Crabby's Office Community courtesy chat

The Crabby Office Lady

The Office Communities has had an extreme makeover. Let's learn the rules of the road before we check out its latest look.

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I'll admit it: sometimes I don't have the all the answers. And I'll admit it for my cohorts too: sometimes Office Online assistance articles and Help topics don't have the answers either. So what do you do when you desperately need an answer? Well, you have options:

- Blame me (you laugh, but it happens)
- Search for the answer on a Tibetan mountaintop (love those wireless connections)
- Realize that others have had the exact same problem, and find out what they did to solve it (love those Office Communities)

I've mentioned this last one before. Sometimes it's referred to as a newsgroup or discussion group, but whatever you want to call it, getting involved in an Office Community can be the best way to find an answer fast (and possibly make friends with a techno-smartypants). I mean, wouldn't you like to actually communicate with thousands of other people who are using the same products as you? And what about getting your answers from experts — such as Microsoft Most Valuable Professionals (MVPs) — for FREE?

NOTE There are no meetings, no dues, and no tearful confessions needed in order to become a part of the Office Community.

Not convinced? You say you don't want to spend your time trolling through long threads of discussions to try and find an answer to your specific issue? You'd rather call Microsoft and pay for your advice? If that's how you're feeling (and you have every right to feel the way you feel, honey) it's possible you haven't visited the new Office Communities. I suggest you do so. With new features, such as being able to show specific threads (like maybe only those that have answers posted to them), e-mail notification when someone responds to a particular question, and being able to view the ratings of those who post, the likelihood of you not finding an quality answer to your problem is virtually nil.

Everyone, play nice

Now, before you jump on in there, I've taken it upon myself to outline some of the rules of the game when it comes to being part of any online community. Just like team sports and life in general, there are regulations designed and ordained with human nature in mind. I suggest you follow these guidelines if you expect to lead a happy, productive, and successful life within Office Communities.

Lurk before you leap

If you've never participated in a discussion group, chances are you may be feeling a little intimidated. I completely understand. Now's the time to learn the fine art of lurking. Think of it as wandering from party to party, people watching, tasting some wine *here*, having a shrimp cocktail *there*....

Go into a group, poke around, read some posts, do a search, see what comes up. Check out how people ask their questions, try and figure out which types of questions garner the quickest results, and learn about who is actually answering the questions. Sometimes it's people looking for answers (like you, and frankly, like me), sometimes it's people who work for Microsoft (like me), and a sometimes it's one of our hardworking MVPs. Once you're comfortable and begin to understand how things work, put on your party dress and your Mardi Gras beads and dance on in there.

Search for your answer before you ask

If you have something going on in your life that's causing you problems, chances are there are thousands of other humans who have that same problem and may be able to offer support, guidance, and even help. Examples are: male pattern baldness, sleepless toddlers, and Outlook showing fax numbers instead of contact e-mail addresses. For brevity's sake, let's address this last one.

Yes, you could post a brand new thread to the Outlook discussion group, and wait to see what happens, but if you do a search for your problem, you'll find that many people are having the same problem and there actually already IS an answer for it (and maybe more than one)! The moral of this story: before you post, take a look around to see if your answer is already there.

Specificity wins the race

Once you know you need to post a message, be specific. And I mean this in two ways:

1. Create a subject line that will focus on what the problem is. Good subject line: "Fax numbers appearing in e-mail lookup." Bad subject: "Address book messed up."
2. When it comes to solutions, what's good for the goose is not necessarily good for the gander. In other words, make sure that you mention which version of the program you're using (Outlook 2003, Outlook 2002, etc.), the operating system you're running (Windows XP, Windows 2000, etc.), and exactly what you're trying to do that isn't doing what you want it to do.

    The answer to your question will often depend on the combination of these three things, and if you don't provide this information, you may end up with a solution that isn't quite right for the software you're running.

Don't hijack threads

What I'm saying is: be relevant. If you've found a discussion thread about inserting and scaling graphics in a table in FrontPage, don't jump in there and start talking about graphic effects or how you can draw really great caricatures. Stay on topic.

Make sense

I know; you type fast...particularly when you're agitated and need an answer to your question NOW. But if we can't understand what you're trying to say, we can't help. Please: use good grammar, don't write in ALL CAPS, employ decent spelling, and last but not least, keep it brief.

Keep a cool head

In the same vein as making sense...please keep your posts clean and swear-word free. And if you're angry, please count to ten or go scream into your pillow. (Then think about this software problem in the context of your entire life and try and put it all into perspective.) Flaming, the posting of obnoxious and rude messages, will just cause people grief — and possibly uncontrollable rage — and perhaps invite them to flame you back, igniting a flame war. There are enough wars going on in the world, Sparky.

So remember: don't say anything you wouldn't want 3 million people to hear. You can never take it back. The tippety-tap of your fingers composing a flame takes but mere moments; your words in a discussion group live forever.

Limit "me too" responses

Sometimes it just feels good to agree, doesn't it? As a social species, we humans tend to get that warm and fuzzy feeling when we're all on the same page. And while that's all nice and good for 'round the campfire, it's just a waste of time and space in a discussion group. If you agree with someone's assessment of a problem, great. If you can expound on the subject or make the question clearer, all the better. "Me too" isn't really useful here. Climb out of your sleeping bag only when you have something to add to the story — even if it's just more information. Otherwise, stay in your tent and wait to see what happens.

Do your part: Vote and be thankful

As I mentioned earlier, the new Office Communities offers a rating system for anyone who posts a message. Now, each time you read someone's post, you can rate it as helpful or not helpful. This helps build the reputation of those who post good information.

There are three different levels that community contributors can achieve: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. If people who answer your questions have a Gold medal next to their names, they are Gold-level contributors and you know that they have already answered more than 500 questions accurately. (Aren't they special.) Silver-level folks have been right 101-500 times, and our Bronze medal goody-goodies have answered your questions correctly 51-100 times. In other words, you know you're in good hands. Wouldn't you want other people to know that too? Of course you would. Say thanks to the folks who saved your hide and give them a good rating.

"The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community." — William James

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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