In our research, the outcome most wanted by respondents is "stronger relationships and trust", an objective named by 56.5% of those polled. This is ahead of objectives such as increased retention or LTV (lifetime value) of customers, at 38.1%. It is no surprise that trust has become so important in tumultuous times.

From political commentators who maintain that we are living in a post-truth era, to consumers weary of corporate scandals that have hobbled well-known brands, faith in institutions has been lost. Brands have to work hard to win it back.

The 2024 'Trust in US Business' report by PwC found a huge trust gap between companies and consumers. Some 90% of business executives think customers highly trust their companies, but only 30% of consumers actually do. That gap of 60 percentage points is higher than the 57 points seen in the 2023 survey. Four in ten consumers had stopped buying from certain companies because they no longer trusted them.

Community, with its emphasis on peer relationships, transparency and shared values, may be one of the most credible tools organisations have to close that gap.

How community drives growth

Growing a community requires understanding its needs.

Professional bodies, such as industry associations, may offer advice and support. Charities might coalesce support around a shared mission. B2B communities might offer more transactional relationships, and consumer groups might share interests or a sense of belonging to a certain lifestyle.

> "More than two thirds of companies have increased community marketing budgets over the past 12 months"

Communities build habit by being always-on: members can connect with peers, find answers and share ideas at any time, independent of whether the community team is present. This self-sustaining quality is what separates a thriving community from a managed mailing list.

Modern communities go far beyond traditional social media networks – IRL events are a key driver, and the platforms that members use to communicate can shift constantly. They can also be hard to measure. Links shared directly between individuals, by platforms such as WhatsApp or Messenger, can generally not be tracked by brands. This "dark social" sharing, word-of-mouth amplified by private messaging platforms, is often the most powerful distribution channel a community generates. It is also the least visible. For community managers, this is both a frustration and an argument: when members are talking about you in spaces you cannot track, the value of community is almost certainly being undercounted.

That has not stopped budgets for community marketing from growing. According to Marketing LTB figures, more than two thirds of companies have increased community marketing budgets over the past 12 months.

	Audience	**Community**
Relationship	Brand out (one to many)	Peer focused (many to many)
Participation	Passive	Active
Metrics	Reach, views, likes	Comments, sharing, repeat engagement
Vibe	'Look at us'	'Come sit with us'
Goal	Tactical sales	Retention and lifetime value

Who does it well?

A Saturday morning visit to a UK park provides a clear illustration of the power of community.

Parkrun, a free, non-competitive, community run or walk meeting, has arguably done more to get UK residents to exercise than any number of government incentives.

Now an international phenomenon, it has more than 10 million members, and 3.9 million people in the UK have completed at least one Parkrun. Typically more than 350,000 Brits take part every Saturday, at around 900 locations. Many post user-generated content across social media channels, too. Sports brands have been natural pioneers of owned communities. Nike Run Club claims to have more than 100 million users worldwide, brought together by an app that lets runners record and share their stats and routes.

And there are plenty of examples from other sectors, too...

Blanchard

What worked: extending the relationship past the end of the programme. Leaders had a reason to return and a place to keep growing together.

Blanchard helps organisations develop better leaders but, after training ended, those leaders had nowhere to stay connected.

To fix this, Blanchard launched a community on Hivebrite where members across 70+ countries can join discussions, attend events and build relationships with peers long after their training is over.

The platform gives leaders a place to keep learning and growing together. In its first year, the community grew to 4,700 members with a 76% activation rate, and members reported feeling twice as supported in reaching their goals.

Volkswagen Group

What worked: making the hub useful day to day. When people rely on it to do their job, engagement takes care of itself.

The VW Group is home to some of the UK's biggest car brands – Audi, Skoda, SEAT and VW itself. And they rely on a wealth of content – from technicians in search of performance data to dealers who need inspiration about a new family EV. They get all of that through Wonderly's bespoke content hub, used by 75% of the 16,000-strong network every day, and described by 85% of dealers as an "essential business tool". This unifying content, and supportive community spirit, helps them sell nearly half a million cars in the UK every year.

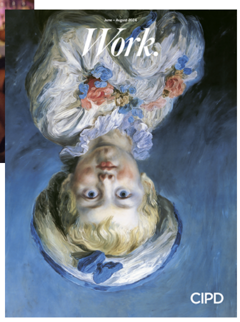
The Obama Foundation

What worked: replacing manual introductions with a searchable directory and dedicated spaces, so leaders could find each other without a staff member in the middle.

The Obama Foundation Leadership Network is a global alumni community for leaders who have completed the Obama Foundation's leadership programmes.

Before launching its community platform with Hivebrite, the foundation had no scalable way for leaders across different cohorts and countries to connect with each other, relying instead on staff to manually manage spreadsheets and facilitate introductions.

Today, the community provides a searchable directory, dedicated collaboration spaces and authentic peer-to-peer connections that enable its 1,200+ leaders across nearly 150 countries to find one another, share resources and build lasting relationships that combat the isolation of leadership work.



The CIPD

What worked: a daily habit. A bulletin people open every afternoon turns membership into routine, and routine into renewal.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development represents 160,000 UK people professionals. Every weekday afternoon, more than 50,000 of them read the People Management news bulletin, reinforcing a community connection among curious professionals. It's part of a portfolio of content supplied by Wonderly – including a vibrant LinkedIn community and award-winning events – cited as one of the main factors in membership renewal every year.

Marine Conservation Society

What worked: content worth spending time with. A magazine members read does more for belonging than a feed they scroll past.

The Marine Conservation Society fights for a cleaner, healthier ocean, with supporters having a direct impact by volunteering to gather together and clean British beaches. They are brought together by 'Your Ocean', an award-winning digital magazine created for MCS supporters by Wonderly. It has an average read time of two minutes and 43 seconds per issue (smashing the industry average of one minute) and celebrates and encourages the community spirit of volunteers.

CERN

What worked: a clear reason to stay connected after leaving. Peers, job postings and mentorship kept alumni engaged every week, not only at launch.

CERN is the world's leading particle physics laboratory but, when scientists, engineers and staff left, there was no way to keep them connected.

In 2017, CERN launched an alumni community on Hivebrite to change that. Members across 120+ countries can now find peers, access job postings, get mentorship and stay close to CERN's mission.

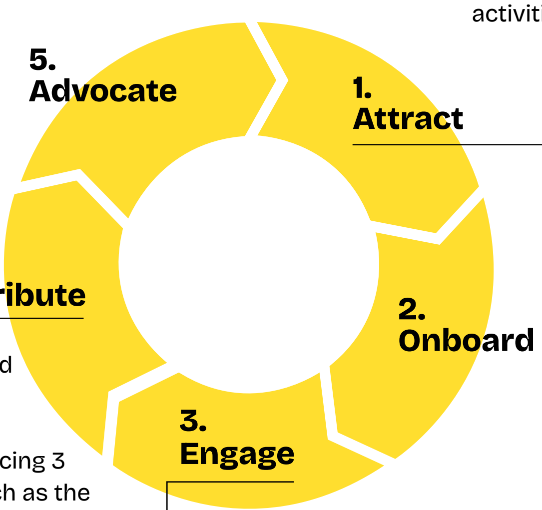
In seven years, the community grew from zero to 10,000 members, with a 75% activation rate and 85% of activated members engaging weekly.

How healthy is your community?

Online discussions, live events, directories, polls and competitions can combine to make a community into a place that members want to come back to again and again.

When they do, members must be assured that they are in a safe space. Clear guidelines on what is expected and acceptable – from both members and admins – can help with this. However, many communities remain immature when it comes to measurement. Over half (53.7%) of respondents to our study do not compare customer metrics between members and non-members. Nearly a fifth (19%) don't consistently track metrics. This lack of measurement might make getting a bigger slice of budgets for communities more challenging.

Personal recommendations cut through more than traditional top-of-funnel activities



Members lead content and discussions, ideally producing 3 times as much as the organisation itself

Organisation-led content brings members deeper into the fold

The community flywheel

A community flywheel is a self-sustaining growth model where engaged members attract, onboard and support new members, reducing the team's workload over time.

Unlike a linear sales funnel, the flywheel is circular: members move from joining, to consuming content, to contributing, and finally to advocating for the community externally.

The community flywheel is one of the most effective frameworks for sustainable community growth, but it requires upfront investment before the self-sustaining dynamics take hold. It demands real effort upfront: starting conversations, welcoming members and keeping energy alive in those early months. The payoff comes later, when members begin carrying more of the load.

The five stages are: Attract, Onboard, Engage, Contribute and Advocate. Each stage builds on the last, compounding value without repeated investment.

A healthy flywheel shows a 3:1 member-to-staff content ratio, fast peer responses, a growing contributor base and strong organic referrals.

The future of community

The future of community may be bright, but it will require better measurement and understanding of who is involved to evolve and mature.

The communities created to tackle these issues of trust and member value are mainly still in a growth phase. More than a third of respondents (35.3%) say their community is established or fully mature, while 40.8% describe themselves as in a growing phase and 23.8% are still in the early stages of launching or testing.

'Growing' is the most-reported stage of development for communities. Growing further will require better reporting and measurement.

40.8%

of respondents describe themselves as in a growing phase

5 community trends

from more than 1,000 communities powered by Hivebrite (2025)

2x more groups per community

As communities scale, members gravitate toward smaller, purpose-driven groups where real engagement happens.

40% increase in member participation

Members are actively seeking trusted, authentic relationships through events, peer matching and direct messaging.

2x more users per admin

Growing communities mean heavier workloads for the people managing them, making smarter tools a priority.

30% of communities are using APIs

Communities are evolving into central hubs, integrating products and services to become the primary touchpoint for members.

50%+ of communities have adopted the mobile app

Members expect to engage on the go, with mobile browser usage growing alongside app adoption.

Key findings & recommendations

What the data shows, and what to do about it. The following findings are drawn directly from survey data.

1 Events are the most powerful driver of meaningful participation.

76.9% of respondents say events (online or in-person) drive the most meaningful participation in their community. The next highest responses were peer-to-peer support (40.8%) and discussion forums (37.4%).

Recommendation: *Make events a consistent feature of your community calendar, not an occasional addition. They are your single strongest driver of engagement, and the data is unambiguous on this point.*

76.9%

of respondents say events are the biggest driver of participation

2 Measurement is where community management falls short.

53.7% of respondents do not compare outcomes between members and non-members. 19% do not track metrics consistently at all. Despite this, 77.6% describe themselves as completely or very confident explaining the value of community to senior leadership.

Recommendation: *Build a simple, repeatable measurement habit before budget scrutiny arrives. The three most commonly tracked metrics across the industry are active users (75.5%), event attendance (55.1%), and participation rate (51%). Starting with these gives you a credible, consistent story for leadership. The next step, comparing those numbers between members and non-members, is where the most persuasive case for community gets made.*

3 Members want to connect with each other, not just with your organisation.

The primary purposes of community, as reported by respondents, are networking and connection (74.8%) and peer support or knowledge sharing (64.6%). At the same time, 42.2% of community managers publish content weekly. The volume of output does not always match what members are actually seeking.

Recommendation: *Design for conversation rather than broadcast. Use content as a prompt for member participation. A healthy community shifts progressively toward member-led activity, reducing the pressure on your team while deepening engagement.*

4 Trust is the most valued outcome, and the most important argument for community.

56.5% of respondents say "stronger relationships and trust" is the main benefit they want from community, ahead of retention and lifetime value (38.1%), learning and knowledge-sharing (37.4%). Only 5.4% cite revenue influence, which tells its own story about what community professionals believe they are actually building.

Recommendation: *Lead with trust when making the case internally.*

Community is not a marketing channel; it is how organisations earn and maintain the confidence of the people they serve

5 Scaling is the next major challenge, and it requires governance.

63.3% of respondents say sustaining participation is their biggest challenge. Scaling the community is the second most cited concern, at 45.6%. Governance and moderation are also identified as challenges (7.5%).

63.3%

of respondents identify sustaining participation as their biggest challenge

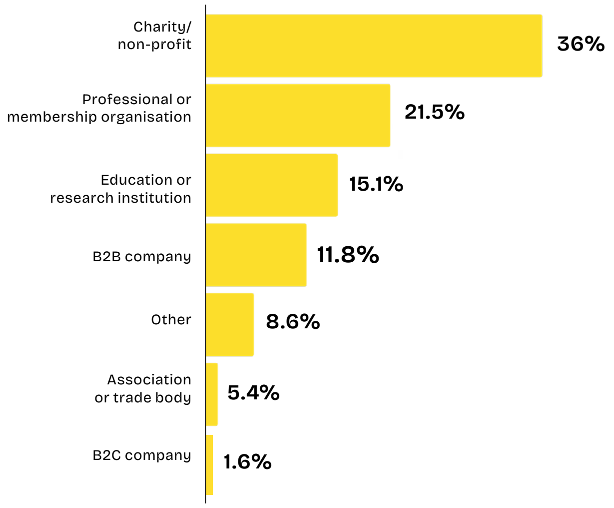
Recommendation: *Put governance structures in place before they become urgent. Appoint member ambassadors or moderators, define clear community standards, and create pathways for members to take on more responsibility over time.*

The data

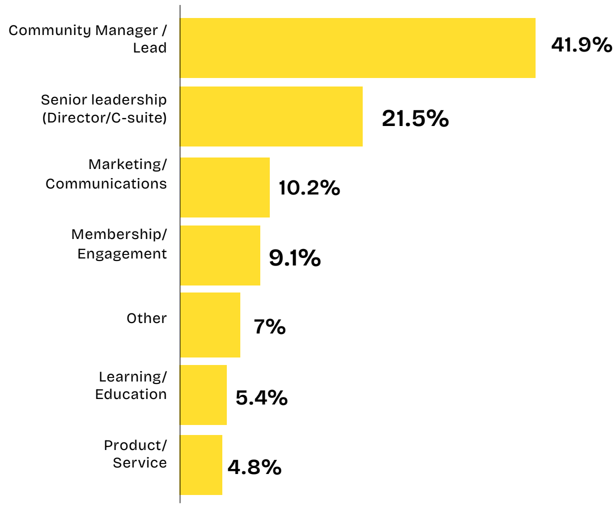
Who took part?

While community roles are well established, senior leaders are highly engaged in community building

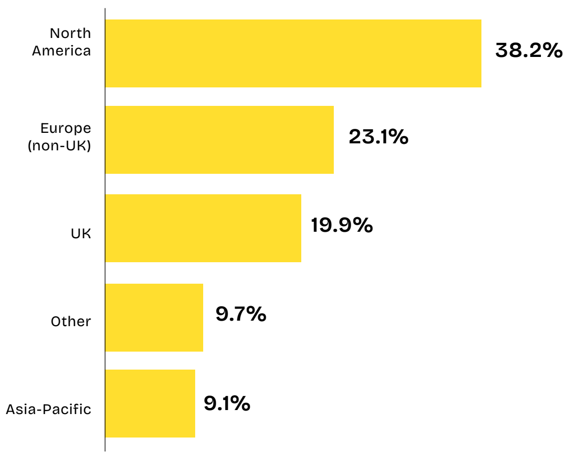
Sector



Role



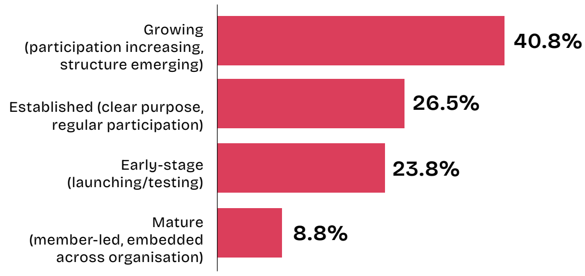
Location



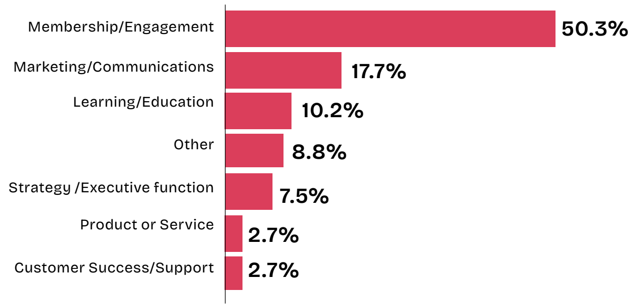
What do their communities look like?

Most see community as a vital – but underdeveloped – part of their organisation

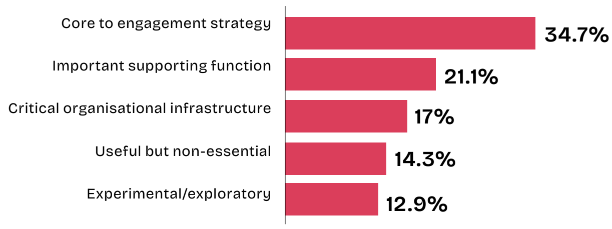
How would you describe the maturity of your community?



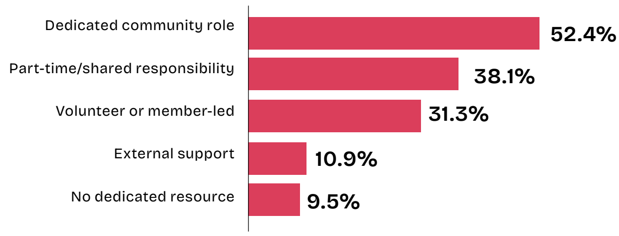
Where does community primarily sit within your organisation?



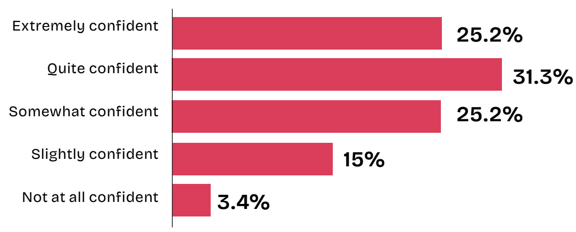
How would senior leadership describe the role of community today?



How is your community currently resourced?



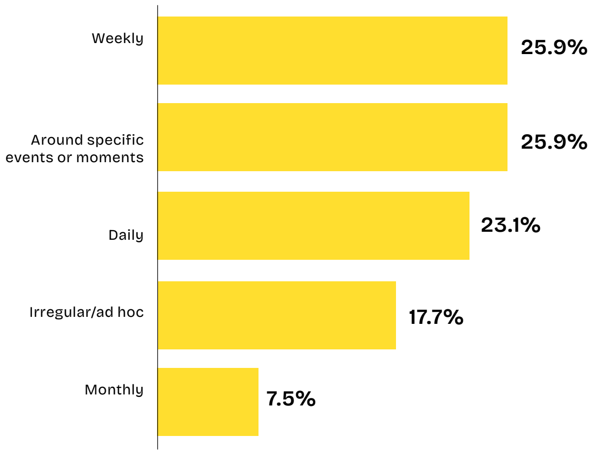
How confident are you that members feel safe asking for help or disagreeing respectfully in your community?



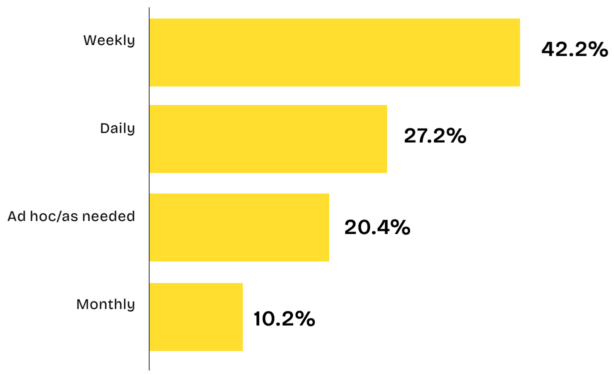
The content

Member engagement is driven by a regular publishing cycle, but in-person events are vital

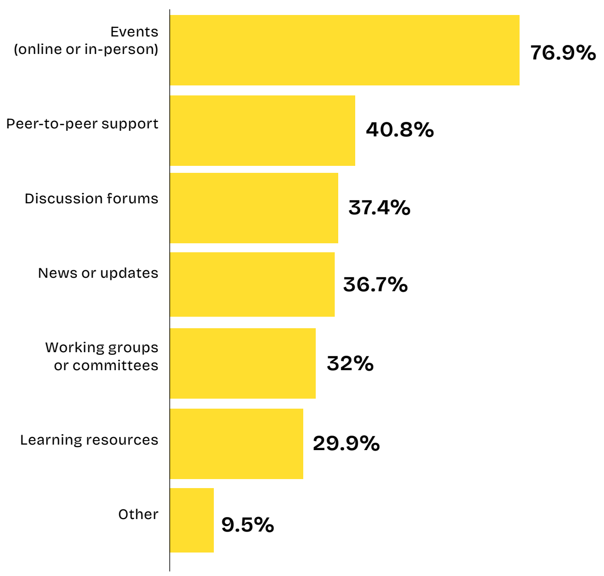
How often do members typically engage with your community?



How often do you publish new content to your community?



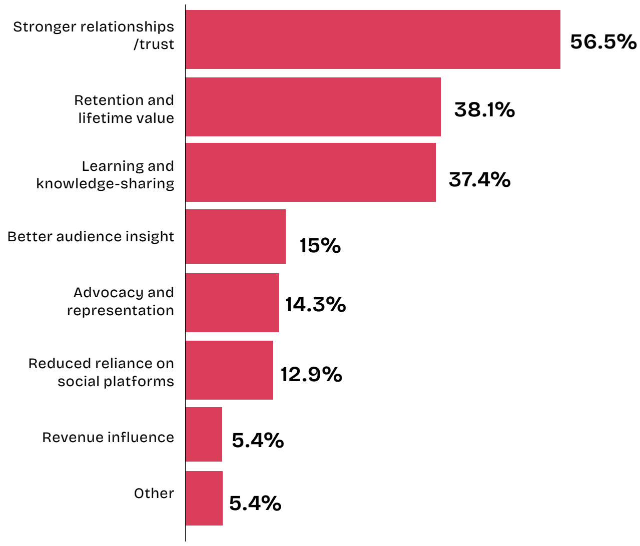
Which drives the most meaningful participation?



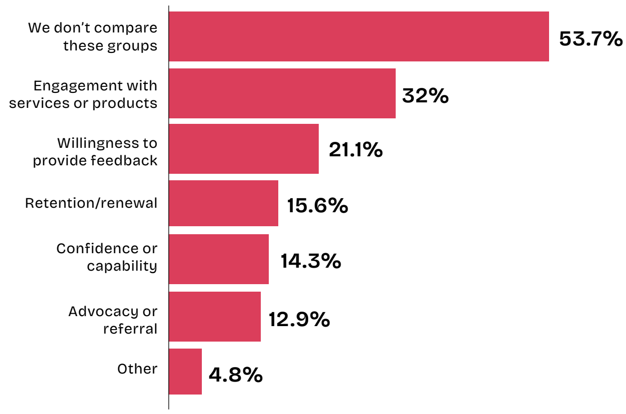
Why are organisations investing in communities?

Building trust, lifetime value and opportunities for members to network are the prime drivers of community initiatives

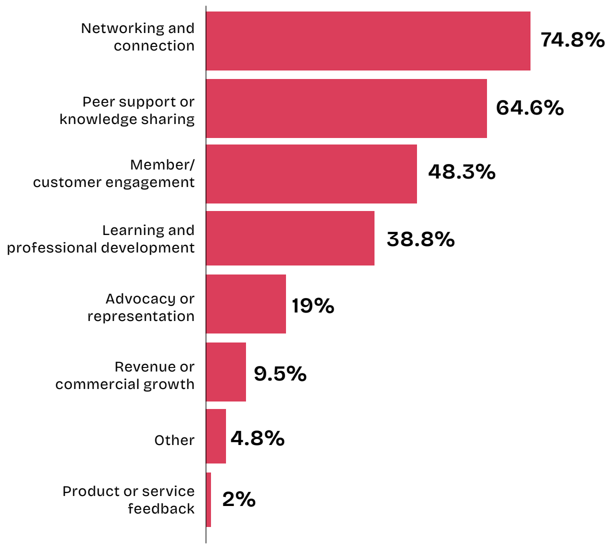
What are the main benefits of an owned community?



Compared to non-members, which outcomes are stronger among community members?



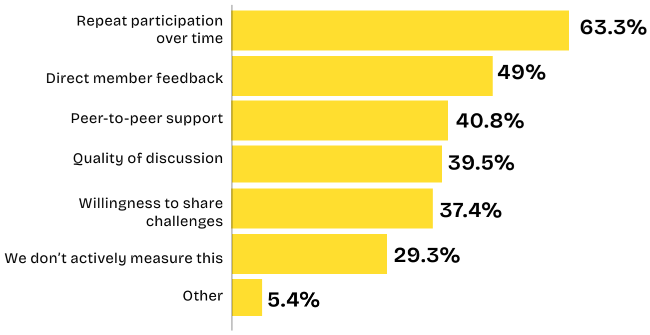
What is the main purpose of your community?



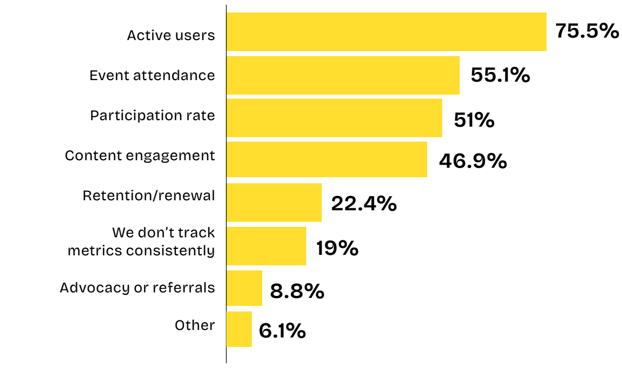
Measuring success

Active involvement is the best measure of success but also provides the biggest challenge.

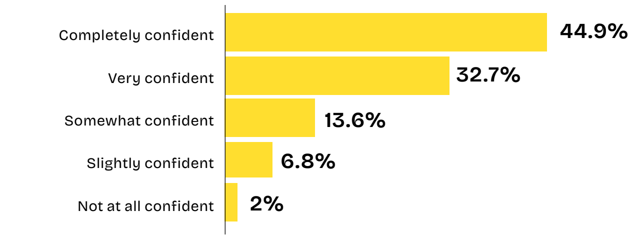
What do you see as key indicators of a sense of belonging in your community?



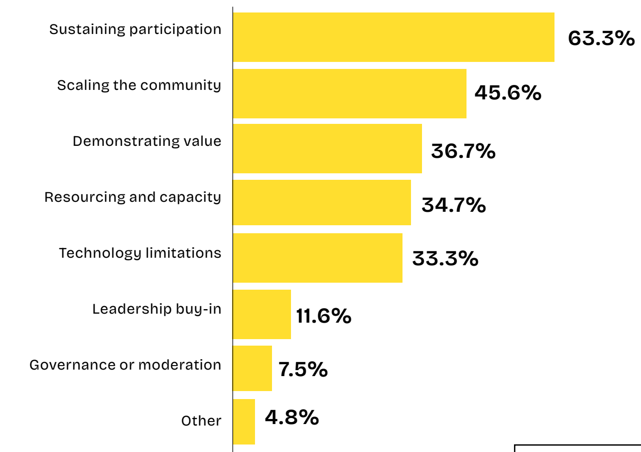
What key metrics do you track?



How confident are you explaining the value of community to senior leadership?



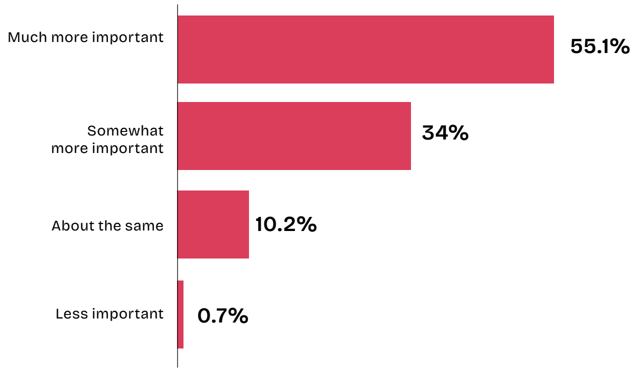
What are the biggest challenges to building your community?



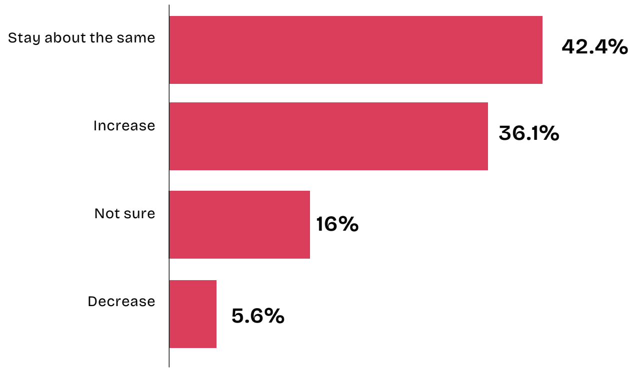
What's coming next?

Respondents overwhelmingly see community becoming more important and expect spend to be maintained or increased.

Over the next 12–24 months, do you expect community to become more or less important?



Over the next 12 months, do you expect your organisation's spend on community initiatives to:



Survey conducted February/March 2026.
186 completed responses.