

# Your Community Is Too Private to Grow

Well, hidden communities don't glow either.

I've been watching the community world for over 20 years, and somewhere along the way, a strange idea took hold.

Communities, apparently, should be hidden. Tightly guarded. Protected behind login walls. Or dropped inside closed chat systems where the outside world can't see a thing unless someone personally drags them in.

When I say "private" here, I mean two kinds of communities. The obvious kind is the one behind a paywall, login wall, or invite-only gate. The second kind is the one that looks busy from the inside but invisible from the outside. Think Slack, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram. Useful conversations happen there, but good luck discovering any of them later unless someone personally drags you in.

I'm also talking about a specific kind of community here. Creator communities. Professional communities. Membership communities. B2B SaaS communities. Communities that want growth, discovery, trust, and long-term compounding value. I'm not talking about support groups, internal team spaces, or communities where confidentiality is the whole point. Some communities should stay private. That is not the argument.

The argument is simpler.

A lot of communities that want growth are hiding far too much, far too early.

No windows. No signage. If you discover one by accident, you knock once, maybe twice, and wait for approval from the rulers of the community garden.

And the garden?

It is rarely lush.

Most of the time, you are stepping into a dry patch of half-buried threads, short chat messages, and content that scrolls past your eyes and disappears into a black hole five minutes later.

Exceptions exist. Good ones, too.

But not enough.

So when people ask why community growth feels hard, my first answer is simple.

Maybe because nobody can see the community.

I've joined dozens of communities over the years. Some were average. Some were excellent. The better they were, the more the same question kept coming back:

Why is this invisible?

Why are we hiding the proof?

> A community should be private by exception, not by default.

## Your Login Wall Is Not a Value Proposition

I understand the instinct.

You want to protect the culture. You want to reduce spam. You want the space to feel safe. You want members to feel like they are in a room built for them, not for random drive-by noise from the internet.

Fair enough.

But those are not the first problems to solve.

Before you protect the culture, you need enough people to create one. Before you keep the wrong people out, you need enough of the right people in.

That is where many communities get the order wrong.

The community industry has spent a lot of time thinking about engagement after the join and not enough time thinking about discoverability before the join. That is the strategic mistake.

I've seen community builders treat the login wall like part of the product. As if hiding the content automatically makes the community feel premium.

It does not.

It makes the community harder to trust.

"Join first and find out" is not a serious growth strategy.

That might work if you are Taylor Swift. For the rest of us building creator communities, member communities, and B2B SaaS communities for very online professionals and the internet's spreadsheet warriors, it usually does not.

Before anyone joins your community, they are asking one simple question:

## **What is in it for me?**

If the answer is "create an account and then we'll show you," many of them will leave.

Honestly, they should.

Landing pages alone do not do the job anymore. A bold headline, a few smiling faces, and three testimonials do not reduce uncertainty.

A landing page is what you say about yourself. A public discussion is what the world sees about you. One is marketing. The other is evidence.

People want proof before commitment. They want to browse, observe, and get a feel for the quality of thinking inside the room.

That is normal behavior.

And the moment you hide the proof, you make discovery harder than it needs to be.

## **Closed Communities Have a Discovery Problem**

When the best parts of your community live inside Slack, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, or any other closed system, future members cannot discover that value.

They cannot search for it. They cannot stumble into it. They cannot send it to a colleague. They cannot judge whether it is worth their time.

So what happens next?

You, the community manager, now need to manually convince each new member to join.

You're not growing. You are convincing people one by one.

Outreach is fine. Personal invites are fine. Hand-holding your first 50 members is fine. But if every new signup depends on one-on-one convincing, you do not have a growth engine. You have a repeated labor problem.

A hidden community does not compound naturally. It has to be pushed every single time.

That may be manageable when the goal is to get the first few people in. It gets exhausting when the goal is to build something that compounds.

## **A Private Party With No Sign Outside**

Some of the best-run communities feel huge on the inside and tiny on the outside.

Inside, everything looks healthy. There are active conversations, familiar names, useful exchanges, jokes that only regulars understand, and that warm sense of being among people who get it.

Outside, almost nothing exists.

No searchable knowledge. No visible proof. No breadcrumb trail. No useful public content telling the outside world that something valuable is happening here.

Just a landing page making promises and asking for trust.

It feels like a private party with no sign outside.

And then the hosts wonder why nobody is showing up.

This is the part that bothers me most. A lot of these communities are actually useful. They contain real expertise, real case studies, real questions, and real answers. But because everything is hidden, none of that value compounds. It helps only the people who already made it inside.

If your community is useful only to people who already joined, you are leaving growth on the table.

## **Chat Is a Feature, Not the Whole Community**

The community world loves one line of advice: go where your users are.

That is one reason Slack and Discord became popular as community homes. Fair enough. They are good at what they do.

Slack works well for teams collaborating in real time. Discord shines in fast-moving communities, especially where live interaction matters. WhatsApp is great for close-knit group communication.

But let us stop pretending these are strong long-term knowledge systems for communities.

They are not.

Imagine you spend an hour writing a thoughtful, useful post for your community and share it in Slack.

Two minutes later, someone drops in with, “Hey everyone, quick question...”

Done.

Your post is buried under replies, reactions, screenshots, side chats, and ten unrelated messages about billing, templates, and whether the recording is available.

Good luck finding it again.

These platforms are built for conversation. They are not built for compounding value. They are optimized for energy, not memory.

A useful piece of community knowledge should not have the lifespan of a fruit fly.

> A public archive compounds. A chat feed evaporates.

That is why chat should be a feature of the community, not the entire community.

**Discoverability Is Part of the Value**

The strongest communities do not just create conversations. They leave visible value behind.

That matters for search. It matters for social sharing. It matters for LLM discoverability. More than that, it matters for trust.

Public content gives future members a chance to judge the quality of thinking inside the community before they commit. It gives them a signal. It reduces uncertainty. It answers the quiet question every potential member has:

## **Is this worth my time?**

This is one reason public, user-generated platforms keep dominating discovery. Real questions, real answers, real context, real language. Search engines like that. LLMs like that. People definitely like that.

And in 2026, this is no longer a side note.

If your community is not indexable, ChatGPT, Perplexity, and the rest of the answer engines have nothing to find, cite, or recommend. You are opting out of a growing referral channel by design.

You do not need to be an SEO expert to understand the basic principle. If your community is solving real problems in a niche, the public layer of that content should be doing acquisition work for you.

A useful answer published openly today can bring the right person into your orbit months later.

A useful answer buried inside a private chat is just a missed opportunity wearing a community badge.

## **Some Things Should Absolutely Stay Private**

This part matters, so let me say it clearly.

Not everything should be public.

Sensitive conversations should stay private. Support threads should stay private. Vulnerable sharing should stay private. Member-only networking should stay private. High-trust discussions should stay private. Some behind-the-scenes conversations should stay private.

There are spaces where trust matters more than reach.

I'm not arguing for radical openness. I'm arguing against lazy defaults.

Too many communities ended up private-by-default not because it was strategically right, but because it was familiar, convenient, or built into the tools they chose at the beginning.

That is not a strong enough reason to shape your entire growth model.

# The Hybrid Model Is the Practical One

This is why I keep coming back to hybrid communities.

Not fully public. Not fully private. Hybrid.

I still think the rough 80/20 split is a useful mental model. Do not hold me to the exact percentage like I'm drafting tax law. The point is direction.

Most of your useful, educational, discovery-friendly content should be accessible without a login. Keep the sensitive, high-trust, high-context layer private.

The public layer should solve real problems in your niche. It should answer questions your future members are already typing into Google, ChatGPT, Perplexity, LinkedIn, Reddit, or muttering to themselves at 2 AM while pretending they are “doing research.”

That public layer attracts.

Most people will lurk. Fine.

A smaller number will sign up. Also fine.

That is how healthy top-of-funnel behavior works.

Then let the private layer do what private spaces do best: support, context, feedback, insider conversation, member-only interaction, and the kind of trust-rich discussion that does not belong in public.

Public content is not a free sample. It is proof that your community knows what it is talking about.

> Public earns attention. Private earns belonging.

Most serious communities need both.

## **You Do Not Need to Rebuild Everything Tomorrow**

This is where people usually get stuck.

They agree with the argument, then look at their Slack or Discord setup and think, great, now what?

The good news is that you do not have to tear everything down and start over next Tuesday.

You can move toward a hybrid model in steps.

Start by publishing a weekly public recap of the best community discussions. Clean up the useful parts. Remove the private details. Turn chat into something durable.

Take the questions that come up again and again and turn them into public FAQs, guides, or short discussion posts. If the same question keeps showing up inside your community, there is a good chance people outside it are asking the same thing.

Make event takeaways public. Share summaries, recordings, clips, transcripts, or written learnings. If a webinar or office hour produced value, do not let that value die in the room.

Create one public surface people can actually find. That could be a public forum, a website section, a knowledge hub, or even a basic archive of best discussions. If you are committed to Slack as the interaction layer, pair it with a discoverable public layer instead of expecting Slack to do both jobs.

Do not try to open everything at once. Open the parts that are broadly useful first.

The move toward a hybrid model does not need to be dramatic. It just needs to be intentional.

## **Show the Value Before Asking for Commitment**

If you want your community to grow, stop asking people to jump over a wall before they know what is on the other side.

Show them the value first.

Let them browse. Let them learn. Let them get a feel for the quality, tone, and usefulness of the space.

Let them feel a little FOMO.

The good kind.

The kind that makes someone think, alright, this is actually useful. I should join.

Because right now, too many communities are doing the opposite. They are hiding everything, showing nothing, and then acting surprised when growth stalls.

Unless you are running a secret society or a support group for aliens in Area 51, private-by-default should not be your operating model.

Most communities do not need higher walls.

They need more windows.

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