



Sample

Join the Club
Create Your Own Membership Site

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Introduction

Membership sites have been hot properties on the Internet in the last few years. However, they are a relatively new phenomenon, so there's still a lot to learn about them.

In this guide, I'll show you how to plan, produce and promote an effective membership site.

I've been assisting clients with their own membership sites since 1998, and I've actively started my own membership site in 2008. So I know some of the benefits – and challenges – of building a successful membership site.

Who is this for?

I've written this for infopreneurs – that is, speakers, trainers, authors, consultants, coaches and other information experts. If you make money by teaching the ideas in your head, this is ideal for you.

Despite membership sites being relatively new, you can already find Internet marketing experts selling their expertise on how to create your own membership site. This information is excellent, but not all of it is relevant for infopreneurs.

This program is different. Because I've written it with infopreneurs in mind, you'll find that everything is relevant. It might not all be relevant right *now*, because you might be

at a different place in your business. But where that matters, I'll explain how to evaluate it.

As an infopreneur, you have four big advantages over others when it comes to building a successful membership site:

- ⇒ You already have **expertise** in a topic area, and that's the topic you will use for your membership site. Many other people starting a membership site don't have that topic expertise.
- ⇒ You're already generating **income** from this topic in other ways, so (a) you know what people consider valuable, and (b) you're not *relying* on your membership site to generate income.
- ⇒ You already **focus** on this topic in your day-to-day work, unlike many other people, who have to do this "on the side" away from their regular work.
- ⇒ You already have a **market** of clients, prospects and newsletter readers who could be potential subscribers.

Why now?

Many speakers, trainers, coaches, consultants and other experts are finding that it's no longer feasible to generate income based purely on personal exertion. There are only so many hours in a day, and the number of income-generating hours is decreasing. The world is small, but travel – particularly international travel – is more time-consuming and stressful. Clients are more knowledgeable, and hence more demanding. There's more

competition in the market, both from people doing the same thing, and from people offering the same expertise differently (e.g. using the Internet to deliver it).

All of this means it's increasingly difficult to create a *profitable* business in the short term and a *sustainable* business in the long term.

A membership site can help you solve some of these problems. It's certainly not the magic pill to cure all your business ills, but it *can* help.

Overview

I'll start with a brief overview of the three main characteristics of a typical membership site.

Then I'll describe the benefits of a membership site – both for you and for your members.

Then we'll look at the different income streams in an infopreneur's business, and how a membership site can assist you generate income in different streams.

If you're not ready for a full membership site yet, the next section will describe "Password Protected Areas", a simpler form of membership site that's a useful stepping stone to the fuller version.

Then we'll move on to the mechanics of a full membership site. I'll show you some real client examples, I'll give you guidelines for planning your site, and then we'll look at the technical steps for creating it.

Of course, building it is not enough – you have to promote it as well. So I'll give you some simple ideas and suggestions for marketing it to your network.

Finally, I'll describe six of the most common problems and pitfalls you could encounter along the way, so you can be sure to avoid them before you begin.

Enjoy the program!

Creating Your Membership Site (Using Ning)

Ning.com is a free service for creating membership sites (Ning calls them “social networks”). It’s like setting up a private version of Facebook. Here’s an example of the First Step Community at www.first-step-community.com:

The screenshot shows the homepage of the First Step Communications Member Community. At the top, there is a navigation bar with icons for a globe, a microphone, and a stack of coins, followed by the text "First Step Communications" and "Member Community" in a yellow box. Below this is a tagline: "Web technology for speakers, trainers, consultants and other information experts".

The main navigation menu includes: Main, Invite, My Page, Members, Events, Forum, Groups, Photos, Videos, and Manage. The "Main" menu item is currently selected.

The page content is divided into several sections:

- Latest Activity:** A central feed showing recent actions:
 - Liana Taylor decided to attend the event [E-Books and Special Reports](#) 19 hours ago.
 - Maree Harris commented on the blog post [Teleseminar: E-books and Special Reports](#) 1 day ago.
 - Liana Taylor joined First Step Member Community. [Leave a Comment](#) for Liana Taylor. 1 day ago.
 - Lyndsey Baigent and Linda Sultmann are now friends. 17 Jul.
 - Gihan Perera added the blog post [Teleseminar Recording: Spin One Idea Into Dozens of Products](#) 17 Jul.
 - Tony Fountain commented on the blog post [Teleseminar: E-books and Special Reports](#) 16 Jul.
 - Linda Sultmann joined First Step Member Community. [Leave a Comment](#) for Linda Sultmann. 15 Jul.
- Videos:** A section on the left with an "Edit" button. It features two video thumbnails:
 - [Creating Wealth: Should you D.I.Y., Or Outsource?](#) Added by Matt Hern. The thumbnail shows a triangle with "Knowledge" at the top, "Time" on the left, and "Energy" on the right, with "Action" in the center.
 - [Contingencies Could Save Your Lifestyle](#) Added by Matt Hern. The thumbnail shows a man in a suit speaking.
- Right Sidebar:** A user profile for Gihan Perera with options: Sign Out, My Friends, Invite More, Inbox, My Settings, and a Quick Add dropdown. Below this is an **Events** section with an "Edit" button, listing:
 - [E-Books and Special Reports](#) August 6, 2008 from 11:30am to 12:30pm - [Teleseminar](#)
 - [Internet Boot Camp for Infopreneurs](#) October 23, 2008 at 9:30am to October 24, 2008 at 5pm - Sydney

Here are the main things you can do with Ning:

- ⇒ You can customise it to **match your branding**
- ⇒ You can enable members to use **blogs, video, forum, events, photos** and other features
- ⇒ You can **remove all advertising and Ning branding** so the site looks like it's yours alone
- ⇒ You can **protect the site** so that new members require your approval before joining
- ⇒ You (and other members) can make **announcements** via an internal blog
- ⇒ Members can participate in discussions in the **forum**
- ⇒ You (and other members) can **announce coming events**

With all these features built in, Ning is the perfect tool for getting started with your membership site. So, in this section, we'll talk about how to set up Ning for this purpose.

However, there are also some things Ning *doesn't* do for you, including:

- ⇒ A way to take payments for membership subscriptions and renewals;
- ⇒ A way to e-mail your members regularly;
- ⇒ A way to upload files for your members;
- ⇒ A way to conduct teleseminar and Webinars.

So, in the following section, we'll talk about other services you can use for these facilities.

Signing up

The sign-up process is easy, free and takes (literally) 10-15 minutes. Just go to www.ning.com, and you'll see an option right there to start your own social network (Remember, "social network" is Ning's term for what we call a "membership site"):



Ning

Hello, **Gihan Perera** (sign out) / My Social Networks / Help

Create Your Own Social Network for Anything

Name Your Social Network

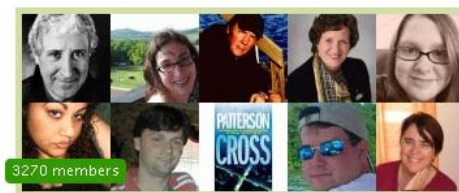
For example, Paris Cyclists

Pick a Web Address .ning.com **CREATE**

At least 6 letters. For example, pariscyclists.ning.com

Ning Spotlight

Here are a few of the hundreds of thousands of social networks on Ning today...



As part of the sign-up process, you'll have to choose a Web address, which will be of the form **blah.ning.com**, where you can choose the "blah" part. Choose a meaningful name – such as your own name, your business name, a special name for your community, or some variation of these. Here are some examples from our clients:

- ⇒ clickingyou.ning.com (for the ClickingYou Club)
- ⇒ ygenclub.ning.com (for the Y Gen Club)
- ⇒ thoughtleaderscommunity.ning.com (for the Thought Leaders Community)
- ⇒ fountainandco.ning.com (for Fountain & Co)

You can later "hide" that Web address by assigning a separate domain name to it. But even if you do plan to do that later, still choose a meaningful name now.

After signing up, you'll be the first – and only – member of the site, and you'll have administrator privileges. To make changes, click the "Manage" link that appears in the menu:



Membership approval

From the “Manage” menu, choose “Privacy and Content Control”:



This is an important page, because this is where you control who gets access to the membership site.

The “Network Privacy” options on the left determine how people are allowed to *find* the membership site itself:

⇒ If you’re trying to attract as many people as possible, do this, which allows anybody to search for the site from the Ning home page, and look through the site even before becoming a member:

Public

This network is **visible to everyone**.

Anyone can sign up to become a member.

Visitors can...

- See everything
- See just the main page

⇒ If you want people to register before looking at what's there, do this:

 Public

This network is **visible to everyone**.

Anyone can sign up to become a member.

Visitors can...

- See everything
- See just the main page

⇒ If you don't want people to be able to search for it using the Ning home page, but you still want to promote it for people to join, do this:

 Public

This network is **visible to everyone**.

Anyone can sign up to become a member.

Visitors can...

- See everything
- See just the main page

⇒ If you want it completely private, where only *you* can invite people to join, do this:

Private

This network is **visible to members only**.

Who can sign up to become a member?

Anyone

Only Invited People

Choose each of the “Feature Controls” options on the right, depending on what you’d like to allow. As a broad rule, allow your members to do as much as possible, because that will encourage them to make more use of the membership site.

However, there’s one important setting you have to consider related to new members:

Approve new members before they can join

If you tick this box, then every time somebody applies to join, you’ll get an e-mail asking you to approve their application. If you don’t mind who joins the site, leave this box unticked. But if this is a private membership site, or you’re charging a subscription fee, or there’s some other reason you want to approve each new member, tick this box.

Look and feel

You'll probably want to change the site's branding to match your own business branding. Ning doesn't give you full control over the site layout, but it does allow you to choose colours, fonts and a logo or other header graphic.

From the "Manage" menu, choose "Appearance":



Appearance

Adjust your network's colours, images and overall style.

From this page, you'll be able to adjust all the look-and-feel settings. These settings are reasonably straightforward, and you can keep adjusting them to your hearts' content until you're happy with the result.

If you have a simple logo to insert at the top of the page, you can upload it directly to the site. Alternatively, if you'd like a full "banner" across the top (as we do at www.first-step-community.com), ask your graphic designer to construct one for you.

Configure the features

From the "Manage" menu, choose the "Features" option:

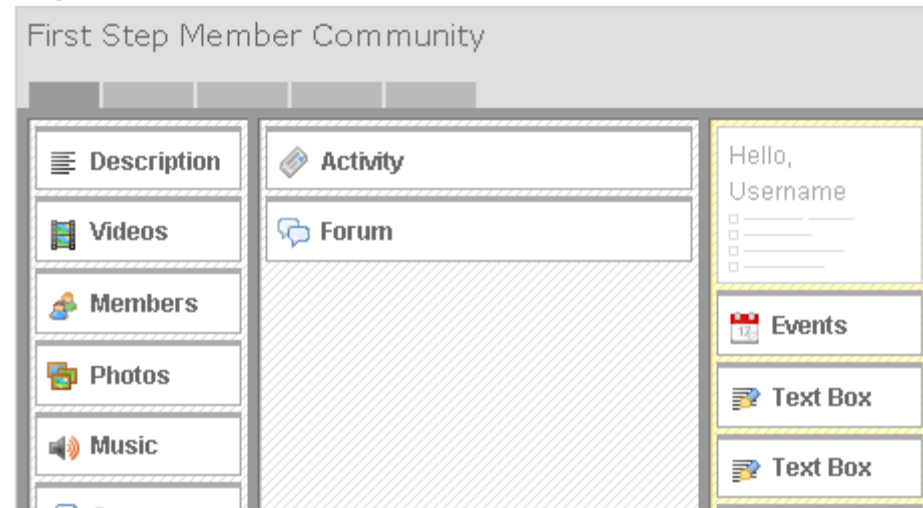
Features

Customize your social network by adding new features or removing existing ones.

This is one of the most important areas to set up, because it controls what features are available to members.

The “Layout” section on the right shows what your pages currently look like:

Layout



To add new features, drag them from the “Features” list on the left; and to remove current features, drag them from the Layout section back to the Features list. This is all fairly straightforward.

We recommend you include these features:

- ⇒ Blog: For members to make announcements
- ⇒ Events: For members to promote their coming events
- ⇒ Forum: For members to take part in discussions
- ⇒ Groups: For members to set up their own private groups within the community
- ⇒ Text Boxes: You’ll add one or more of these to display common fixed stuff to all members

Common area

There’s one important thing to note, though. You’ll notice there’s one area in the right-hand column in the Layout that has a yellow background. Anything you drag into that yellow area will be visible on *all* member pages, which gives members the opportunity to promote themselves easily to other members.

Here’s an example: Suppose you want to give each member a private blog, where they can post messages regularly. If you drag the Blog feature into the yellow area, it effectively means everybody sees a shared blog when they log in. On the other hand, if you drag it into some other area of the layout, each member only sees their own blog when they log in (they have to visit another member’s page to see that member’s blog).

Similarly, if you drag the Events feature into the yellow area, everybody will see everybody else's coming events.

This is extremely important, because it's also the way that *you* promote things to other members. So do drag the Blog feature and Events feature across into that yellow area, so your members can quickly see your blog announcements and coming events.

Usage statistics

Ning makes it easy to track the visitors to your membership site, and know which pages they are viewing the most. It doesn't provide this facility itself, but it encourages you to sign up for the free Google Analytics service, which does provide this facility.

This process is described in detail at the Ning site, so we won't explain it here. Go to the Ning Help page at help.ning.com and search for "Google analytics".

Remove Ning branding

By default, Ning is free, and you have access to all its features without paying anything at all. However, the free version of Ning has three "limitations" – and they are all to do with branding:

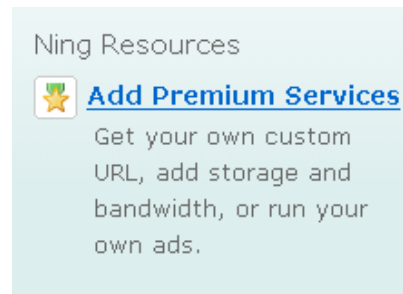
1. As mentioned above, the Web address includes "ning.com".
2. Google advertising appears on the right-hand side.

3. Ning inserts a small ad for itself on the right-hand side:



If you want to get rid of these limitations (which I do recommend when you get serious about your membership site), it costs about US\$40 a month.

From the "Manage" menu, click "Add Premium Services":



From this page, choose the services you'd like to install (each incurs a monthly fee). You don't require the "Additional Usage" option at this stage.

Note: You don't have to add *any* premium services yet. You can add them later, but of course you'll have the three limitations noted above.

We've now come to the end of the section about setting up a Ning.com membership site.

Live presentations

You can also promote your membership site in your live presentations (with the organiser's permission, of course). Remember that this is a potential source of recurring income, so you might be willing to offer it to audiences at a very special price, knowing that you'll get this back many times over.

Problems and Pitfalls

Before we finish this guide, let's talk about some of the things that can go wrong with membership sites – and what you can do about them. If you're aware of these before you begin, you can successfully avoid them.

Problem #1: Not enough people join

The first solution is to be more generous with your time frames. For instance, if you offer a free trial, don't just give them 2 weeks free, because that doesn't give them time to evaluate it properly. Remember that a member has a fairly low marginal cost (in other words, it's almost zero cost to have an additional person on your membership site). So be generous and give them, say, 3 months access before you ask them to pay. It gives them time to join up to the site and experience it for themselves before making a financial decision about it.

The other factor is that generally site owners are too optimistic about their success. Even if your members believe your material is valuable and indispensable, they might just not have the time to use it.

For example, at First Step, all our Web site clients get free access to our First Step Member Community. And yet, some of our clients haven't even *joined* the community yet

– let alone made use of the resources in it. A few have even called me to apologise, but they say they simply don't have the time to make use of it.

Problem #2: Not enough people participate

The real key to this is that you, as the owner of the membership site, have to push it. You really have to build the momentum before it takes on a life of its own. As the old saying goes, "If it is to be, it is up to me".

For example, I have had conversations with people where they ask me a question and I'll answer them but I'll also say, "There might be other people in the member community who might have the answer for you. Why don't you post something in the forum?"

I want people to start using the forum because they might get value from somebody else's answer. At the same time, I also want other people to start seeing that people are using the forum.

As the owner of your membership site, you have to take a lot of responsibility for it. If you're running a corporate membership site, where you're providing resources free for your licensees or for the people who have done your program, it might be a little bit easier because they've already signed up for an on-going program. However, you still have to prompt them to take action.

Also, don't rely on them coming back to the site themselves. Publish a members-only newsletter regularly to tell them what's going on. They *will* recognise the value, but only if you keep telling them about it.

Problem #3: You get distracted by other things

If this happens, it probably means you're off strategy – in other words, you're not quite ready for the recurring income stream yet.

So either figure out that this is something you're going to commit to, or don't get started on it until you're ready. Once you start it can actually take up quite a bit of time because you made a commitment to people that you're going to deliver value every month.

Problem #4: It becomes a burden to maintain

This is a related problem. You might not be distracted, but perhaps it's become a challenge to keep providing new material.

One option – which might seem surprising – is to give *less* material. You don't have to provide 10 e-books every month or 3 audio programs. People already have a problem with a lack of time, so feed out your material a little bit at a time. It doesn't mean you have to be really stingy and not give out anything because then they won't get value from it and they will leave. But if you give them too much, they might feel overwhelmed and

leave anyway. So if it's becoming a bit of a drag for you, just question whether you're giving too much information.

Also, keep some material in reserve if possible. For example, before I created the First Step membership site, I knew that I had lots of e-books, audio programs, recordings and articles – all of which I could provide in the membership site. So it's never difficult for me to provide new material for members, because I have so much I haven't "published" yet.

Another option is to leverage your time more effectively. For example, when I conduct the monthly teleseminar, I create a recording from it, which I make available for members. I sometimes get the recording transcribed and write an e-book from it as well – which becomes yet another product.

Problem #5: Too many subscribers leave the site

Part of this is natural attrition, so expect it and don't get stressed or depressed every time someone leaves your membership site.

But do ask them why they're leaving, so you know what to change in the future. In almost every case with the people who have left the First Step membership site, it was because they just don't have the time to implement the stuff that they're going to get from me. They often say they're going to come back later (whether they will or not I'm not sure) but a lot of them say they just don't have the time at the moment.

The other thing to stop people from leaving is to make sure you deliver value they *want*. So keep asking them “What would you like to know?” For instance, before every monthly teleseminar, I ask people to send me their questions so I can make sure I answer them. In fact, the initial teleseminar topics even came out of a survey asking members for their most popular topics. Don’t guess what they might want. Ask them so that they get the real value that they’re paying for.

Problem #6: You become too reliant on it

This means you’re generating a lot of income from your membership site, so in general it’s a good problem to have! However, it can also be a risk, because if your members suddenly leave, it will create a huge dent in your income stream.

There are a number of ways to manage this, of course – including:

- ⇒ Continue to work at your other income streams
- ⇒ Keep providing value to members so they *don’t* leave
- ⇒ Plan to sell the membership site to somebody else, so you can “cash out”
- ⇒ Keep abreast of what your competitors are doing, so you don’t get unexpectedly wiped out by somebody else who launches a bigger and better version of what you’re doing

Final Words

That's it! You now know how to plan, produce and promote a membership site.

I hope you've enjoyed this program. A membership site – if it's done well – can be a highly profitable source of income, and it's recurring income as well.

I hope you make the most of the opportunity. I would love to hear what you think about podcasting when you get it going. Feel free to e-mail me gihan@gihanperera.com. I'd love to hear your comments, your case studies, your success stories, your failure stories and any questions that you have.



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About Gihan Perera

Gihan Perera is a business consultant, speaker, author and entrepreneur – with clients throughout Australia, and in New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, the U.K. and Canada. He works with professional speakers and trainers, consultants, business owners, CEOs and strategic leadership teams to improve their marketing, sales and persuasion skills in one-on-one meetings, group presentations and on the Internet.

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