

# Excerpt from *Finding Community: Researching Communities*

## **Separating the Wheat from the Chaff**

Of course no *Communities Directory* or online directory listing can represent a community completely. Every listing will be colored by the aspirations and prejudices of the community members who wrote it. The community's aim is to present their group in the best light. They're writing to impress. So how can you tell if their presentation is exaggerated or sugar-coated? Or if it leaves out significant facts? For example, does a website show photos of beautiful natural buildings, but it's only by visiting the community that you learn that they're living "under the radar" because local building codes don't actually allow that kind of construction? Or does the text glowingly portray the community they hope to become some day, but not describe what the place is actually like now?

You'll have to use discernment—and a touch of skepticism—to separate the exaggerators and prevaricators from the straightforward and the transparent. Over the years I've learned what kind of descriptions tend to be correlated with grounded, stable, successful communities. Here's what impresses me:

- The community is at least several years old.
- It has more than a few people.
- It has a website.

- The directory listing and website are clear and straightforward.
- The website shares practical information such as what it costs to join, how decisions are made, and, if it's in a rural location, how its members make a living.
  - The website has photos.
  - In the photos, the people look happy; the physical infrastructure looks well-cared for.
  - The website seems well-designed — the links work, words are spelled correctly, the photos look good.

When I read some community listings or websites I find myself wrinkling my nose in disbelief. Here are some characteristics of directory listings that raise red flags for me:

- **The community name is over-long, theoretical, spiritually idealistic, politically adamant, or all-encompassing.** Relatively short, down-to-Earth names such as, say, "Raccoon Hollow," "Green Prairie Village," or "Good Shepherd Commons" are credible to me. "Peace, Equality, and Justice Homestead" and "Living Adherents of the Divine Order" are not. A community with an exceptionally positive name that sounds like an affirmation — "Acolytes of Angelic Actualization" — arouses my suspicion: I picture founders so idealistic they don't realize that such a name would deter the kind of grounded, practical people that could help their community thrive. Communities with academic-sounding or ancient Greek names (hubris alert!) conjure up for me an image of people with

theoretical, probably inflexible ideas about community, and likely little practical experience or people skills.

- **The community's mission and purpose statement is also over-long, theoretical, spiritually idealistic, etc.** In my experience, theoretical, vague, flowery, new agey, idealistic, or high-falutin' community descriptions tend to be highly correlated with forming communities that never get off the ground — whose founders have little practical, grounded experience or people skills, or with an imagined community that doesn't actually exist yet. It's not that I think these folks don't have positive visions; it's that I think they're likely to not know how to start a community, and tend to repel the very kinds of folks who could help them get the place built!

Further, I assume that even if the description says "our community believes this" and "our community believes that," it's a project in the early, theoretical stages, probably with just one person and most likely no property yet. I prefer websites which tell you what the community has actually done, what they're actually doing now, and what they plan to do in the near future — not just what they believe in.

- **The listing doesn't say it's a "forming community", yet it has only two members.** With only two people, they are definitely still in the forming stages. Why don't they say so?

- **They just have two people, and . . . they've been there for years.** Why hasn't anyone joined them? Or if many people over the years join for a short while and leave, why is that? What's turning people off?

● **The tone is preachy, plaintive, or bitter.** This could mean the person who wrote it was going through a rough time, but it could also reflect the general tone of the community.

● **The website is poorly done — links are broken, words are misspelled, photos are fuzzy.** On the one hand, this could reflect the level of attention and care at the community as well. On the other hand, “you can’t judge a book by a cover” also sometimes applies. Sometimes you can’t judge a community by its poorly done website either. Tony Sirna, editor of the FIC’s Online Directory, notes that since many community members are not tech-savvy, some communities may have poor-looking websites but are still fine communities — and vice versa.

—From Chapter 13: *“The Communities Directory, the Internet, and You — Researching Communities”*