

2026 COMMUNITY TRENDS REPORT

Circle



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| Introduction | 2 |
| Research | 4 |
| Core shift one: Communities are now a key differentiator for businesses | 7 |
| Trend 1: Belonging is the new competitive advantage | 8 |
| Trend 2: Top performing communities transform their members | 9 |
| Trend 3: Community is no longer limited to the post-purchase experience | 11 |
| Trend 4: Community teams are maturing and getting dedicated budgets | 12 |
| Core shift two: Creators and community businesses have realized there's no "one right way" to build a community | 14 |
| Trend 5: There's a growing culture of experimentation in community building | 15 |
| Trend 6: Prioritizing member experience over member growth | 18 |
| Trend 7: Forward-thinking communities are piloting flexible participation models | 20 |
| Trend 8: Deep member connection starts with emotional safety | 21 |
| Trend 9: The quiet power of thoughtful, behind-the-scenes AI | 23 |
| Looking ahead to 2026 | 24 |
| Acknowledgements | 25 |

It all started with an unexpected confession from a community builder on Circle. Over coffee, she told us something that made us pause.

“Unlike my teenagers,” she said with a laugh, “my members keep asking for less screen time, and more *real* time.”

We laughed too, but it stuck with us. Because in that one sentence, she captured something we’ve been hearing again and again this year.

Digital overwhelm is at an all-time high, and it’s quietly reshaping how we spend our time and attention online. People are drowning in content and ads, trying (and let’s be honest, often struggling) to cut back on screen time. Just look at the boom in physical devices like Brick, designed to help people unplug from their phones.

Meanwhile, the surge of AI-generated content is driving a major shift for businesses, one that’s equally exciting and disconcerting.



Creators and brands are entering uncharted waters, where fake content spreads quickly and hot takes dominate feeds, crowding out authentic, nuanced voices.

IT'S NO WONDER THAT PEOPLE ARE TUNING OUT THE NOISE AND TURNING TOWARDS THINGS THAT FEEL REAL.

Things they can trust. Because no matter how good AI gets at creating content and answering questions, people crave experiences that feel unmistakably human: the kind that AI can't replicate.

Honest, unpolished voices. Real interactions with creators and peers. Discussion threads that are even more insightful than the posts that sparked them.



THAT'S WHY WHAT MATTERS MORE TODAY ISN'T ATTENTION. IT'S CONNECTION.

People aren't asking "Who's showing up on my feed?", they're asking, "Who gets me? Who do I trust?" and perhaps most importantly, "What is real?"

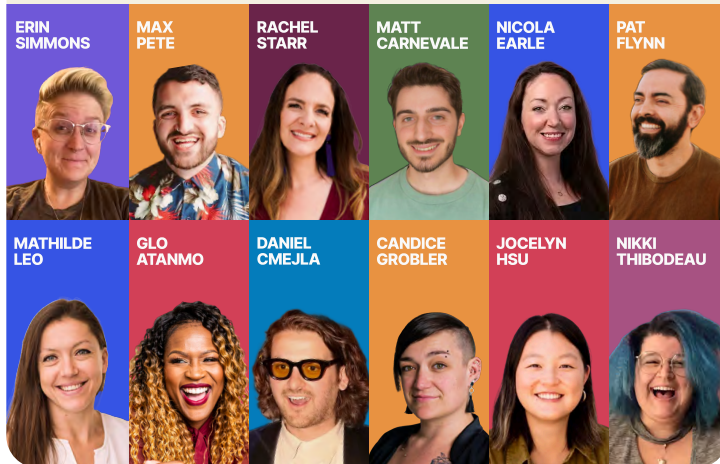
Connection and belonging are becoming real, meaningful differentiators for businesses. And communities are where that sense of connection and belonging is built, making them more transformational for businesses than ever.

So how can you build authentic, meaningful communities where that sense of connection truly thrives?

We asked 750+ community builders to find out. Let's dive in.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Gathered first-hand insights from 12 industry experts who live and breathe community building every day. Through interviews and research, we got a close-up view of what's working, what's not, and what's next.



Surveyed 750+ community builders from all over the world to validate what we'd heard from the experts. The data confirmed some patterns — and uncovered new ones — shaping all kinds of communities.

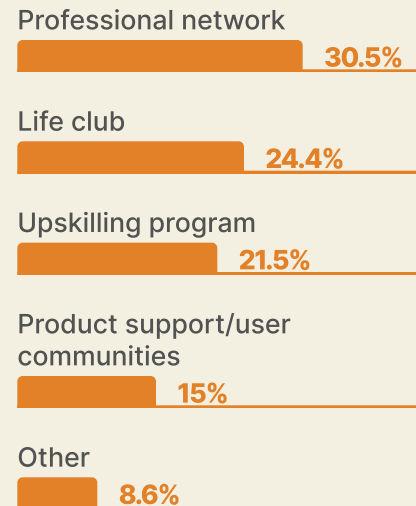


Overlaid what we learned with product data from over 18,000 Circle communities to see how these same trends are showing up inside thousands of thriving communities on our platform.

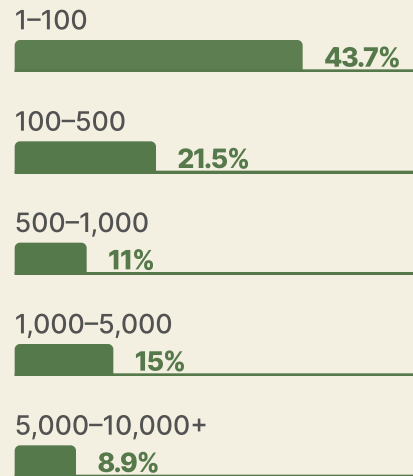


WHO RESPONDED TO OUR SURVEY

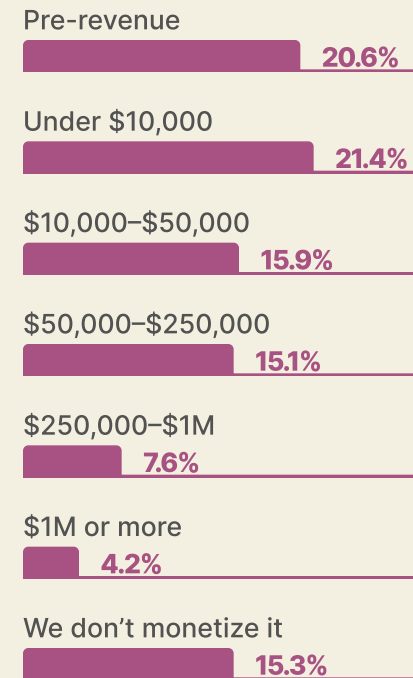
What category best describes your community?



Approximately how many members are in your community?



What is your community's estimated annual revenue (USD)?



What best describes your role in the community?



HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

If you're **launching a new community**, use it to:

- **Get inspired:** browse the trends and find an idea that stands out to you — it could be something you'd love to try yourself or learn more about.
- **Work it into your launch:** see how that idea could fit into your launch, whether it shapes your onboarding experience, first event, or the types of content you'll start with.
- **Listen closely, and go from there:** find out what resonates with your first members. Use their feedback to tweak your approach and make your community stronger from the start.

If you're **growing an existing community**, use it to:

- **Spark discussions:** share these trends with teammates, peers, or members to start meaningful discussions about what comes next.
- **Refine your strategy:** identify what's working, what's not, and what's really required to unlock your community success. Prioritization and focus is key!
- **Put it into action:** let this report inspire your 2026 roadmap, with one caveat — make sure to leverage experiments and pilot programs to find the right formula for your community.

Core shift one

COMMUNITIES ARE NOW A **KEY** **DIFFERENTIATOR** FOR BUSINESSES

For a long time, community was seen as a feel-good, nice-to-have extension of branding. It's now widely recognized as a powerful growth engine for creators and brands — one that fuels the kind of belonging and transformation that not only helps businesses grow, but last.



Trend one

BELONGING IS THE NEW COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

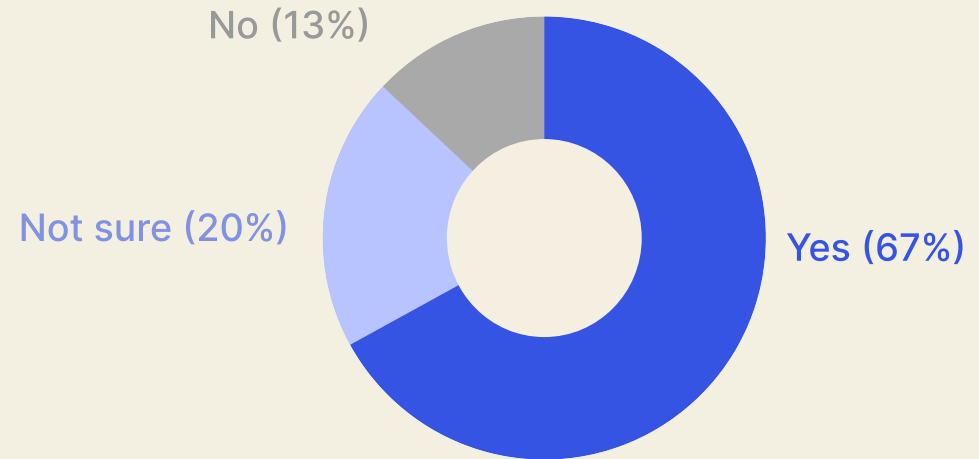
Traditional branding doesn't cut through the noise like it used to, and has become almost a table stakes requirement for building a business. Belonging is quickly becoming the new way that businesses can stand out.

When people feel seen, connected, and part of something bigger than themselves, they don't just engage — they stick around.

That's what makes community-driven marketing so powerful (and part of why nearly half of respondents credit their community for helping their business stand out). Instead of chasing fleeting attention through ads and social media posts, businesses are creating spaces where that sense of belonging can flourish.

And flourish it does: 67% of respondents report that members say they joined or stayed because of shared identity and values.

Have your members reported that they joined or stayed because of shared identity or values?



46% OF RESPONDENTS SAY HAVING A COMMUNITY GIVES THEM A COMPETITIVE EDGE

Trend two

TOP PERFORMING COMMUNITIES TRANSFORM THEIR MEMBERS

69% of our survey respondents say member transformation is now their most important strategy for growth and retention, and it's easy to see why.

When you consistently celebrate your members' wins, two powerful things happen. You show existing members that real results are possible, inspiring them to stay engaged and keep going. And you attract new members who want to achieve the same success.

Because when your members win, your business does too.

69%
OF RESPONDENTS SAY MEMBER TRANSFORMATION IS THE #1 GROWTH STRATEGY





PAT FLYNN

Founder, Smart Passive Income

“Your members are the heroes of the story. When you talk about their transformation — whether it’s in a 60-second short or a long-form podcast episode — you don’t even need a funnel.

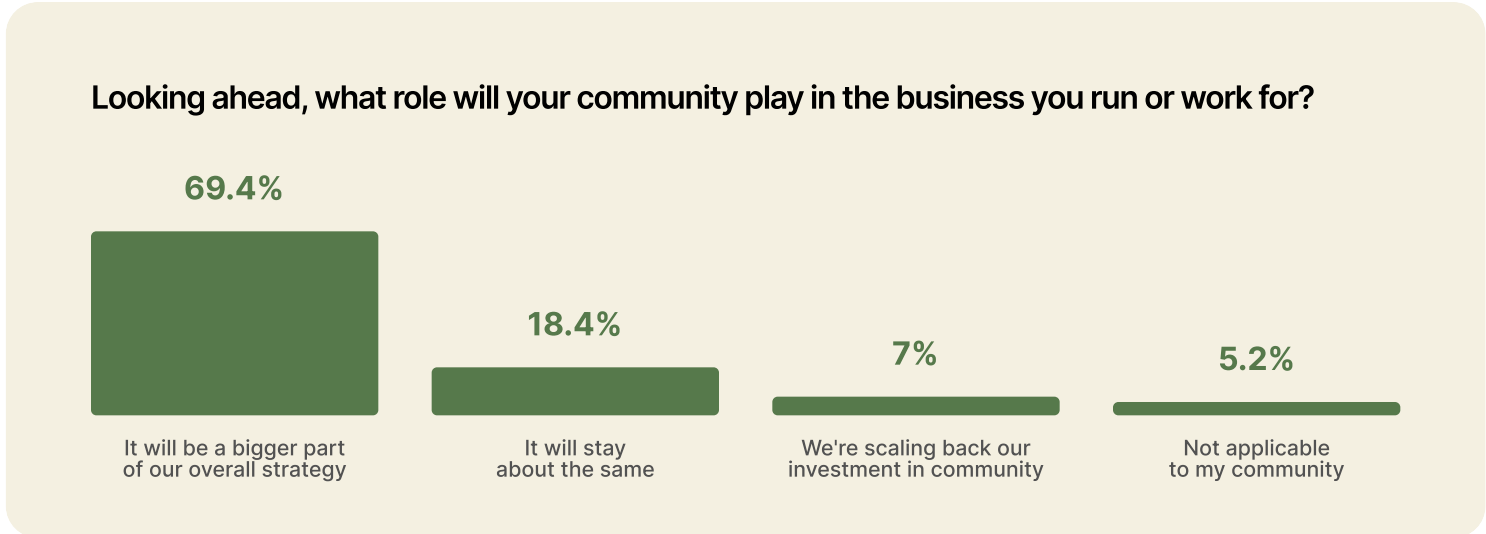
Our role is to facilitate those moments where people can find results, and find each other.”

Trend three

COMMUNITY IS NO LONGER LIMITED TO THE POST-PURCHASE EXPERIENCE

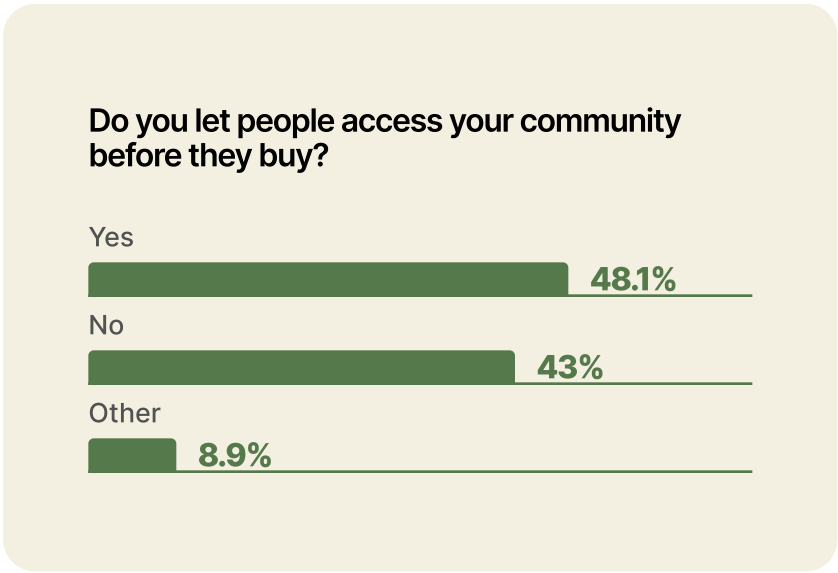
Community is now the golden thread that ties the whole customer lifecycle together. People are discovering brands, learning from peers, and evaluating choices inside communities long before they ever hit the buy button.

48% of respondents say people first engage with their community pre-purchase — a sign that connection starts much earlier than most expect. Businesses are leaning into this shift, with 69% of respondents saying that community will be a bigger part of their 2026 strategy.



Business takeaway

Whether you're running a membership community or a brand community, give people ways to engage before they buy. Offer free tiers, public events, or sneak-peek spaces that show what being part of the community really feels like.



Trend four

COMMUNITY TEAMS ARE MATURING AND GETTING DEDICATED BUDGETS

Community teams are making more of an impact than ever before. They're working with marketing to turn members into advocates, giving product teams real-time feedback, and helping customer success build relationships that last.

It's no wonder 39% of respondents told us their community teams now work across multiple departments. It shows just how essential community has become to how businesses run today.

And the roles themselves are evolving, too. Nearly one in five community pros say their scope is now more clearly defined, and another 16% report that they've added senior or specialized roles in engagement, operations, content, or data.

For community professionals, this is an exciting shift. It means there's more room to grow, specialize, and build a long-term career in the community space.

What areas of your business/organization does your community support?



32%

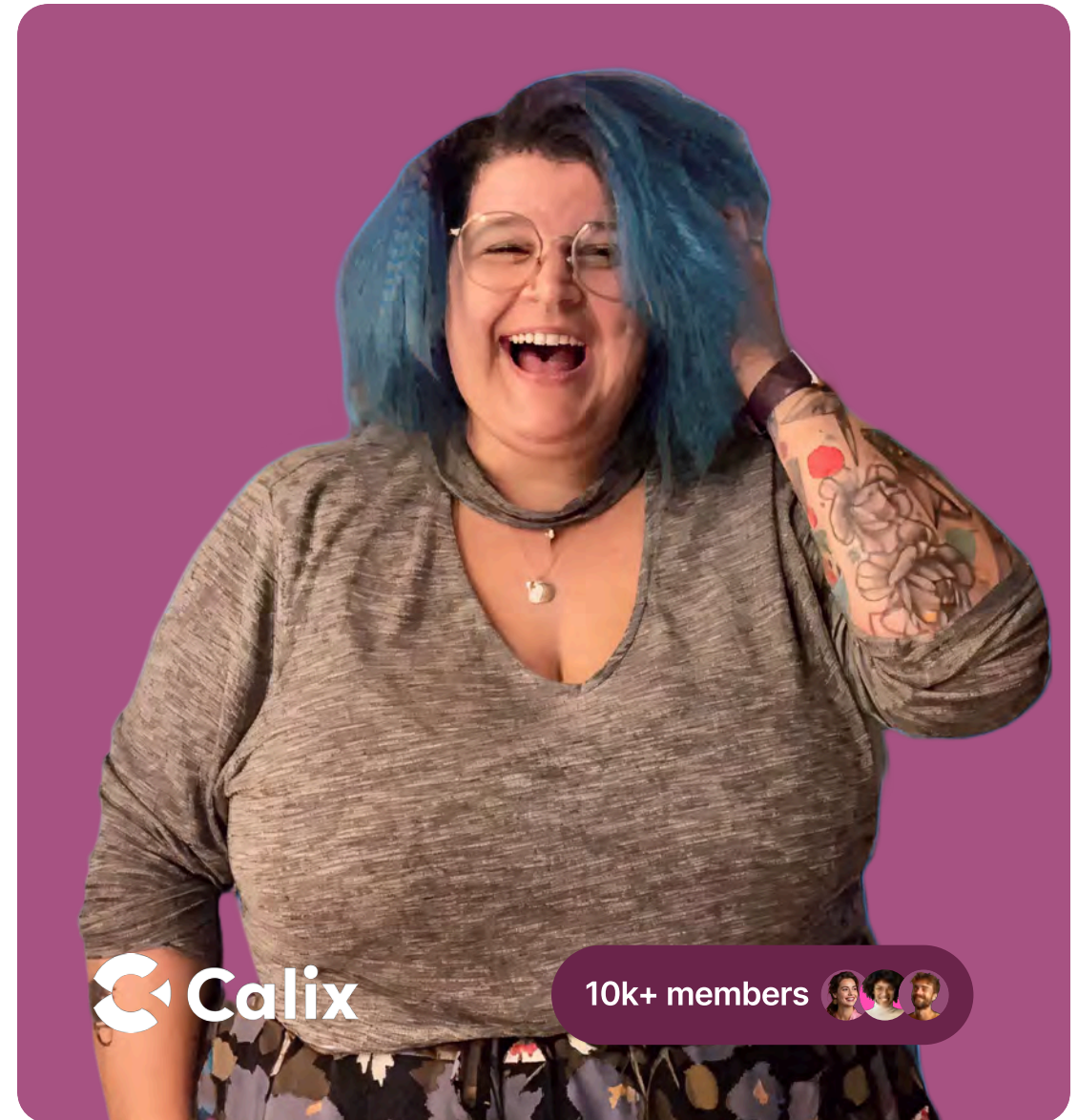
OF RESPONDENTS NOW HAVE A DEDICATED COMMUNITY BUDGET, WITH A FEW EVEN REACHING \$1M, AND SOFTWARE OFTEN ACCOUNTS FOR 30%-50% OF THAT SPEND

NIKKI THIBODEAU

Regional VP, Digital Engagement and Community, Calix

“There was a time where we focused solely on the community and its members, but that’s no longer the case: we’ve become a lot more integrated with teams across the business.

Operating outside of our baseline support use case, we’re now integrated with Customer Success and Customer Marketing, Sales & Renewals, and so much more.”

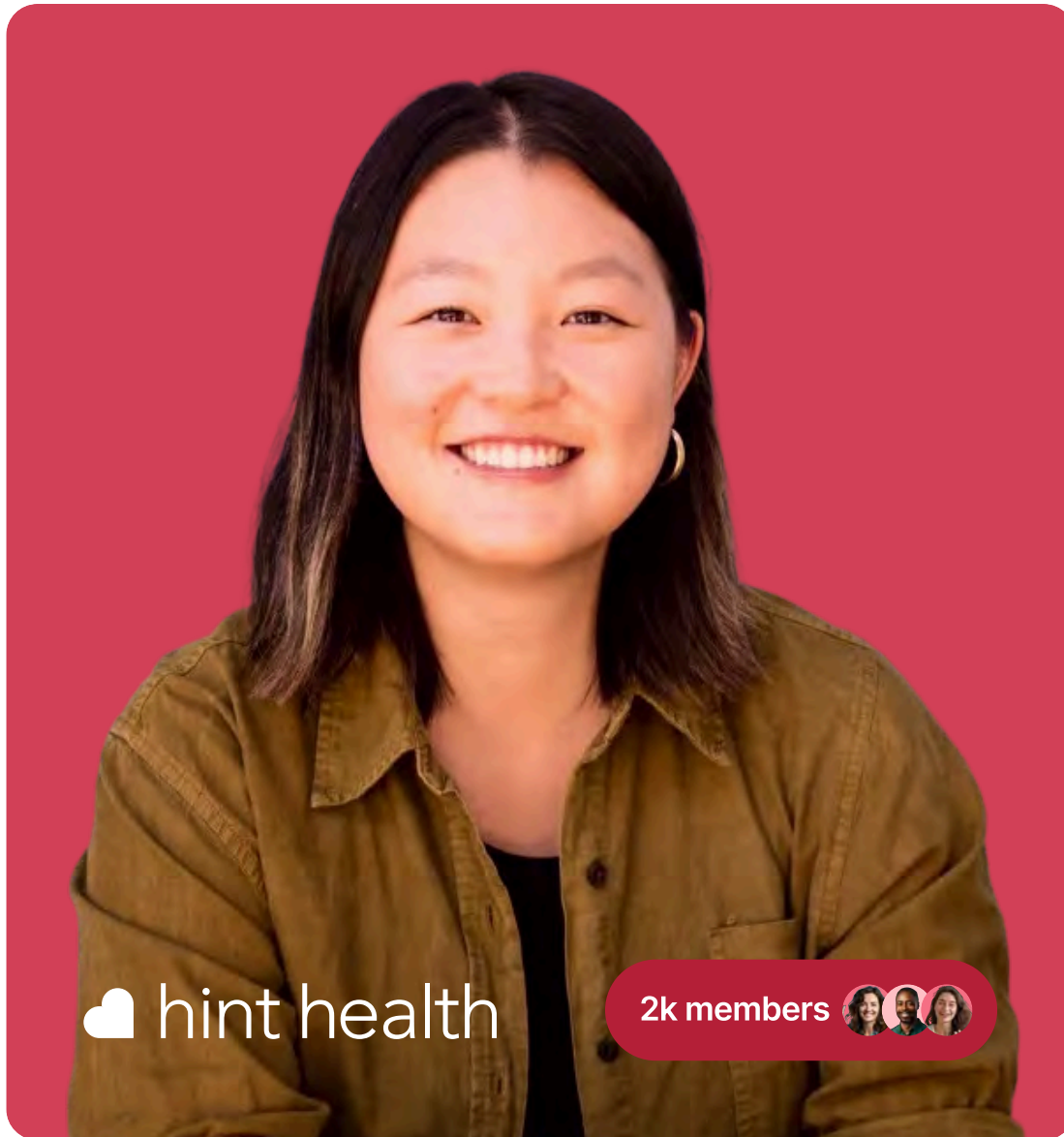


Core shift two

CREATORS AND COMMUNITY BUSINESSES ARE REALIZING THERE'S NO “ONE RIGHT WAY” TO BUILD A COMMUNITY

Communities are evolving, and so are the strategies behind them. Community builders are ditching the copy/paste approach, learning to experiment more, and designing spaces that feel more intentional, human, and built for the long run.





“Your **customers are** different.
Your **product is** different.
Your **team is** different.
Your **brand is** different.

Focus on building a
community unique to your
specific audience and needs.”

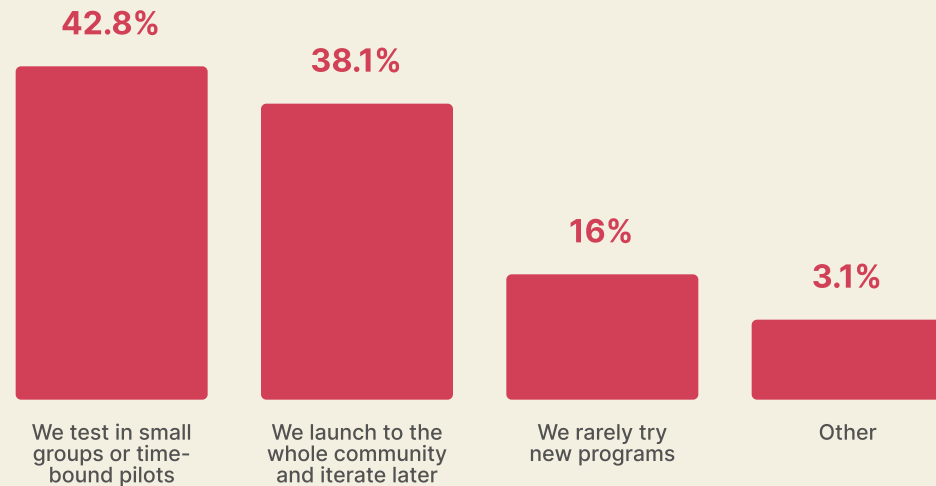
JOCELYN HSU
Head of Community, Hint Health

Trend five

THERE'S A GROWING CULTURE OF **EXPERIMENTATION** IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

Much like great products, the communities that thrive are the ones built on small experiments, honest feedback, and frequent iteration. And more community builders are starting to catch on to that. Instead of copying what other communities are doing, they're focusing on learning what works for their members (and getting better at creating those feedback loops).

When you're testing new community programs, how do you typically go about it?



About a third of respondents (29%) are already developing their own growth and engagement methods, and there's also a growing culture of testing and iterating emerging. 43% of respondents report that they pilot new initiatives — from event formats and content series all the way to ambassador programs, peer-learning cohorts, and member matching — in small groups or short time frames before scaling them.

GLO ATANMO

Founder, The Life Leap

“If you treat your creator business as an experiment, you can take away all the anxiety of having to be perfect and get everything correct.

Because all it takes is getting an experiment right once.”



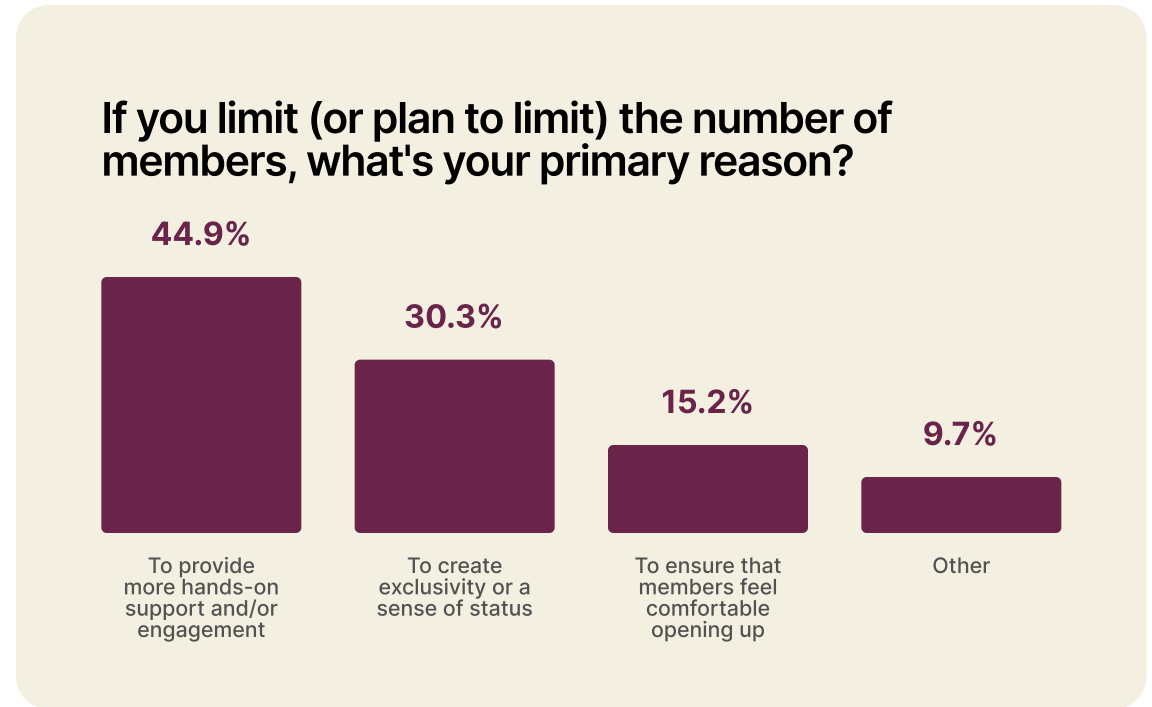
Trend six

PRIORITIZING MEMBER EXPERIENCE OVER MEMBER GROWTH

Scaling member numbers is great, but it's not the only way to grow revenue. There's also power in doing less, with 39% of respondents already de-prioritizing member growth for 2026.

12% even plan to cap membership numbers moving forward to be able to offer more hands-on support, a sense of exclusivity, and an environment where members feel comfortable opening up and being themselves.

By focusing on quality instead of quantity, creators and brands can build more sustainable businesses with higher ticket prices, enhanced service levels, and more of a human touch.



RACHEL STARR

Founder, coCreator Society

“People I’m working with are moving away from chasing bigger member numbers. They’re charging more and offering a higher level of service in return.

To earn trust nowadays, you have to be more nurturing...it takes a lot more handholding than it did a year ago. And it’s not just about service, it’s about connection — bringing back that human touch to balance out AI.”



Trend seven

FORWARD-THINKING COMMUNITIES ARE PILOTING FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION MODELS

Doomscrolling and endless feeds have left people feeling stretched thin. Now they're seeking online spaces that offer calm, connection, and renewal.

Community builders are answering that call. By slowing the pace and making participation more flexible, online communities have the unique ability to create experiences that restore energy instead of draining it.

57% of respondents say selective participation is shaping their community strategy for 2026, and 21% already plan to revise and reduce event programming in 2026 to better serve their members.

50%
ARE PRIORITIZING LIGHTER ENGAGEMENT THIS YEAR
 Quick video explainers, fun quizzes, and mini challenges make it easy for members to join in and learn something new.

Business takeaway
 When everyone's running on limited time and attention, less can really be more. Instead of filling the calendar with always-on sessions, try swapping a few for async, bite-sized content, and curated experiences people can join when it works for them.

What strategies have you used to make participation feel lighter or more flexible?

| | |
|---|-------|
| More async formats and activities | 60.8% |
| Bite-sized content or micro-learning | 50.3% |
| Rotating or seasonal programming | 21.3% |
| Skimmable summaries or TL;DRs of key conversations | 21.3% |
| Opt-in-only threads or channels for deeper engagement | 21% |
| Quiet periods or intentional rest phases | 20.7% |
| Other | 6.5% |

Trend eight

DEEP MEMBER CONNECTION STARTS WITH EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Emotional safety has always mattered in online communities, but today, it's more important than ever to make it a core pillar of community design. Because in times of uncertainty, meaningful connections become our safety nets. As social creatures, this is what holds us together and helps us face challenges head-on.

People need places they can show up as themselves, share openly, and talk about sensitive issues without fear of judgement, bullying or privacy concerns — which is nearly impossible on poorly moderated social media platforms.



73%

OF RESPONDENTS SAY EMOTIONAL SAFETY IS A CONSCIOUS DESIGN CHOICE IN THEIR COMMUNITY STRATEGY

A clear sign that trust has become the foundation of real connection.

How do you create a sense of emotional safety or belonging?





MATT CARNEVALE

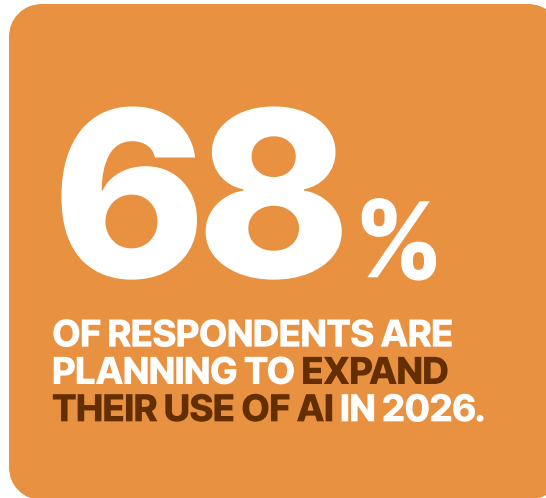
Head of Community, Exit Five

“Community will turn into group therapy at scale. I see it in Exit Five: fear is high across many marketing leaders. Marketing is getting harder, our playbooks are burning before our eyes, we're excited and scared of AI at the same time.

But, there's something that always alleviates fear and tough times: going through it with other people like you. There's a certain comfort in knowing others are going through the struggle with you. And if community builders can facilitate that, they will create a super strong connection to their brand.”

Trend nine

THE QUIET POWER OF THOUGHTFUL, BEHIND-THE-SCENES AI



AI is helping community builders save time and create richer, more diverse member experiences.

Almost two thirds of respondents are using AI for automating repetitive tasks like addressing common member support questions, pulling reports, community moderation, and automated responses to questions through AI agents.

Community builders are also getting creative with AI agents to spark engagement, like setting up AI “learning companions” that help students get better results (and stay motivated along the way).

By handing off routine tasks to AI, community builders can now pour their energy into creating innovative member experiences and building meaningful relationships.

We’re still at the very early stages of this shift in community building, and we’re excited to see how it plays out in 2026 and beyond.

What are you currently using AI for?

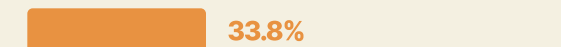
Content creation or planning



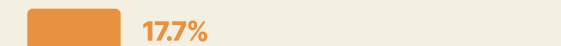
Generating insights or analyzing data



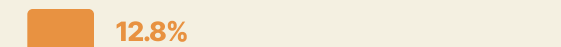
Member support



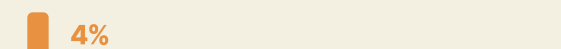
Community moderation



AI agents acting autonomously



Other



LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026

As people continue to tune out the noise and look for genuine connection, the communities that thrive in 2026 will be grounded in what's real, intentional, and human.

Here's where to focus your energy in the coming year.

1. Build strong connections

People are craving unmistakably human experiences and meaningful connections. Create safe online spaces where members can show up as themselves, form connections with each other, and feel part of something real again.

3. Keep things simple

Everyone's attention is stretched thin. Streamline your programs and give people room to engage on their own terms without FOMO. Choose meaningful moments over endless notifications.

5. Make community the throughline

Community isn't one piece of the puzzle anymore. It now ties the whole customer journey together. Give people ways to engage pre-purchase, and grow alongside you post-purchase.

2. Champion member transformation

Celebrate your members' wins, tell their stories, and design experiences that help them see real progress. When your members grow, your business does, too.

4. Use AI thoughtfully

AI can take busywork off your plate *and* help you create trust and meaning. Use it intentionally to free up your time for what matters most: connecting with members and helping them connect with each other.





A FEW SPECIAL SHOUTOUTS

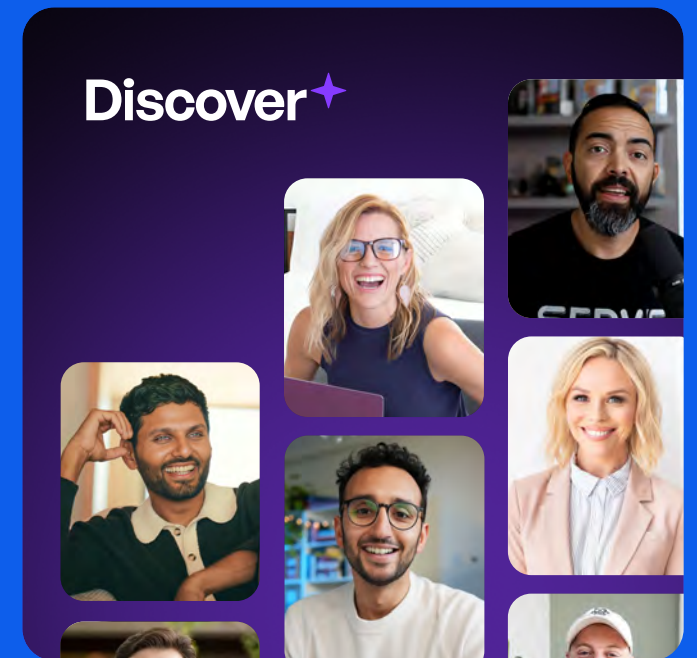
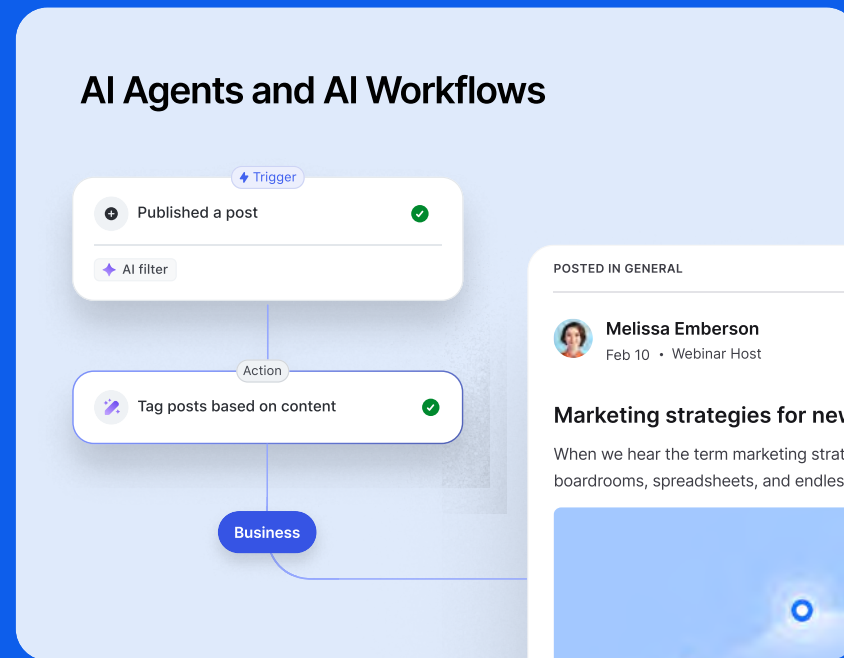
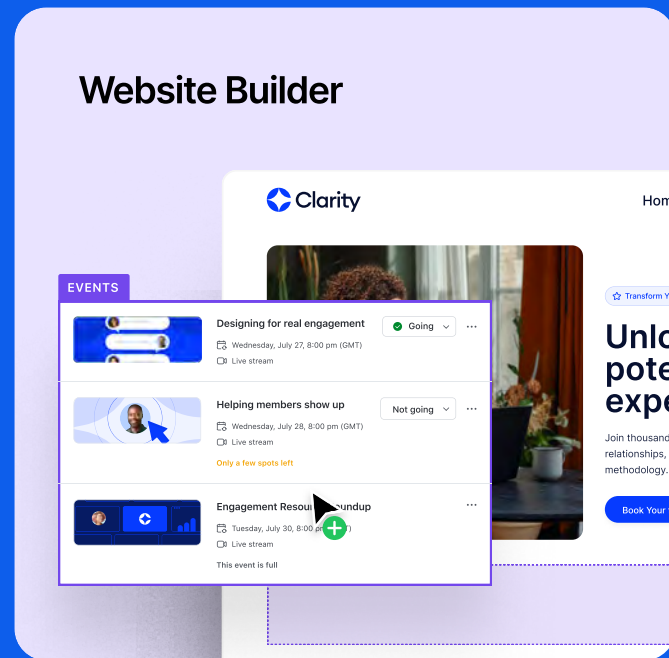
A huge thank you to the community building experts who generously shared their time and wisdom with us.

Your insights helped us shape the two big community shifts and subsequent trends that will go on to inspire thousands of other creators and brands in 2026 and beyond.

Now that's the power of community.

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO LAUNCH A COMMUNITY ON CIRCLE

Circle is the world's best community platform and it's only getting better. In 2025, we launched:



Circle

[Start your 14-day free trial and join over 18,000 community builders on Circle today!](#)