The Complete Buyer's Guide to Community Software



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Community Platform Software: Your Ultimate Comparison Guide

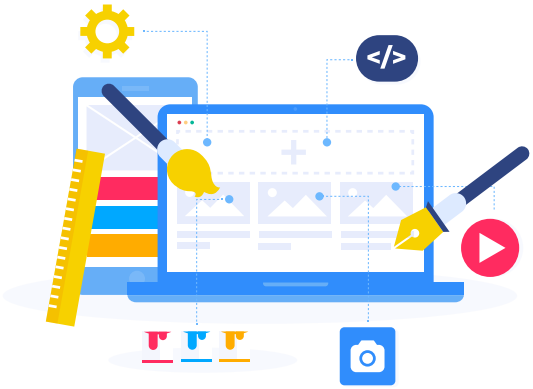
This guide is your complete and total resource for selecting community software. Whether you're actively searching for the best community platform to fit your needs or still considering whether a customer community is a logical strategy for your brand—you'll find all the guidance you need to make your next step right here.

Online Customer Success Communities

You've no doubt already come across more than one or two successful online customer communities. Today, online communities powered by customers, product users, software enthusiasts and brand advocates play a hugely important role in how we find and gather Customer Success information. Think of the last time you had a question about your mobile phone contract or a problem with one of your software subscriptions. Chances are, you hopped on to Google and it led you straight to an online customer community, where other folks just like you were already discussing the topic and helping each other out.

This is the power of communities for brands.

The ability for companies to provide a space in which their customers can get their questions answered and their problems solved—at a fraction of the cost of scaling up your 1:1 Customer Support and / or Success efforts.



How do you choose the right community platform?

Have you already identified that implementing an online community makes sense for your business? Great!

Before you dive in and potentially lose your footing, it's vital to understand what makes a good community thrive. **How should you approach building your first community**? What do you expect it to bring to your business? And what software should you buy? There are a whole lot of options out there, each offering different features, use cases, functionality and integrations. Choosing the right one for your company can be a real challenge.

Don’t panic! That's exactly why we’ve created this Community Platform selection guide—to help you through the process of determining the right strategy and finding the best-fit vendor for your needs. It covers everything community-related to help you truly scale your Customer Success through community.

This community platform comparison guide covers:

- The essential steps you need to take before you even start the vendor selection process
- Practical top tips for building an effective community, and
- A comprehensive feature comparison to use during your vendor selection process.

Essential steps to take before jumping into community



Get clear on your community concept & objective

It’s critical to **define the business case** for your community before launching an implementation plan or even selecting the platform you’ll use. Not only will this secure buy-in and support from your executive board or leadership team, but defining the community’s strategic function will guide your planning and rollout agenda—making sure you maximize the return on your investment from the first day your new community goes live. So get to work on creating the right community concept. Namely: what should your community accomplish for your users? Check out the most common online community use cases for B2B software companies:



Customer Support

Provide a centralized self-service content platform with an average of 60% peer-to-peer support



Customer Success

See an average of 70 - 80% customer engagement with your B2B community



Better Software Products

Implement on average 20% of customer ideas and get their voice on your product roadmap

You may decide to make **user engagement** and **support** its primary function, but if you also have plans to utilize the community for **product ideation**, you need to bear this in mind during the vendor selection process so you can select a platform with the right features and functionality to make that happen. Your desired community concept will determine whether your community can function as a standalone silo—separate from the rest of your website and digital presence—or whether you're better served by a modern community solution that integrates across your entire website, app and external channels, so your users can engage wherever they may be.

✅ What functionality do you need to meet your objectives?

As we touched on briefly above, customer communities can be extremely valuable across a variety of applications—**self-service** customer support, product ideation and development, increased **customer engagement**. What's important to note, though, is that the intended use case for your customer community will significantly affect the features you need and the type of platform or solution that suits you best. Determine what features you'll need in your community platform in order to achieve your desired community concept and objective. Discussion forums, knowledge bases, gamification...? The possibilities are (almost) endless!

> 💡 **Pro Tip:** Don't forget to map out how you'll measure success at this stage! Will you report on the number of calls your online community has deflected from the call center? Will you track the purchase behavior of community members against non-members to prove its impact on customer retention and share-of-wallet? Make sure your chosen platform has the reporting power to tell you what you need to know! Get clear on your metrics now, so you can build and launch a community that will meet your goals.

🏠 Custom build or configurable SaaS?

Take some time at this stage to decide whether you're willing to invest a large amount into IT resources and ongoing development costs, with a custom-built platform, or if a flexible, configurable and future-proof SaaS community solution better fits your needs. If you decide to custom-build your community platform, you'll enjoy absolute flexibility and control over your functionality and features—but your initial investment will be much higher, and another downside is that you'll fall behind in terms of technological features unless you're willing to invest significant resources into a dedicated development team. On the flip side, SaaS provides you with a future-proof solution—continuous new front end features and improved UX—and no additional budget or resource required.

Hey, that's mine! Confirm roles and responsibilities

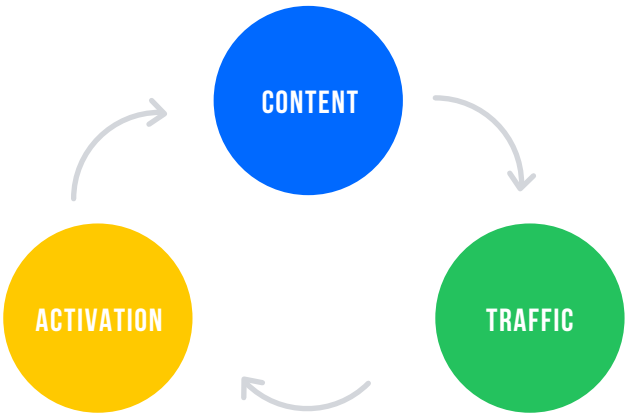
Start to confirm roles and responsibilities—such as which department(s) will handle the community implementation process, and ultimately who will own the community? How will it be managed on a day-to-day basis? Have you already allocated resources internally to take care of the key community roles, such as community managers, moderators and channel managers? Align internally and answer these questions to ensure the community rollout goes smoothly and you are set up for future success.

Ready, set... Stakeholder management!

Whilst you won't finalize your launch plan until you've selected a vendor and planned the implementation, it's still essential to give some forethought to how best to launch it with a bang. Now is a good time to involve key community stakeholders instead of launch plan. A good launch plan would typically involve members of your company's support, marketing, IT, and management teams. Get decision makers on board upfront and have your internal business case ready

Top tips for a successful community

Successful communities immediately begin producing results. But in order to do this, it's vital that three key elements come together: content, activation, and traffic. The content-activation-traffic flywheel in customer communities is what drives the long-term value of your community. Regardless of its underlying goals, it's important to look at your community as an entity that requires some serious care and effort to flourish. With the right strategies in place, you'll ensure that the value your community brings to your business continues to increase as time goes by.



The content-traffic-activation flywheel

> 💡 **Pro Tip:** Gamification, like awarding users badges or allowing them to 'climb the ranks' based on their community behavior is a tried and true way to activate your customers and prompt engagement. It's vital to find a community platform that offers strong gamification features.

> 💡 **Pro Tip:** Choose a platform that will ensure your content is SEO optimized and well indexed by Google. To really create standout impact and engagement, consider using an integrated community rather than a standalone destination. This infuses your community content into your existing digital channels — for example, using embeddable widgets across all pages of your website or app so users can access relevant content wherever they are in their user journey.

Community Platform Features: An Overview

For the purposes of this guide, we've split platform features out into the most pragmatic categories:

- **General community, security + deployment features**
- **Content types + editing**
- **User management + moderation**
- **Gamification + engagement tactics**
- **Integrations + analytics**

General community, security + deployment features

Your general community features cover the basic functionality of what you need your community to do for you. Basic communication, security and notification functionality—which all vendors should be able to provide.

General community

- Set-up community access permissions
- Flexible community structure with categories and groups
- Basic community functionality
- Private messages

- Subscriptions / notifications
- Live, federated search with automatic suggestions for the best content
- Rich media / wide variety of supported file types
- Customizable layouts and branding (colors, buttons, images and icons) with no development resources required

Globalization

- Multi-language support
- Local compliance
- Global moderation

Spam filter

- Basic spam detection based on sentiment and vocabulary
- Advanced spam detection based on machine learning and NLP
- Spam correction
- Multi-language spam detection

Data security

- Compliance with key standards and certifications
- Vendor undergoes regular audits

Content types and editing

When you're selecting a community platform vendor, ensure you won't be limited when it comes to the different types of content your team and your users are able to create and host. Think about knowledge base articles versus questions; video updates versus event invitations... the opportunities are broad, so make sure your platform is going to support rich media and varied content types.

Questions and answers

- Users can create questions and answer those of others
- Organize and link questions to specific categories
- Various notification options for new questions and replies
- Allow users and moderators to mark replies as "answers" to questions to expand the knowledge base
- Easily create FAQs from popular questions and articles

Discussion forum

- Create discussions between and amongst users
- Organize and link discussions to specific categories
- Various notification options for discussion follows, replies and reactions
- Highlight discussions and create sticky topics for vital info

Articles + blog posts

- Create blog posts + articles
- Users can comment on blog posts + articles
- Enable easy social sharing buttons

Ideas

- Dedicated ideation area and features
- Ask users to submit ideas
- Allow users to vote on ideas
- Indicate custom idea status (e.g. added to backlog, under construction, delivered, closed)
- Show top ideas by votes, views, replies and more

User management and moderation

Single sign-on is now a hygiene factor for registration-based platforms, and users expect a smooth and easy-to-use experience from start to finish. Keep an eye on the user management functionality your potential vendors offer and make sure you won't be offering a sub-par community experience.

Registration + authentication

- Register and login directly or via SSO
- Registration tokens available
- SAML2.0, oAuth2, OpenID SSO standards
- Ability to use Facebook / LinkedIn for social SSO authentication
- Link with CRM logins

User profiling + permissions

- Avatars + profile pictures
- Ability to extend community profile into your 'My environment'
- Include / exclude specific user groups
- Follow / unfollow other users
- Personalize content streams and pages based on user role

Moderation workflow

- Flexible topic views
- Moderator assignment for different categories or topics
- Collaborate with an unlimited amount of agents
- Queue topics on urgency, SLA, expertise and more
- Use integrations like Zapier, Zendesk and Slack to streamline workflows

Gamification and engagement tactics

In order to create and maintain a thriving space, community managers must find ways to incite user engagement. Gamification triggers this engagement by creating moments of user gratification which hook community members to keep them coming back for more. Features such as user badges, interactive polls and displaying user ranks and roles are perfect for this.

Gamification

- Create user ranks and roles
- Automatic ranking or custom options
- Custom icons and badges
- Full notification capabilities for ranks and roles
- Display ranks and badges on user profiles / avatars

Engagement tools

- Avatars + profile pictures
- Ability to extend community profile into your 'My environment'
- Include / exclude specific user groups
- Follow / unfollow other users
- Personalize content streams and pages based on user role

Analytics and Integrations

You want a community platform that you can easily connect to your other Customer Success tooling, in order to get the richest insights and streamline your workflows as much as possible. From escalating support tickets to reviewing feature requests based on ARR-values, integrations help you get the most out of your community and its results.

Community analytics

- Analyze posts and other content
- Full reporting capabilities
- Key stats and trends

- In-depth reporting
- Integrate with 3rd party reporting
- User-friendly dashboards
- Monitor content generation
- Assess customer sentiment
- Contribute to customer health scores
- Member growth and retention statistics
- Customer engagement levels

Out-of-the-box integrations

- Integrate with CRMs like Salesforce and Gainsight for a holistic 360 customer view
- Integrate with Analytics tools like Google Analytics and Mixpanel for richer insights
- Integrate with ticketing tools like Zendesk for streamlined Customer Support
- Integrate with workflow tools like Zapier, JIRA and Miro for more effective day-to-day processes
- Customizable embeddable widgets
- Content integrations with social channels
- REST API and webhooks for full custom integrations

Organic search engine optimization

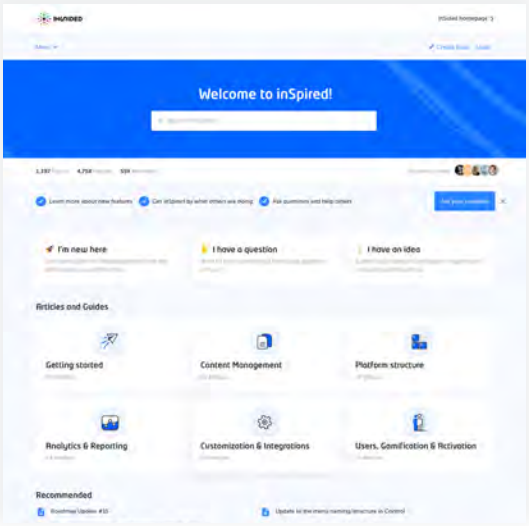
- Highly effective community ranking and content recognition by Google
- Integrate with Google Search Console for optimal crawling results
- Support Open Graph metadata for community pages to provide automated crawling context to Facebook, LinkedIn, Google and Microsoft
- Community page structure and semantics optimized for search
- Custom (sub)domain support

Success approach: Is it a partnership for success?

A community platform is just one click away. Community success is not. A vital element when it comes to select the right community platform vendor for your business is ensuring that they take the right customer success approach and are committed to working with you not just to launch your community but to continue fueling its growth so you can exceed your business goals. Here are four areas to focus on when considering the success services your potential vendors offer.

1. Getting your community started

Ideally, your vendor will support you with creating relevant, traffic-driving content and creating a content calendar optimized for fast growth. They'll be there to boost your starting traffic by integrating your community content across your entire digital presence like your webshop, app, social media and existing website. The perfect vendor will also lead you every step of the way to activating your first users and bringing them on board to become brand advocates.



2. Ensure community health and continuous growth

Once your community is up and running, that doesn't mean you should be left high and dry. Look for a vendor who will continue you to support you to make the right decisions - they may do this by performing community health checks (analyzing your community stats against industry benchmarks) as well as giving you clear ideas for growth and concrete actionable next-steps you can take to bring your community to the next level.

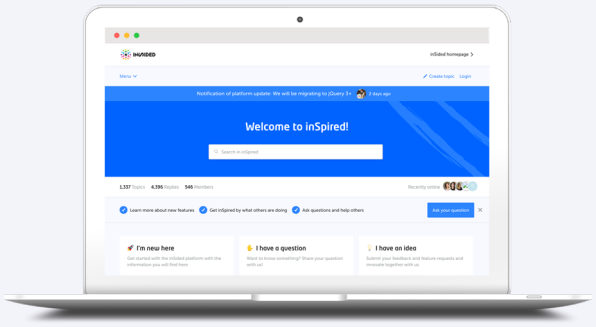
3. Goal setting and benchmarking

Any community platform provider worth their salt will have a wealth of experience and insights about what makes a successful community. They should be willing to share their expertise with you and collaborate with your team to set ambitious yet realistic goals that are guided by their own community performance benchmarks. They should also be a proactive partner when it comes to monitoring and reviewing your community performance so that you can always report back to your management team a strong business case for the community.

4. Education and training: build a world-class community team

The best vendors aren't just creating a successful community for you - they are upskilling and empowering you to do the same for yourself. Look for suppliers who offer in-depth training sessions as well as on-demand help content like how-tos and tutorials. Additionally, make sure you are partnering with a supplier who can offer you a dedicated success manager and a single point of contact when it comes to challenges or growth opportunities around your community. The best of the best in community platform suppliers stay ahead of industry trends and keep their customers fully up-to-date with digital sessions, webinars, innovation sessions and inspiring customer events.

As our selection guide and feature overview shows, there are a wealth of things to consider when choosing the best online community platform for your business. Do your research, consider your intended use cases and talk to multiple vendors to find the best fit for you. inSided's community experts would love to help you through the process, so **book a chat** with us today.



We can't wait to show you around.

Book your Gainsight demo quickly and easily today.

Get a demo →

ABOUT GAINSIGHT

Gainsight's innovative platform helps companies of all sizes and industries drive durable growth through customer-led, product-led, and community-led strategies. It offers a powerful set of customer success, product experience, and community engagement solutions that together enable businesses to scale efficiently, create alignment, and put the customer at the heart of innovation. With Gainsight, it's never been easier to drive acquisition, increase product adoption, prevent churn, and grow with renewals and expansion. Learn how leading companies such as GE Digital, SAP Concur, and Box use Gainsight at www.gainsight.com.

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