



SAE International's Member Connection



SAE International decided to completely revamp its original online member community, with some help from Higher Logic's Community Management Services. We chatted with Matt Creech, MBA, Director of Membership & Sections from SAE International, to learn more about how SAE has seen better engagement and growth since the launch of its new community, Member Connection.

SAE's online community challenges

SAE's previous community, the Engineer Xchange, wasn't used often and didn't offer real value to its members. The process to build it was harried and incomplete — some stakeholders did not have appropriate influence, there were no dedicated community managers, and the platform license purchased didn't have basic community functionality (although it leaned towards fostering engagement). The process of defining objectives, functionality and a mission for the organization was missing.

In a last-ditch effort to ramp up content, SAE hired bloggers to take over the site and post general articles that were not engagement-centered (take the word "engineer" out and replace it with "chef" or "doctor" — it still said the same thing).

A time for community change

The Engineer Xchange was not member-focused. SAE decided to shut it down without any notice except for a message stating, "If you're looking for these resources, you can find them in our new, upcoming community." There was no value in the old platform, so members didn't miss it or complain about the change. SAE knew they were making the right decision by going in a different direction.

After a detailed RFP process, they selected the Higher Logic community platform and its Community Management Services for the new community. It planned to launch the new site, Member Connection, in one year's time.

AT A GLANCE:

- Global headquarters in Warrendale, PA
- Community: Member Connection, <http://connection.sae.org>
- Website: <http://www.sae.org>
- Public social media they use: Facebook, LinkedIn, Google +
- Twitter handles: @SAEIntl and @SAEInterNews



“Solving problems day in and day out is an engineer's life — this community should be one of the many problem-solving resources for their work.”

SAE wanted the new community to be friendly for a corporate entity during work hours — it should be easily accessible at any time for members to chat and engage. Previously the organization tried using LinkedIn, but that wasn't a friendly platform for work hours (with the stereotype being it's a place to network and find a new job). The primary focus for the community would be helping professionals in their current jobs and industries SAE represents — discussions should be technically focused, and the site should be set up with both a general topics area and more specific sections for each major industry served.

There is value in an online community for professional societies, especially as membership evolves. This type of online collaboration hub didn't exist for SAE's demographic before.

How community management services can help

The previous community failed because there was not a team focused on its success on a daily basis. SAE identified early the importance of hiring a community manager as a dedicated resource. In the past, there was no one to moderate, reply to discussions or help with an overall engagement strategy. It also wasn't practical to hire internally or carve out 25-30 percent of a current employee's time to devote to the community.

SAE saw compelling reasons for choosing Higher Logic's Community Management Services, including the distinct advantage of having access to professionals on the cutting edge of the industry. While hiring an in-house community manager seemed ideal for SAE's tight-knit group, the financial and support benefits from professional services outweighed those concerns. The new Higher Logic community manager would act as both a SAE team member and work behind a team of industry experts and community professionals from Higher Logic. It was a win-win.

Taking an engineering community to the next level

Since Member Connection's official launch in June 2015, almost 7,000 members have joined and agreed to the community's terms (that's out of about 44,000 members total) and about 2,500 messages created. This 16 percent join rate is a great number for a young community site. It also boasts over 3,000 views and downloads of community resources.

Members self-moderate for discussions on engineering issues, technical aspects of the job and the state of the industry. These discussions are lively, focused and rarely go off on tangents. Although, a new community favorite includes the discussion *Why Do Old People Drive Into Shops* — it has a silly quality but gets quite technical. Engineers have gathered to work out the problem and try to solve how to make driving safer and easier for the elderly.

Members also chastise people who put up job postings. The focus definitely feels anti-LinkedIn — the community is void of job postings or advertisements, with a clean interface and marketing only for upcoming events or distinct member benefits.

A new step for the community is inviting professionals who are highly engaged with SAE as volunteers in standards development, but are not currently members. SAE wants to build a relevant, technically-focused community to bring together mobility professionals and share in discussions on emerging technology, safety and other issues. SAE's standards development programs do not require one to be a member of SAE. This ensures the best and brightest in their industries are able to participate whether they are members or not. For example, an aerospace engineer might volunteer to contribute to creating new standards, but has not

Member Connection by the Numbers

- 6,757 members joined
- 3,000 resource views/downloads
- 2,497 messages
- 684 unique contributors
- 345 unique threads (over 100 have more than five replies)

“It should not even be a second thought to find information — a crank shaft engineer has a question and immediately knows to reach out on Member Connection to solve his or her problem.”

Community Management Services

Higher Logic has worked with over 700 clients to launch engaging and successful communities. Whether you are a team of one or many, we offer different community management service packages to fit your needs.

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become a member yet. SAE will still invite them to participate in the aerospace discussions in Member Connection (while their access to other industry discussions is limited).

This initiative is good for the health of the community and the organization's membership component — if non-member volunteers derive value from the discussion groups for their industry, it may convince them to expand and participate in cross-sector learning and collaboration, eventually joining SAE as a member.

Member Connection also plans to track conversions of non-member community users who become SAE members.

"The previous community was up and running for nearly three years, and we didn't receive any complaints when it was shut down," says Matt. "If Member Connection were to close tomorrow after less than one year in existence, I know our inboxes would be filling up and our customer service department would be incredibly busy, fielding calls from unhappy members."

What's next for Member Connection

SAE is experiencing great momentum in Member Connection, but would like to see more diversity in member engagement. It currently has the same core group of most active members, and wants to increase the volume of participants who join discussions and post messages.

It is rolling out sector communities in phases and hopes to have all communities up and running at the one-year mark, at which point it will look at business unit goals for 2016 to see how they match up with Member Connection's engagement.

The overarching goal is to position Member Connection as a real-time resource. It will be the place for mentoring and career advice, where mobility engineers go to collaborate and connect with each other.

Advice for other new communities

Matt stresses orienting your community with your organization's entire presence, whether it be in the virtual or real world. It's important to bring all of your stakeholders together for a unified communications strategy.

"Don't plan or launch your community in a vacuum - look at everything you're doing and see how you can incorporate the community into the existing stream," says Matt. "Engage as many internal and external stakeholders as possible. Your community can be an incredible benefit where members derive value, but it can also be a powerful engagement tool for other groups or parts of your organization to achieve success."

HIGHER LOGIC

Higher Logic is an industry leader in cloud-based community platforms, with over 25 million engaged members in more than 200,000 communities. Organizations worldwide use Higher Logic to bring like-minded people all together, by giving their community a home where they can meet, share ideas, answer questions and stay connected.

“If a problem comes up that [our community manager] hasn't dealt with, she can spin around and talk with her network of professionals, while someone else might feel like they are on an island.”

Client Profile | SAE International

SAE International is a global association of more than 127,000 engineers and related technical experts in the aerospace, automotive and commercial-vehicle industries. SAE International's core competencies are life-long learning and voluntary consensus standards development. Member Connection is SAE's online member community for personal and professional growth in mobility engineering professions.