

Free Stuff: Message Boards

By Richard Lowe

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One of the more significant ways to create a "sticky site" (a site which people want to visit over and over again) is to add a message board. What is a message board? It is a means whereby online group conversations can take place. For example, you could post a question, several people could post answers, and other people could expand upon those answers. On an active message board, these conversations can go on for pages.

Okay, so let's say you want to add a message board to your site. You have several options.

- You may want to use a service such as egroups, topica or communityzero because these offer additional features which wrap a sort of community around a message board.
- If your host does not allow you to install your own scripts (and this is true of virtually all free hosts) then you must use a remotely hosted message board.
- If your host supports user written CGI routines, than you can install a script to run on your own web site. This is the best way, in my humble opinion, to operate a message board as it gives you total control over everything, including the board layout and contents.

We will explore each of these options below.

Communities

There are quite a few community-type message boards out there. The advantage of these services

is that you get quite a few other things to offer your visitors. These generally include calendars, chat rooms, file sharing, lists of links, note boards and so on.

On the downside, these services do not integrate well into your web site. They are very detached and have a far different look and feel. In addition, they do not tend to drive traffic to your site (since they are part part of your site) and thus are not very good at adding "stickiness".

These type of message boards are great when your primary purpose is to host a, well, community and your web site is secondary.

Communityzero <http://www.Communityzero.com>

In my opinion, this is the best of the community-type message boards on the internet. I've found the servers to be quick and responsive, and downtime seems to be virtually non-existent. Highly recommended.

Egroups <http://www.egroups.com>

Egroups was purchased by Yahoo several years ago. The service is one of the largest (if not the largest) of it's type. Egroups has just about every feature you can imagine and it has become very popular. However, their servers are down so often and response time is so poor it's difficult to imagine how they remain in business. Usable but with some issues now and then.

Topica <http://www.topica.com>

Topica is an up-and-coming service and it is very good. It has all of the usual features, but the servers sometimes seem slow. Recommended.

User Installed Scripts

This is, in my opinion, the best way to create a message board as it allows you to have complete control over your board. When you use a script, you do not have any banners or advertisements to entice your hard earned visitors to go elsewhere (unless, of course, you put them there yourself).

The main disadvantages of these scripts are:

- Since it is hosted on your own web site, any activity counts against your bandwidth and disk space limits.
- You must maintain the script on your site yourself, which can be a chore.

Discus <http://www.discusware.com/discus/>

This is the script which I use, and I must say that I am very happy with it's performance so far. The script is easy to install because it has been entirely automated. Just answer the questions and follow the instructions - very simple and straightforward.

This script is so good that I cannot even recommend any others. It's fast, full featured and easy-to-use. The message board that results is excellent. This script has a free version which has just about everything you will ever need, and a professional version which costs a few dollars which has just about everything else.

Remotely Hosted Scripts

The final option is to take advantage of scripts which are hosted on another server. This has the

advantage that the script is maintained and supported by someone else, and uses their bandwidth and disk space instead of yours. Of course, the disadvantages are that you lose control of the board, the boards are generally not extraordinarily customizable and, most importantly, since they are advertisement supported they tend to be peppered with banners which pull visitors from your site.

Boardhost <http://www.boardhost.com/>

One of the better message board services. Their boards are quick, rarely down, and very customizable.

Beseen <http://www.beseen.com/board/index.html>

A threaded discussion forum for your web site. Build a sense of community between you and your customers. Allow your visitors to interact with you, your staff and each other by posting questions and comments. No programming required. Easy setup and simple to maintain. Customizable to your look and feel.

Bravenet Web Services <http://www.bravenet.com/>

As visitors can publicly discuss topics of interest in your Forum. Posting new messages and replying to existing ones is simple and fun. Your forum is completely customizable so you can make it look just like the rest of your site.

MyForum.Net <http://www.myforum.net/>

Myforum.net is an easy way to add customized, interactive forums to your web site. They support username.myforum.net (which can be pretty cool), their boards are easy to customize and, of course, they are free.

Additional Information

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Msgboards/index.htm>

Message Boards A way to make a very sticky site is to have an active message board

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Msgboards/ethics.htm>

Message Boards - Ethics Nothing is more sad than a once proud message board being reduced to rubble by a malicious moderator.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Msgboards/contributor.htm>

Message Boards - Contributor Message boards thrive on contributions. In fact, without contributors there is no board at all.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Msgboards/promotion.htm>

Message Boards - Promotion Message boards are very useful in getting people to return to your site, but they must be promoted in order to be of maximum benefit.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Msgboards/moderator.htm>

Message Boards - Moderator The best message boards are wonderfully and expertly moderated. The worst are frequented by nothing but spam robots.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Sticky/msgboards.htm>

Sticky Sites - Message Boards You can add a message board to your site to get people to want to come back over and over.

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