TUTORIAL

Finding Online Discussion Groups

by Steve O'Keefe

In May, I filled-in for PR Diva Gwendolynn Gawlick at PMA's Publishers University in New York, where I taught a class in online book promotion. I explained the importance of locating online discussion groups used by the target audience and offering them an excerpt from the book being promoted. I got several questions about how to find these groups. Here's a little primer.

There are four main types of discussion groups: Usenet Newsgroups, Internet Mailing Lists, Web Site Message Boards, and Commercial Service Forums. These groups come in two flavors: moderated and unmoderated. For moderated boards, send e-mail to the moderator asking permission to post the message and offering a free review copy of your book. Discussion group moderators are actually *media*; that is, they're opinion shapers who control forums important to your target audience. It's a good idea to suck up to them. Unmoderated groups are free-range forums, so just post away and, if you get complaints, refer to the my book, *Complete Guide to Internet Publicity*, for instructions on how to handle them.

Keywords and Tracking

Start by making a list of keywords related to the topic of the book. Here's a list of keywords I used for the book *100 Best Stocks to Own for Under $20* (Dearborn): money, saving, personal finance, stock / stocks, stock market, invest / investing, trading / online trading, mutual fund, broker, risk (investment), retirement (planning), financial planning, NASDAQ, books.

Next, start a document to record where you placed messages. You'll find a Microsoft Word template for a Discussion Group Postings Report in the Resources Section at the Patron Saint Productions web site. Download the template (it's free) and use it to track your postings work.

Usenet Newsgroups

These are groups with names such as *alt.books.review* and *rec.arts.dance*. They never require subscription, but some groups are moderated. The best resource for finding these groups is Google Groups <http://groups.google.com> — not to be confused with Yahoo Groups, discussed below.

Go to Google Groups and search using your keywords. When you find a newsgroup that looks promising, take a quick peek at the latest postings in the group. Does it look like your posting would fit in? If so, post immediately using Google, or record the name of the group and post later using your own newsreader software.

Internet Mailing Lists

These are also called newsletters or e-zines. The best source for finding them is Yahoo Groups <http://groups.yahoo.com> and the second best is Topica <http://www.topica.com>. Search for mailing lists using your keywords. Target lists with large memberships or that are an exact match for your target audience.

You might be able to post to some lists immediately, without subscribing. In most cases you'll have to subscribe first, then post, follow-up for three days, then unsubscribe. *Warning:* Some mailing lists generate an enormous amount of e-mail. If possible, set your subscription to "daily digest" so you get only one e-mail a day, not hundreds. If you know what you're doing, you can use e-mail filters to quickly sort, file, and delete hundreds of mailing list messages in minutes.

Web Site Message Boards

These are also called bulletin boards or threads. Unmoderated boards are usually choked with spam and are a complete waste of time. The best place to search for these boards is Google <http://www.google.com>. Try a search sting like this: *"moderated message board" topic*, where *topic* is one of your keywords. Using variations on this theme (try *moderated message threads*, *moderated bulletin board*, etc.), you should be able to quickly find a half-dozen boards. Postings are usually made by filling out a form on the web site — although you might want to get pre-approval by sending your posting via e-mail to the moderator.

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Commercial Service Forums

These include message boards on America Online, CompuServe, MSN, etc. For finding message boards on AOL, this little tip will save you hours of hunting: use Keyword: "Message Board" to get to the Message Board Search page (it's impossible to find unless you know the keyword). On the web, it's located at <http://mbsearch.web.aol.com>. Search using your keywords, and AOL will show you a list of postings that contain those words. This list of postings is your roadmap to discussion groups where people are talking about these topics. Almost any other method of finding discussion groups on AOL is an exercise in frustration.

To find forums on CompuServe, use the GO Word: "Forum Center." That will give you a list of forums sorted by topic. Virtually every forum has public message boards. The only forums you'll want to avoid are those owned by software companies and other firms exclusively for the discussion of their products and services.

I've never posted on MSN, so I can't advise you on message boards there. For best results with any commercial service, post your message from a "native" account, and solicit replies to a native address — for example, post on AOL using an AOL screen name, and solicit responses to your AOL address — not to an e-mail address outside of AOL.

Good luck and happy hunting!

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