

Introductions and Requests: Rhetorical Strategies That Elicit Response in Online Communities

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Abstract

Conversation is a critical element to the success of online communities, both for the communities as a whole and the individual members. Yet conversations often fail: Forty percent of potential thread-starting messages in Usenet groups receive no response. When this happens, those who are trying to get information, support, or discussion from a group receive no benefit from their efforts. This paper presents a multi-method series of studies into community responsiveness to two rhetorical strategies: self-disclosing introductions and making requests. Introductions signal legitimacy and commitment, and requests reduce community effort by making clear what is needed. An analysis of a longitudinal sample of 40,931 messages from 99 Usenet groups shows that introductions referencing lurking and a personal connection to the topic of discussion increase the likelihood of getting a reply. So does making requests. Machine learning detects introductions and requests automatically within the text. A pair of experiments in which introductions and requests are added or removed from previously posted messages and reposted to Usenet groups shows that introductions referencing the group history cause an increase in reply counts, but requests do not. The research will inform the design of an automatic intervention triggered at the time messages are written that makes suggestions for strengthening rhetorical strategies when the community is unlikely to respond.