

Five Forum Jerks and How To Deal With Them

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Trying to [manage an online forum](#), as my colleague Nate Warren noted earlier this month, is like herding cats. It's no wonder some marketers still hesitate to recommend social media to clients. Under the cover of anonymity, some people will say unbelievable things.

Years of hosting conversations at the two-decade-old online community [The Well](#) have given me some insight. Well members post under their real names, but bad behavior still ranges from low-level cluelessness to shocking verbal abuse.

In 2001, I co-hosted a forum (on The Well they're called conferences) about the 9/11 attacks. It turned into the personal toxic waste dump of a guy I'll call Sludge, whose capacity to hate people on the Left made Rush Limbaugh look like Mister Rogers.

It looked to us like he spent the whole day flaming people in dozens, if not hundreds, of topics. He could get as ugly talking chiles in the Cooking conference as he did about terrorist-coddling liberals. If you crossed him, he would track you all over the system and, within minutes, spew venom after everything you posted: weather reports, birthday greetings, the cute thing your baby did.

Whole conferences went silent as people took their discussions private to get away from him.

Sludge held particular contempt for women, so I volunteered to draw his fire in the hopes that he would violate the Terms of Service badly enough to get him kicked out. I deleted something of his and came back to a long screed about "Lisa, the Town Skank." He finally got booted for using his wife's account to read women-only conferences, looking for dirt about me.

If you still believe what your mom said about names never hurting you, you've never read an email so hateful that your hands shake too much to type for a while.

Because I love online community, I'm a firm believer in active forum moderation to control the jerks and keep the conversation beneficial for the greatest number. Here are some recurring problem posters and what to do about them.

The Debate Club President: This person loves a good argument and doesn't mind a bad one. They sometimes will take a contradictory position that they personally don't believe, just for sport.

The Problem: Skilled Debate Clubbers keep conversations lively, but clumsy or overtalkative ones can kill a discussion, especially if they turn into Bomb-Throwers or Broken Records (see below).

Manage by: Hosting online discussion like you would a cocktail party, circulating to make sure everyone's drink is topped off and no one feels left out. If forum participants are used to the moderator chiming in, you will be able to control topic drift or those who monopolize the conversation without looking heavy-handed. As longtime Well host

[David Gans](#) – who made his bones wrangling Deadheads, never the easiest cats to herd – told me when I started, just be a good host. Create a pleasant space to hang out. Refill the pretzels and empty the ashtrays. Make sure people know you’re there and a lot of little issues will work themselves out.

The Bomb-Thrower: Will lob something incendiary into a discussion just for the fun of it. Truly virulent Bomb-Throwers will slam “breeders” on a parenting forum, refer to prayer on a Christian website as “talking to your invisible friends,” or rant about idiot Boulder liberals on the [Daily Camera’s comment threads](#). They’re like trolls, only they come out from under the bridge more often.

The Problem: Bomb-Throwers are often the first to scream “Censorship!” when moderators try to mitigate the damage they do to a conversation. Classic control freaks, they divert attention by attempting to make you the problem.

Manage by: Setting rules and expectations up front, and enforcing them publicly and fairly. This give you the track record and tools you need to shut these guys down. Start with zero tolerance for name-calling, attacks or slurs, and an eagle eye for topic drift. For the sake of a healthy online community, you may have to remove posts or block users. Brace yourself for the inevitable abuse and just do it. Your rational readers will thank you.

The World’s Foremost Expert on Everything: There’s one of these in every crowd, isn’t there?

The Problem: They’re all on the Internet now, spreading misinformation. Worse: boring.

Manage by: Correct important errors of fact and let your users take care of the rest by either challenging or [bozo filtering](#) the World’s Foremost Expert. Some Bozos never understand why people don’t respond anymore. They just keep talking … to nobody. It would be funny if it weren’t so pathetic.

The Broken Record: You’ll be talking about rose gardening until somebody announces that illegal immigrants take all the landscaping jobs. They pop up in a thread about [stomach flu at a summer camp](#) to posit that illegal immigrants in the kitchen spread disease. Talking about cars? They’re right there griping about Mexican drivers. It gets old.

Note the similarities between Bomb-Throwers and Broken Records. Every topic on the Internet, from laundry to astrophysics, becomes a referendum on their pet subject.

Manage them by: Routing around them. Turn that eagle eye on drift into a firm rein. “Back to roses, is anybody else having trouble with Japanese beetles?” Again, your clued-in users will reinforce the message by refusing to take the bait.

The Bully: You’ll recognize this guy the first time he responds to someone with, “Shut your piehole, you fat Irish moron.” They snark and call names, and that’s just to warm up. More toxic bullies will dig up personal info about people or stalk them – online and even in person.

The Problem: Testosterone. Anger management. Childhood abandonment issues. Whatever. You’re just an online host, not a psychotherapist.

Manage by: This is the place for heavy-handed hosting. Delete, suspend and ban. In extreme cases like Sludge, who was practiced at skating just inside the lines, you may have to provoke the Bully into violating the user agreement. It makes for an unpleasant

couple of days, but it works. Call the police if the bullying moves into meatspace. Life is too short.