

Setting up and Running an E-forum Discussion Group

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, who are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. The disasters we have been affected by include the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King's Cross underground fire, Lockerbie aircraft bombing, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11th September attacks, the South East Asian Tsunami and the Bali, London 7 July and Sharm El Sheikh bombings and other recent terrorist attacks and transportation disasters.

This leaflet offers guidance to those affected by a disaster on how to set up a secure discussion forum. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide, but the links below offer further useful information. Increasingly, those affected by the same or a similar disaster and scattered around the country or living outside the UK wish to be in touch with each other. You may also find our leaflet Setting up Family and/or Survivor Support Groups useful.

How to start

Getting started is one of the biggest hurdles, but there are plenty of people out there who have already done this and can offer help and advice. Setting up and running a successful forum requires time and patience, particularly in becoming familiar with the management aspects, so be prepared to put in several hours of work to preparing your forum.

Before you dive in

The first step is to check whether or not a forum along the lines you have planned already exists. If it does, you may end up splitting the audience and so weakening both forums. Consider instead becoming a regular contributor and then moderator to the existing forum. Then, as and when the opportunity arises, launch your own more specialist forum.

Creating your forum

Having decided to start an online forum you need to work out how to 'deliver' it. This usually comes down either to having someone provide you with a 'ready to go' forum service – a hosted service - or opting for the DIY approach, which involves providing the web site and forum system yourself.

If you are setting up your first forum, the hosted service is where you should start. DIY hosted forums are really for those who want the highest level of control over the look, feel and operation of the forum as well as its branding. With a hosted forum, these aspects are set already and so you can concentrate on the actual business of the forum itself.

Yahoo! offers one of the most widely used hosted forum services, through its 'Yahoo! Groups'. Google and MSN also offer their own hosted forums or groups and all are free, easy to set up and to use. In almost all cases you and your contributors will need an 'ID' or email account associated with the provider, which again are free.

Setting up a forum or 'group'

Creating a hosted forum or 'group' is a straightforward process and the following points describe the basic steps using the Yahoo! Groups service. (Please note that plenty of guidance is available at each stage.)

1. Go to <http://groups.yahoo.com>.
2. Click the 'Start your group' today link.
3. Sign-in using or Yahoo! ID (or create your own Yahoo! ID if you haven't already got one).
4. Find, either by browsing or searching, a suitable category that best describes your group.
5. Click the 'Place my group here' button – this categorises your group.
6. Next, choose a name for your group, a group email address and then provide a short description of its purpose.
7. Click 'Continue' to move to the next step.
8. Don't be surprised if you are returned to this page and advised that the email address or Group name is already in use.
9. Keep choosing names and addresses until you find one that works for you.
10. Finally, confirm your Yahoo! Profile (used when other members of the group want to learn more about you), enter the security code and finally click 'Continue'.
11. That's it! Your group has been created and you are given its web and email addresses to advertise.

Although you now have an online forum to use, there still are a few important tasks to do.

Customising the Group

Once you have created your group you will be given the option of customising it, including setting the joining and posting rules, which are matters that should be given very careful consideration.

The first thing you need to do is to decide how people join the group. For a Yahoo! Group you have a choice:

- Anyone can join (initial setting);
- People can join only with your approval.

If your forum is discussing sensitive and personal matters, which a forum for survivors and bereaved from disasters may well be, you should go for option 2 and be sure to vet (via a separate email or phone conversation) the individuals who request to join. The onus will be on you as the 'owner' to ensure that those who join are suitable - other participants will be relying on you to protect their conversations.

Next you need to decide who can post messages to your group:

- Only group members - making it a private discussion group (the initial setting).
- Anyone - making it an open discussion group. Only you - making it a newsletter.

The initial setting is recommended as this ensures that group members can discuss matters whilst knowing those who are 'listening'.

As the group owner, you can change these options at any time, but do make sure you think things through beforehand and discuss any prospective changes with others.

The finishing touches

There are numerous ways to customise the look, feel and operation of your group. Take your time to look through and consider what is available and whether or not it will improve your forum.

For example, when someone new joins, you can have the system send them a Welcome message that may contain some background to the group, who it comprises and any instructions for posting, etc. Doing this helps to answer common queries about the group (so you don't have to answer them) and

makes your new member feel welcome.

Be sure also to spend plenty of time getting used to the forum system, how it operates, and the management of posts and members. Ask a few friends to join the group, add posts, etc. and come to you with any queries they might have. This will help you become more familiar with the day-to-day management tasks.

Before you launch your Forum

Before you launch your forum, be sure to delete any of your test messages and posts – these look untidy and may confuse new members. You should also have a few core people join the forum and start several discussions off so that when potential members visit they can see there is some activity and so will be more inclined to join in.

Launching your Forum

There are many factors that go into making a forum successful. It is vital that you have enough visitors and posts to sustain existing discussions and start new ones. Therefore make sure you advertise your forum at every opportunity and ensure that members do likewise. You may be able to advertise the existence of the forum to others affected by a specific disaster, for example, through the police family liaison officer service. If activity on the forum is tailing off, it is up to you to step in and add a few posts and send an email to existing and potential members reminding them of the forum and its purpose and perhaps outlining some of its recent activity.

Launching a forum is much like getting a spinning top going - it requires a lot of initial effort but once it is going, a gentle push now and again is all that is needed to keep it on track.

Forum Rules

Setting out some basic rules of behaviour is essential for any forum, as is the enforcement of these rules. Your rules should be clear and prominent on your website, but can be kept very simple. For example, here are the rules from Just Chat:

We do not permit:

- Sexual or offensive language or content
- Harassment of other users
- Abuse or disruption of our services
- The impersonation of Just Chat staff
- Advertising of third party services or websites, unless authorised by us in advance and in writing.

Legal aspects

The legal aspects of running a forum are straightforward, the only important issues being copyright and privacy.

Copyright: the copyright in any user's contribution remains with the user
Privacy: you must ensure that personal information provided by users on registration is secure. If you are using a hosted forum, this will always be the case.

Moderation

Who or what is a ‘Moderator’?

An online forum is a powerful tool for allowing people from geographically different places to contribute easily to a discussion. However, like any form of discussion or debate, it is vital that it stays on the topic being discussed, and that people follow the forum rules and behave in an appropriate manner. To ensure this is the case a forum can have one or more moderators.

Unlike the owner of a forum, who is responsible for its operation, a moderator performs a similar role to that of the chairperson and is essential to the success of any forum. He or she is responsible for ensuring that the discussion remains on topic and that everyone has the chance to voice their opinions. They are also responsible for ensuring that contributors behave themselves and in extreme situations may remove people from the forum or have their comments amended or removed. Finally, a moderator should take the time to make new contributors welcome and act where necessary to promote discussion and keep the forum active.

Being a moderator is not an easy job - it requires tact and patience as well as the ability to anticipate problems and deal with them before they arise. A moderator also receives little or no reward for their work, yet there is a great deal of satisfaction to be had in helping start, grow and steer an online community of people with a related interest.

Challenges for the moderator

Online forums also introduce a number of challenges for moderators. With some forum systems, moderators must approve each and every item that is posted. This is fine if you have a small community of people in the same time zone, but if your forums are drawing together people from all over the world or you get a particularly ‘hot topic’, it may become difficult to keep an eye on all of the activity that is going on. As a result either something may slip through or the forum cannot be sustained.

It is therefore important that as a forum grows, so too does the number of people who are available to moderate it. Recruitment of moderators can be a difficult task, although often the forum itself can offer individuals who already have experience of the topic and the tact and skill needed to share the load.

Forum ‘Jargon’

These are a small selection of terms or jargon that you will come across when working with or contributing to online forums:

- **Blog** - The online diary of an individual or group in which postings are categorised and can be commented on by readers.
- **Flame** - The act of posting a hostile comment towards an individual or group and usually the result of frustration.
- **IP** - A forum system may keep a record of the IP address or ‘telephone number’ of the computer that was used to make a post. This is usually used where forums permit anonymous posts, but you need to ensure any posts found to have legal or criminal implications can be traced back to the originator if required.
- **Link** - A connection within a posting to another topic or word, picture, page elsewhere on the Web. Some forum systems prevent linking from within postings.
- **Newbie** - An individual who is new to a forum and so is unfamiliar with either its etiquette or the act of posting contributions.
- **Post** - A single contribution made by an individual to a topic in a forum.
- **Thread** - A ‘topic’ of discussion to which individuals post contributions and replies. As time

goes on, the thread may create other topics or come to an end.

Useful Links

Community Spark – This web site offers a wealth of tips and advice for building successful online communities and is worth spending plenty of time reading.
<http://www.communityspark.com/>

Hosted Groups – The following are a selection of the most popular online-hosted forum providers. These are not recommendations and each will typically require contributors to have an email account with the provider, but they all offer high quality services that will meet most needs at little or no cost:

Google Groups - <http://groups.google.com> Yahoo! Groups - <http://groups.yahoo.com> MSN Groups - <http://groups.msn.com>

ManagingCommunities.com – A website written by Patrick O’Keefe who has been managing online communities since 2000. There are a number of useful articles and links on the site including a link to an online forum dedicated to those tasked with managing online communities.
<http://www.managingcommunities.com>
<http://www.communityadmins.com>

Security

As noted previously, the subject matter of some forums may be very personal and not to be shared with those outside of the group. Therefore the security of the forum and its information it contains is vital.

In setting up an online forum using Yahoo! Groups there are various security options. Firstly, all potential contributors need to have a Yahoo! ID, which is required whenever you want to join or post anything to a forum. Next, membership of the forum can be controlled so that only known and vetted individuals may join. Finally, contributing and access to the content of the forum can be limited to its members only.

Providing that IDs are kept private and that members are properly identified and known, then the security of the forum can be maintained. However, such stringent security may also put people off and makes it difficult to show potential people members how the forum might help them.

It may therefore be worth considering having a ‘public’ and a ‘private’ forum with different security requirements. In doing so though, bear in mind that you may need to balance the needs of both and that it will add to the time needed for managing the forums.

How can Disaster Action help?

Individual members of Disaster Action have had some experience of e-forum discussion groups, and are happy to share that experience with those who contact us.

Given the stressful circumstances that are likely to follow any disaster, it may be useful to have assistance from someone at more of a remove from the emotional impact of what has happened.

Disaster Action would like to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this leaflet.

Further Information

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Useful Contacts

Further Information