

Case Study: Understanding Posting Behavior in a Health Community

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Product Background:

Online health communities provide patients and caregivers a safe space to learn, ask questions, and share experiences. While many members were active in reading, liking, or replying to content, new post creation was concentrated among a small group of contributors, resulting in less fresh content and lower overall engagement.

Because Company X relies on active communities to sustain participation and support sponsored pharmaceutical content, understanding why engaged members were not initiating new posts and what might help support post creation became a top priority.

Research Objectives

- Understand why community members do not initiate new posts within their health communities despite engaging (i.e., liking, replying) with other member posts
- Explore what, if anything, could enable or support members in creating new posts within their communities

Methodology:

Mixed-methods, exploratory approach



Survey

Quantified posting behavior and engagement patterns across communities and helped segment members by how they interacted with content



1:1 Moderated Interviews

Explored why members did not initiate new posts and surfaced the experiences and conditions that influenced post creation

Interviewed members who engaged through reading, liking, or replying, but rarely or never initiated new posts



Synthesis

Combined quantitative findings with qualitative insights to identify key drivers and barriers to post initiation

I deliberately chose moderated interviews because participants were discussing their illness and personal struggles. A live, moderated format allowed me to build trust and rapport, which were essential for encouraging openness and obtaining honest responses.

Key insights:

Initiating a new post feels higher-risk than responding

Creating a post required more confidence and reassurance than liking or replying

“ *I'll reply in a hot second, but I don't know what I'd post myself.*

I am not sure my situation is all that interesting

”

Perceived redundancy discourages post creation

Members avoided posting when they felt their experience was already represented

“ *I don't want to repeat what's already there.*

The questions I want answers to have already been asked by someone else.

”

When members lack context about others, they are less likely to initiate a post

Incomplete profiles weakened expectations of connection or response

“ *I don't see anything about them in their profile so then what do I do?*

A lot of profiles are empty which makes it difficult to want to engage.

”

What was learned

Assumptions Challenged

What was assumed

- Existing engagement (liking, replying, commenting) was assumed to eventually lead to members creating new posts
- Low post creation was primarily a usability issue, and improving the posting interface would be sufficient to increase new content

What research revealed

- Members understood how to post and often found the experience straightforward
- Initiating a new post felt meaningfully different than responding or reacting
- Initiating a new post required both significant mental effort and confidence

Implications

Implications for the product and community

- Initiating a post requires more support and reassurance than responding to existing content
- Even though new posts were infrequent, engagement metrics made some communities appear active
- For members, highly engaged posts can raise the perceived risk of initiating something new, especially if they're already unsure what to post or whether it will be well received
- Community health depends on giving members clearer ways to start new posts with less mental effort

Outcomes:

What changed as a result of this research

- Shifted internal understanding from a perceived usability issue to the mental effort required to start a new post

Actions informed by the research

- Introduced and tested targeted prompts within the breast cancer community to reduce the effort of deciding what to post
- Sent call-to-actions email to members within the breast cancer community inviting them to share their experience i.e., Tell us Your Diagnosis Story
- Encouraged profile updates via SMS, app notifications, and emails to increase context and connection between members

Evidence of impact

- 9% increase in traffic to the breast cancer community following email prompts
- 7% increase in new posts after introducing targeted prompts within the breast cancer community

What I'd explore next:

Reflection

In a follow-up phase, I would focus on members who initiate posts frequently to understand how they decide what to share and how they reduce the mental effort others described. Comparing their approaches with those of less frequent posters could help identify additional ways to support post creation without increasing pressure.