



Community Journey

Onboarding Manual

*Privacy-first community lifecycle toolkit. From concept to thriving members — in one file. No external dependencies.
No tracking. No compromise.*

Screen Edition (Dark) · v1.0 · Offline.Ltd, 2026

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01

The Empty Room

Before anyone shows up — why communities begin with you

A Door That Opens Both Ways

You are standing in an empty room. It has good bones — high ceilings, maybe, or a warm corner where light pools in the afternoon. But nobody is here yet. The chairs are still folded against the wall.

This is the moment most community builders skip past. They rush to throw open the doors, hang banners, blast invitations into the void. And then they wonder why the room stays quiet, even after fifty people wander in.

Here is the thing nobody tells you: a community does not start when the first member arrives. It starts the moment *you* decide what this room is for — and, just as importantly, what it is not for.

Community Journey exists because that decision deserves more than a gut feeling and a hope. It deserves structure. Not the stiff, corporate kind that smells of committee meetings — the kind that a jazz musician has. You learn the scales so thoroughly that improvisation becomes possible.

This manual is your scales. By the end of it, you will know how to fill every section of Community Journey, yes. But more than that, you will understand *why* each section exists, what it protects, and what it unlocks.

What Community Journey Actually Is

Community Journey is a single HTML file. That is not a limitation — it is a promise. Your community blueprint never touches a server you do not own. It lives in your browser's local storage, exports as clean JSON, and runs fully offline. It is a privacy-first lifecycle toolkit for building communities that matter.

Think of it as a workbench, not a dashboard. Dashboards show you what happened. Workbenches help you build what happens next.

The app is organized into four phases — **Envision**, **Build**, **Grow**, and **Launch** — plus a set of sharp-edged tools (a stress test, a dashboard, an AI architect) that keep you honest. Each phase contains sections you fill in at your own pace. Progress rings track your completeness. Templates give you a running start if the blank canvas feels daunting.

OFFLINE PROMISE

Community Journey has zero external dependencies. No analytics, no tracking pixels, no CDN calls. The Crimson Text font is embedded in the file itself. Your data stays yours.

Who This Manual Is For

You might be a founder building a community around your product. A creator tired of shouting into the algorithm and wanting a living room instead. A nonprofit organizer who knows that lasting change is built in circles, not broadcasts. A developer seeding an open-source contributor ecosystem. A coach launching a

paid mastermind.

Whatever the shape, if you have felt the pull to gather people around a shared purpose — and you want to do it with intention rather than luck — this manual will meet you where you are.

We will walk through every section of Community Journey, explain the thinking behind it, show real examples, and share the mistakes that are easiest to make. Some of those mistakes are ones we have made ourselves.

How to Read This

You do not have to read front-to-back. Each chapter maps to a section in the app, so you can jump to whichever phase you are in. That said, the first three chapters — Canvas, Personas, Values — are foundational. If you skip them, the later chapters will feel like decorating a house with no foundation.

A note on tone: this manual talks to you like a late-night conversation with a friend who has built a few things and broken a few others. It is direct. It is sometimes funny. It will not waste your time with corporate filler. And it trusts you to carry the weight of your own decisions.

Let us begin with the most important nine questions you will ever answer about your community.

02

The Community Canvas

Nine questions that define everything

The Weight of a Good Canvas

The Community Canvas is a 3×3 grid with nine text fields. It looks simple. It is not. Every other section in Community Journey — personas, spaces, rituals, pricing, growth — flows downstream from what you write here. If your canvas is vague, everything built on it wobbles.

Think of it as the DNA of your community. Not a mission statement for your website — something rawer. The canvas is where you get ruthlessly honest about what you are building, who it serves, and why it deserves to exist.

Purpose Statement

This is the field that spans the full width of the canvas, and for good reason. Your purpose statement answers the question: *Why does this community exist?* Not what it does. Not who it is for. Why it exists.

A weak purpose statement sounds like a tagline: "Connect like-minded professionals." That could describe a million communities. It tells you nothing about what makes yours necessary.

A strong purpose statement is specific enough to exclude: "Help indie game developers ship their first game by removing the isolation that kills solo projects." Now you know who this is for (indie game devs), what the problem is (isolation kills projects), and what success looks like (they ship).

Write your purpose statement and then ask: *If someone read only this sentence, would they know whether to join?* If the answer is no, sharpen it.

THE EXCLUSION TEST

A purpose that tries to include everyone includes no one. Your statement should make some people think "that is not for me" — and that is exactly right.

Topic & Niche

Be specific. "Marketing" is not a niche. "SEO for B2B SaaS companies with \$1-10M ARR" is. The tighter your niche, the stronger the gravitational pull. People do not join communities about broad subjects — they join communities where they feel understood.

A useful trick: describe your topic at three levels of zoom. Wide ("technology"), medium ("developer tools"), tight ("CLI tools for data engineers"). Your community lives at the tight level.

Target Member

Describe your ideal member the way you would describe a friend. Not demographics — psychographics. What keeps them up at night? What do they wish existed? Where are they in their journey?

"Mid-career product managers who have outgrown beginner content and want honest peer conversations about the messy parts of the job" — that is a target member. You can picture them. You know where to find them. You know what to say.

Shared Identity

This is the glue. What do your members have in common that makes them feel like a tribe? It is not the topic — it is the *experience* of that topic. "We are all building in public." "We have all left corporate to go solo." "We are parents who code after bedtime."

Shared identity turns a mailing list into a movement. Without it, members will consume content but never connect. With it, they will introduce themselves to strangers and say, "You are one of us."

Unique Value

Why should anyone join *your* community instead of the ten others in the same space? This cannot be "great content" — everyone says that. It has to be structural.

Maybe it is radical transparency (members share real revenue numbers). Maybe it is curation (application-only, so signal stays high). Maybe it is format (weekly hot seats instead of passive feeds). Maybe it is access (direct line to industry leaders who do not post on social media).

Your unique value should be something a competitor cannot copy by changing their tagline. It should be baked into how the community operates.

Platform & Format

Discord, Slack, Circle, Mighty Networks, a forum, WhatsApp — the platform question consumes more energy than it deserves. Here is a useful heuristic: choose the platform your target members already use daily. If they live in Slack for work, a Slack community has near-zero friction. If they are gamers or developers, Discord feels like home.

The format question matters more. Async-first (posts, threads) or sync-first (live calls, events)? Text-heavy or video-rich? Global or local? Your answers here shape the rhythm of participation.

PLATFORM MIGRATION

You will probably switch platforms at least once. Do not over-invest in platform-specific features early. Build your community in people and rituals, not in channel configurations.

Competitive Landscape

Name your competitors honestly. Reddit threads, Facebook groups, paid masterminds, free Discord servers — all of them are alternatives to joining your community. Why are they insufficient? What gap exists?

If you cannot name at least three alternatives, you either have not looked hard enough or you are building something so niche that you need to validate demand before building infrastructure.

Success Metrics

How will you know this is working? "A thriving community" is not a metric. "40% of members post at least once per week by month six" is. Pick metrics you can actually measure with the tools you have. Vanity metrics (total member count) feel good but mean nothing if the room is silent.

Three useful metrics to start: **Weekly Active Rate** (percentage of members who do anything), **30-Day Retention** (how many new members are still active after a month), and **Member-to-Member Connections** (are people talking to each other, or only to you?).

Community Size Goal

This field is more philosophical than it appears. Some communities are best at 30 members. Some need 3,000 to generate enough activity. The answer depends on your model.

Paid masterminds work at 12–30 people. Creator communities often need 200+ for enough diversity of perspective. Local meetup groups thrive at 40–80 active members. SaaS product communities scale with the user base.

Set targets for 3, 6, and 12 months. Be honest about whether you are optimizing for intimacy or reach. Both are valid. The mistake is wanting both simultaneously.

03

Member Personas

The people who will fill your empty room

Beyond Demographics

Demographics tell you who people are on paper. Personas tell you who they are at 11pm when they are deciding whether to open your community or scroll Instagram instead.

Community Journey gives you structured cards for each persona: name, role, participation style, motivation, fear, and a quote. The most important fields are motivation and fear. Get those right and everything else follows.

The Four Participation Archetypes

Every community has four types of members, and you need all of them.

Lurkers (60–70% of your community) read everything but rarely post. They are not passive — they are learning, absorbing, deciding whether this place is safe. Lurkers are the silent majority that determines your culture by what they tolerate and what drives them away.

Commenters (15–20%) respond to others' posts, answer questions, react with emoji. They are the social connective tissue. Without commenters, every post feels like shouting into a well.

Creators (5–10%) generate original content — discussion starters, project showcases, long-form posts. They set the pace and the standard. If your creators leave, the community slowly starves.

Connectors (2–5%) are the rarest and most valuable. They introduce members to each other, tag relevant people into threads, remember who said what three weeks ago. Connectors turn a group into a network.

DON'T FORCE LURKERS TO POST

A community that pressures everyone to create content will drive away 70% of its members. Design value for lurkers too — curated threads, searchable archives, weekly digests.

Building Real Personas

Give each persona a real name. Not "Persona A" — "Sarah, the Career Switcher" or "Marcus, the Skeptical Expert." Names create empathy. Empathy creates better design decisions.

For each persona, fill in these fields in Community Journey:

Role / Background — What is their day job, life stage, or context? "Senior developer at a fintech startup, 7 years experience, manages a team of four."

Participation Style — Are they a lurker, commenter, creator, or connector? This determines how you design the experience for them.

Primary Motivation — Why would they join? Be specific. "Wants to find co-founders for a side project" or "Needs a safe space to discuss leadership challenges without judgment."

Fear / Barrier — What almost stops them? "Worried it is another dead Slack group." "Does not want to be sold to." "Afraid of looking stupid in front of experts."

Quote / Thought — Write a sentence in their voice. This is the most powerful field. "I have tried three communities this year and they all turned into ghost towns by month two."

How Many Personas?

Two to four is the sweet spot. Fewer than two and you are building a monologue, not a community. More than four and you are trying to serve too many masters — the experience will be mediocre for everyone.

If you find yourself listing six or seven personas, you probably need to narrow your niche. Go back to the canvas.

Validation

Community Journey includes built-in validation for personas. You will see a completeness percentage on each card, amber borders on cards with empty required fields, and pulsing indicators if you accidentally create two personas with the same name.

These are not just UI niceties. An incomplete persona is worse than no persona at all — it gives you false confidence that you understand your audience when you are really just guessing.

Fill every field. If you cannot fill a field, that is useful information: it means you do not know your member well enough yet. Go talk to them. Seriously. Five conversations with real potential members will teach you more than fifty hours of strategy.

04

Values & Guidelines

The invisible architecture that shapes every interaction

Values Are Not Rules

Rules tell people what they cannot do. Values tell people who they are when they are at their best. Rules create compliance. Values create culture.

Community Journey separates these into distinct fields: Core Values, Guidelines / Code of Conduct, Tone & Voice, and Cultural Rituals. Each serves a different purpose.

Core Values (Pick Three to Five)

Your values should be specific enough to guide real decisions. "Respect" is not a value — it is a platitude. Everyone claims to value respect. Try instead: "Disagree with specifics, not generalities." Or: "Ship something ugly before designing something perfect." Or: "Generosity over gatekeeping — share the playbook, not just the highlight reel."

Good values create a slight tension. "Move fast and help each other" acknowledges that speed sometimes conflicts with support, and declares which one wins. "Transparency over comfort" says that honest feedback matters more than politeness.

Write your values and then ask: *Could someone disagree with these and still be a reasonable person?* If everyone would agree with your values, they are too generic to shape behaviour.

THE POSTER TEST

If you would not put a value on a poster in your community space (physical or digital), it is too bland. Values should make newcomers think "oh, this place is different."

Guidelines & Code of Conduct

This is where rules live. Be concrete. Not "be respectful" but "no personal attacks — critique ideas, not people." Not "no spam" but "self-promotion is welcome in the #showcase channel only; elsewhere, lead with value first."

Include consequences. Most codes of conduct fail because they list behaviours without stating what happens when someone crosses a line. A clear escalation path — verbal warning, written warning, temporary mute, permanent ban — protects everyone, including you.

Also include: how to report a problem (privately, to whom), a commitment to respond within a timeframe, and a clear appeals process. People tolerate strict rules far better than arbitrary ones.

Tone & Voice

How do the leaders and moderators of your community speak? This is subtler than it sounds. A community where moderators use formal language ("Please be advised that...") attracts different members than one where they say "Hey, quick heads up —".

Your tone cascades. New members mirror whatever they see from leadership. If you are warm and direct, your community will be warm and direct. If you are stiff and official, your community will feel like a corporate intranet.

Write three words that describe your desired tone. "Warm, direct, curious." "Irreverent, generous, no-BS." "Nerdy, patient, encouraging." Then use those words as a filter for every message you send.

Cultural Rituals

These are the inside jokes, traditions, and shared moments that make a community feel like home. They cannot be manufactured from scratch — but they can be seeded.

Examples: A weekly "show your desk" thread. A custom emoji for when someone ships something. A tradition of welcoming new members with a specific phrase. An annual awards ceremony voted on by members. A running joke about the founder's terrible taste in coffee.

The key word is *shared*. A ritual only becomes a ritual when members participate in it without being asked. Your job is to start it consistently enough that it becomes part of the culture's muscle memory.

05

Spaces & Channels

Designing the rooms of your house

The Ghost Town Problem

The single most common mistake new community builders make is creating too many channels. It feels productive — look at all these organized spaces! But ten channels with one message each feel lonelier than one channel with ten messages.

Start with three to five spaces. You can always add more as conversation naturally outgrows a channel. You can never undo the feeling of walking into a silent room.

THE RULE OF FIVE

Launch with no more than five channels. If you feel the urge to create a sixth, first check whether the existing five are active. Dead channels are worse than missing ones — they signal that nobody is home.

Anatomy of a Good Space

Community Journey tracks four attributes for each space: name, purpose, type, and access level. Each matters.

Name — Short, clear, and scannable. #introductions, #showcase, #help, #off-topic, #announcements. Members should know what belongs in a channel without reading the description.

Purpose — One sentence explaining what this space is for. Pin it. Refer to it when redirecting off-topic posts. "This is where you share what you are working on — finished or in-progress. Feedback welcome but not required."

Type — Community Journey offers seven types: Discussion, Announcements, Showcase/Gallery, Help/Q&A, Social/Off-topic, Resources/Library, Events. The type determines the expected behaviour. An Announcements channel is one-to-many. A Discussion channel is many-to-many. A Help channel is question-then-answer.

Access Level — All Members, Paid Only, Mods/Staff, or VIP/Founding. Access gating is a powerful tool for both monetization and quality control. Just be transparent about what is behind each gate.

The Essential Five

If you could only have five channels, make them these:

#introductions — Where new members land. Set a template: name, what you do, what you are hoping to find here. This channel is sacred — every intro should get a response from the team or a moderator within 24 hours.

#general — The living room. Low-stakes, broad conversation. This is where culture forms organically. Do not over-moderate it.

#wins or **#showcase** — Where members share what they have accomplished. This channel is a dopamine engine. Celebrate everything. A first blog post deserves the same energy as a product launch.

#help — Where members ask questions and get answers. The speed of response here determines whether members come back. If a question sits unanswered for 48 hours, your community has a trust problem.

#off-topic — The kitchen at a house party. This is where friendships form. Dog photos, weekend plans, random links. It sounds trivial. It is not.

When to Add More Spaces

Add a new channel only when an existing one is consistently overwhelmed — when posts are getting buried because there is too much activity for one stream. That is a good problem.

Resist the urge to pre-create channels for anticipated topics. If nobody has asked about **#career-advice** yet, do not create it. Wait for the demand. Organic growth is healthier than architectural ambition.

06

Rituals & Events

Creating the heartbeat of your community

Why Rhythm Matters

A community without rituals is a library. Quiet, useful, but nobody makes friends there.

Rituals create predictability, and predictability creates habit. When members know that every Tuesday at 3pm there is a live Q&A, or that every Friday a discussion prompt drops in #general, they build your community into their week. They start to feel like it would be strange *not* to show up.

Community Journey tracks four fields for each ritual: name, description, frequency, and owner. The last one — owner — is the most overlooked and the most important.

Frequency Tiers

Daily — Lightweight prompts or check-ins. "What are you working on today?" These work well in active communities (50+ members) but feel forced in smaller ones.

Weekly — The backbone. A weekly AMA, office hour, discussion thread, or challenge. This is the minimum viable rhythm for any community. If you do nothing else, do one weekly ritual.

Monthly — Bigger events. A masterclass, a community call, a showcase. These give members something to anticipate and plan around.

Quarterly — Retrospectives, member surveys, strategy sessions, IRL meetups. These are the moments your community reflects on itself and evolves.

THE OWNER PROBLEM

If you are the owner of every ritual, your community has a bus factor of one. Gradually hand rituals to trusted members. When a member owns a ritual, they are invested in the community's success in a way that no amount of content can create.

Rituals That Work

Here are rituals that have proven effective across different community types:

Monday Kickoff — A weekly thread where members share their goals for the week. Low effort, high visibility. Creates accountability.

Win Wednesday — Members share something that went well, no matter how small. This normalizes progress over perfection and creates a positive feedback loop.

Ask Me Anything — Invite an expert (internal or external) for a live Q&A.; Even 30 minutes of focused conversation creates enormous value.

Monthly Challenge — Set a themed challenge with clear parameters and a deadline. "Write 500 words every day this month." "Ship one feature by the 30th." Challenges create shared experience.

Retrospective — Quarterly, ask: what is working? What is not? What should we try? This makes members co-creators of the community, not just consumers.

07

Content Strategy

Sparking conversations, not broadcasting monologues

The Content Trap

The biggest content mistake in communities: treating it like a media channel. Posting articles, sharing links, broadcasting newsletters — then wondering why nobody replies.

Community content is fundamentally different from marketing content. Its purpose is not to inform but to provoke conversation. The best community post is not the one that gets the most reads — it is the one that gets the most replies.

Content Pillars

Community Journey asks you to define three to five content pillars — recurring themes that structure your content calendar. Good pillars are specific enough to guide creation but broad enough to sustain variety.

Examples: "Member Spotlights" (profile one member per week), "Industry News Analysis" (break down one piece of news with the community), "Show & Tell" (members share work-in-progress), "Ask the Expert" (invite outside expertise), "Resource Drops" (curated tools, templates, links).

Each pillar should serve a different purpose: one for education, one for community building, one for practical value, one for fun. This ensures your content does not become monotonous.

The Calendar Rhythm

Map your pillars to a weekly schedule. This is not about rigidity — it is about removing the "what should I post today?" decision fatigue.

A sample week: Monday — Discussion prompt tied to a pillar. Wednesday — Expert AMA or resource drop. Friday — Show your work / celebration thread. Weekend — Off-topic, fun, social. This gives your community a predictable heartbeat while leaving room for spontaneous conversation.

Member-Generated Content

The healthiest communities generate 60–80% of their content from members, not admins. Your job is to create the conditions for member-generated content, not to produce it yourself.

How? Templates ("Here is a format for sharing your project"), prompts ("What is the most counterintuitive thing you have learned this year?"), spotlights ("This week we are featuring..."), and challenges ("Post your dashboard design in #showcase").

When a member creates content, amplify it. React, comment, reshare, feature it. Every member who creates content and gets positive feedback becomes more likely to create again. This is the flywheel.

THE 1% RULE

In most communities, 1% of members create content, 9% engage, and 90% lurk. Your goal is not to change these ratios — it is to make each tier feel valued and served.

08

Member Onboarding

The 48 hours that determine everything

The Critical Window

You have 48 hours. That is the window between a new member joining and deciding — consciously or not — whether this community is worth returning to.

Most communities waste this window with a generic welcome message and a link to the rules. The member wanders in, sees a wall of unfamiliar conversations, feels like an outsider, and never comes back.

Great onboarding does the opposite. It makes the new member feel seen, oriented, and capable of taking a meaningful action within their first fifteen minutes.

The Welcome Sequence

Community Journey provides a structured welcome sequence field. Here is what a strong sequence looks like:

Minute 0 — An automated welcome message that is warm, brief, and gives exactly one clear next step: "Head to #introductions and tell us who you are — we are excited you are here."

Hour 1 — A personal DM from the founder or a community manager. Not a template — a real message that references something from their introduction or profile. "I saw you are building a sustainable fashion brand — have you connected with @Maria yet? She is doing similar work."

Day 1 — A reply to their introduction from at least two community members. If organic replies are not happening, seed them. Seriously.

Day 2-3 — An invitation to an upcoming event or ritual: "We have an AMA with [Expert] on Thursday — you should join." This creates a future reason to return.

Week 1 — A check-in DM: "How is the first week going? Anything I can help with?" This is where you catch the people who are confused, overwhelmed, or silently disengaging.

THE 15-MINUTE WIN

Design one thing a new member can accomplish in their first 15 minutes that makes them feel they belong. Posting an intro, answering a poll, reacting to a prompt — something small but connected.

The New Member Checklist

Give new members a clear, achievable checklist. Not ten items — five at most. Each item should move them closer to connection:

1. Update your profile and add a photo (humans trust faces).
2. Post an introduction in #introductions.
3. Reply to someone else's post (this breaks the ice of the first interaction).
4. Join one channel that matches

your interests. 5. RSVP for the next community event.

Track completion if your platform allows it. Members who complete 4/5 onboarding steps retain at 3x the rate of those who complete only 1. That is not a guess — it is a pattern repeated across every community platform.

Buddy Systems

Pair every new member with an experienced one. The buddy's job is simple: send one DM saying hello, answer any questions, and introduce them to one other member. That is it.

This tiny intervention has an outsized impact. A new member who knows two people in a community is dramatically more likely to stay than one who knows zero. Social ties are the infrastructure of retention.

09

Engagement Loops

Systems that breathe on their own

Beyond Admin Posting

If your community's activity drops to zero every time you go on holiday, you do not have a community. You have an audience.

Engagement loops are self-sustaining systems where one member's action triggers another member's response, which triggers another action. They are the difference between a community you *run* and a community that *runs*.

Anatomy of a Loop

Community Journey breaks each loop into three components: Trigger, Action, and Reward.

Trigger — What starts the loop? A notification, a calendar event, a new member arriving, a post going unanswered.

Action — What does the member do? Reply to a question, share their work, welcome a newcomer, vote on a proposal.

Reward — What do they get back? Recognition, a badge, a reply, a connection, a feeling of contribution.

The strongest loops are ones where the reward for one person becomes the trigger for another. When Sarah answers Marcus's question, Marcus feels helped (reward) and Sarah's answer gets upvoted (reward), which attracts more questions (trigger for others).

Five Loops to Start With

The Welcome Loop — New member posts intro → existing members reply → new member feels welcomed → new member replies to the next newcomer. Self-perpetuating warmth.

The Help Loop — Member asks question → knowledgeable member answers → answer gets upvoted → answerer gains status → answerer monitors for more questions. This is how Stack Overflow was built.

The Showcase Loop — Member shares work → community gives feedback → member iterates → shares improved version → inspires others to share. A creativity engine.

The Accountability Loop — Member declares goal → community checks in → member reports progress → community celebrates → member sets next goal. This works brilliantly for learning and building communities.

The Curation Loop — Member finds a useful resource → shares it with the community → community upvotes → resource enters a shared library → member earns curator reputation → finds more resources. A knowledge flywheel.

10

Moderation & Safety

Protecting the room so good things can happen

Moderation Is Not Policing

The best moderation is invisible. Members should feel safe and free, not watched. That requires proactive design, not reactive enforcement.

Community Journey gives you five fields for moderation planning: philosophy, team structure, escalation process, common scenarios, and automation tools. Fill all five before you have your first conflict, not after.

The Escalation Ladder

Every community needs a clear, public escalation ladder. Here is a proven one:

Level 1: Gentle redirect. "Hey, this is great but it fits better in #showcase — mind moving it?" No judgment. No public call-out.

Level 2: Private DM. "I noticed your last few posts have been getting some pushback. Here is what I think is happening..." Always assume good intent first.

Level 3: Formal warning. "This is a written warning. Here is the specific behaviour, here is the guideline it violates, and here is what I need to see change."

Level 4: Temporary mute. 24-72 hours. Cooling-off period. DM explaining why and what the path back looks like.

Level 5: Permanent removal. Reserved for repeated violations, harassment, or threats. Non-negotiable. Brief, factual explanation to the community if the incident was public.

THE FIRST CONFLICT

Your first major moderation incident will feel terrible. That is normal. Handle it consistently and transparently, and it will actually strengthen trust in the community. How you handle conflict defines your culture more than how you handle success.

Moderator Burnout

Moderating a community is emotional labour. Your moderators absorb negativity, make difficult judgment calls, and rarely receive thanks. Plan for this.

Pay your moderators if you can — or offer meaningful perks. Give them a private channel to decompress. Rotate responsibilities. Check in on *them* regularly. A burned-out moderator either quits suddenly or becomes heavy-handed, and both damage the community.

11

Monetization

Sustainability is not a dirty word

The Free Trap

Free communities are not free. They cost you time, energy, and eventually money (hosting, tools, events). If your community is valuable, it is worth paying for — and members who pay are more committed than those who do not.

That said, not every community should charge from day one. The decision depends on your model, your audience, and your tolerance for subsidizing the early months with your own labour.

Revenue Models

Community Journey offers six models in a dropdown. Here is what each one actually means:

Free (Ad/Sponsor-supported) — The community is free; revenue comes from sponsors or advertisers. Works at scale (1,000+ members). Risk: sponsors may conflict with community values.

Freemium — Free tier for basic access, paid tier for premium features. The most common model. The challenge is making the free tier valuable enough to attract members while making the paid tier compelling enough to convert them.

Paid Membership — Everyone pays. This creates the strongest commitment but the highest barrier to entry. Works best for professional or mastermind communities where the audience has budget and clear ROI expectations.

One-Time Access Fee — Pay once, access forever. Simple, but creates no recurring revenue and can lead to a growing population of inactive members.

Donation / Tip-based — Works for mission-driven or open-source communities where members believe in the cause. Unpredictable but philosophically clean.

Hybrid — Combine models. A free community with paid events, a membership with à la carte workshops, a donation-supported community with a premium "supporters" tier.

The Revenue Projector

Community Journey includes a 12-month revenue projector. Plug in your price, starting member count, and monthly growth rate, and it generates a table showing projected MRR and cumulative revenue.

Use this as a sanity check, not a forecast. Community growth is rarely linear — it follows an S-curve with a slow start, a growth inflection, and an eventual plateau. Your first three months will almost certainly be slower than you hope. That is normal.

PRICING PSYCHOLOGY

If nobody complains about your price, it is too low. If everyone complains, it is too high. The sweet spot is when about 20% of prospects say "that is a lot" but join anyway because the value is clear.

12

Launch & Growth

From private beta to self-sustaining flywheel

The Seed-First Launch

Do not launch to everyone on day one. Start with 20–50 founding members who believe in the vision. These people set the tone, the norms, and the energy level. If your founding members are disengaged, it does not matter how many people join after — the culture is already set.

Where to find founding members: your existing audience (email list, social followers), personal outreach (DMs to people you admire), adjacent communities (people who are active in related spaces), and warm referrals from early believers.

Launch Phases

Community Journey tracks launch activities across four phases:

Pre-Launch — Build the infrastructure, set up channels, write guidelines, prepare onboarding. Recruit founding members privately.

Soft Launch — Invite founding members. Observe what works and what does not. Fix onboarding friction, adjust channel structure, refine your rituals.

Launch — Open to a wider audience. Have a landing page, a clear value proposition, and social proof from founding members. Time it to an event or milestone for maximum impact.

Post-Launch — Optimize retention. Analyze where new members drop off. Double down on what is working. Kill what is not.

The Growth Flywheel

Sustainable growth is a flywheel, not a funnel. Here is how it works:

Great content creates engaged members. Engaged members create connections. Connections create loyalty. Loyal members invite friends. Friends become new members who experience great content. The cycle repeats.

Your job is to reduce friction at every point in this loop. Make content easy to find. Make connections easy to form. Make invitations easy to send. Each small improvement compounds over time.

Retention Over Acquisition

A community that retains 90% of its members each month will always outgrow a community that acquires 50 new members but loses 40.

Track retention obsessively. If your 30-day retention is below 50%, stop acquiring new members and fix the experience. New members walking into a revolving door will not save you — they will accelerate the

decline.

The most powerful retention tool is not content, features, or events. It is relationships. Members who have at least two genuine connections in the community are 3-5x more likely to stay than those who have zero.

THE LEAKY BUCKET

Before you pour water into a bucket, check for holes. Every growth tactic is wasted if new members leave as fast as they arrive. Fix onboarding and engagement first — then invest in acquisition.

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The Stress Test

Twenty-five questions you might not want to answer

Devil's Advocate Mode

The Community Stress Test is the most uncomfortable section in Community Journey. That is by design.

It presents 25 tough questions across five categories: Purpose & Identity, Member Experience, Growth & Sustainability, Operations & Moderation, and Culture & Values. For each question, you cycle through three verdicts: Survived (you have a good answer), Failed (you do not), or Uncertain (you are not sure).

The honest answer is rarely Survived. And that is the point.

How to Use the Stress Test

Go through all 25 questions at three points in your journey: before you launch (to identify gaps), three months in (to reality-check assumptions), and annually (to challenge complacency).

For every Failed or Uncertain verdict, add a note explaining what you would need to change to Survive. Then put those changes into your launch plan or growth strategy.

A survival rate below 50% does not mean your community is doomed. It means you have work to do — and now you know exactly where.

The Five Hardest Questions

From experience, these are the five questions that trip up even experienced community builders:

"If you stopped posting for two weeks, would conversations continue without you?" — This tests whether you have built a community or an audience. If the answer is no, your engagement loops need work.

"What happens if your most active five members leave simultaneously?" — This tests resilience. If five people leaving would collapse your community, your member base is too concentrated.

"Can you handle disagreement and debate without the community fracturing?" — This tests cultural strength. Healthy communities can contain disagreement. Fragile ones either avoid it (echo chamber) or shatter.

"How many hours per week can you realistically commit to community management?" — This tests sustainability. Most founders underestimate the time by 2-3x. Be honest here.

"Is there a risk your community becomes an echo chamber?" — This tests intellectual honesty. The more aligned your members are, the higher this risk. Design for constructive dissent.

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Templates & AI Architect

Standing on the shoulders of patterns that work

Twelve Templates, Twelve Paths

Community Journey ships with twelve templates, each pre-filling the Community Canvas with proven defaults for a specific community type: Creator Community, Professional Network, Learning Cohort, Local/Interest Group, Open Source/Dev Community, Paid Mastermind, SaaS/Product Community, Wellness/Support Circle, Investor/Angel Network, Customer/Brand Community, DAO/Web3 Community, and Nonprofit/Cause Community.

Templates are starting points, not destinations. Load one, read what it gives you, then rewrite every field in your own words. The act of rewriting forces you to think critically about what applies to your specific context and what does not.

The AI Architect

The AI Architect panel (the floating button in the bottom-right corner) offers nine pre-built prompts across three categories: Structure & Spaces, Growth & Launch, and Improve & Refine.

In **Prompt Mode**, clicking an action copies a context-rich prompt to your clipboard — ready to paste into ChatGPT, Claude, or any AI tool. The prompt automatically includes all of your canvas data, personas, values, spaces, and rituals, so the AI gives you specific advice rather than generic platitudes.

In **Live Mode**, you connect directly to an LLM (Ollama, LM Studio, or Anthropic API) and get responses inside the app. Local providers keep everything on your machine. The Anthropic option sends data to their servers — the app warns you clearly about this.

Save, Export, Protect

Community Journey auto-saves to localStorage every time you make a change. But localStorage is not a backup — it can be cleared by browser updates or privacy tools.

Export your work as JSON regularly. This creates a portable snapshot of your entire community plan that you can import on any device.

You can also run multiple projects simultaneously — useful if you are building more than one community or testing different strategic directions. The project selector in the sidebar lets you switch between them instantly.

BACKUP RITUAL

Set a weekly reminder to export your JSON. It takes three seconds. Losing months of strategic work to a browser cache clear is a heartbreak that is entirely preventable.

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The Long Game

What this manual cannot teach you

Patience as Strategy

The hardest part of community building is not the strategy. It is the patience.

Month one will be exhilarating. Month three will be discouraging. Month six will feel like a trough. Month twelve will either vindicate everything or teach you things that no manual could.

The communities that survive the trough are not the ones with the best strategy. They are the ones where the founder kept showing up — posting, welcoming, connecting, iterating — even when the metrics said nobody was watching. Because someone always is.

Your Community Will Surprise You

The best moments in community building are the ones you did not plan. A member who helps another member get a job. A group that organizes an event you never imagined. An inside joke that becomes a tradition. A conversation that changes someone's career.

You cannot manufacture these moments. You can only create the conditions for them — the spaces, the rituals, the safety, the trust. And then you step back.

Community Journey is a toolkit for creating those conditions. This manual is a guide for using that toolkit well. But the actual community — the living, surprising, messy, beautiful thing — is built by the people who show up.

Go build something worth gathering around.

