

Volunteer Engagement, Management & Care: Summary for Discussion Forums (3 minutes)

If you don't anticipate that a discussion forum would be suitable for your project, we recommend that you merely scan this short summary. We do recommend that you provide ways for two-way communication with and among citizen scientists. These points apply to discussion forums, but not exclusively so – you may find several items here useful for your project interface or for wider public communications such as blogs or social media.

- What discussion areas will you build into your website? It will vary from project to project, but the following items may be useful:
 - Welcomes, introductions, rules/community standards, tutorials, etc
 - News and the relevant science
 - Technical support, suggestions, comments
 - Irrelevant chat to let people have fun, relax and develop supportive relationships
- Moderators are very useful. You may ask them to:
 - Move wrongly placed content, or delete malicious or irrelevant posts
 - Resolve conflicts, remind people of the rules, make tactful decisions about where and where not to intervene when sensitive or emotional topics arise
 - Collect up common questions or technical problems, keep the scientific and technical teams updated, and perhaps arrange regular Q&As
 - Blog, manage the social media, or write the news posts
 - Sit in on team meetings, act as the volunteers' representative
- Community standards exist to keep everyone safe and happy and to keep the project running smoothly. They may cover:
 - Non-discrimination, which may be more complex than it sounds due to subtleties and different experiences
 - Swearing or “adult” content, or political/religious debates – you might have no personal objection, but they could lead to school/parental filtering software blocking your site from children, or cause stressful arguments
 - How disagreements should be dealt with (it will generally de-escalate the situation to do this privately, unless the problem affects several people in which it should be discussed respectfully in public)
 - Links to or discussion of other content, such as commercial advertising, petitions or even untrustworthy science writing
- Citizen scientists have personal problems just like everyone else – some may be contributing to your project *because* of these problems. You may find read very strong opinions or disclosures of illness or trauma, which may make you nervous. Usually, it's nothing to worry about and in fact it's often short-lived and positive. To become part of a community with common goals is an important and moving experience for people.
- It is especially important to “set the tone” in all your communications – if the atmosphere is welcoming, polite and friendly, people will usually comment similarly. However, if there is an atmosphere of anger, stress or disrespect, people's comments will often reflect this.
- One of your best results will be volunteers helping each other, not just with their immediate questions but also going on to write blog posts or new tutorials. Showcase these!
- Whether your communications method is a discussion forum or something else, it is vital to visit frequently – and not just respond to problems or negatives. If you respond to positive events, people will behave positively. If you only come along when there's trouble, people may deliberately create trouble to get the recognition they need!