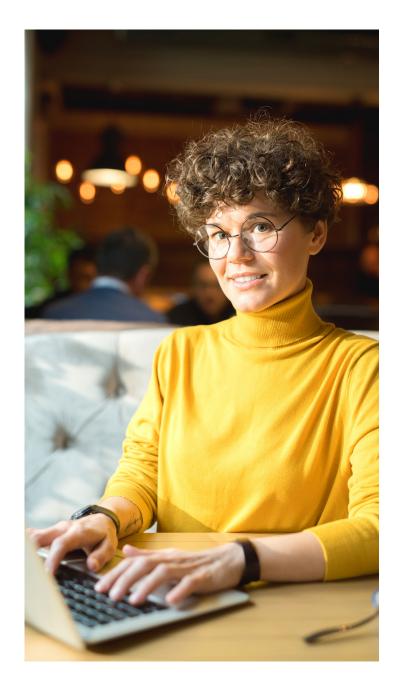# HIRING THIRD-PARTY MODERATORS

A guide to due diligence on third-party moderation services in Australia.

MODERATION MATTERS

Moderation is a critical feature of online community success.

It helps establish social norms and sets the prevailing culture of an online space. It protects hosting organisations and participants from legal and social harms.

If you're engaging third-party providers to assist you with moderation, due diligence is a must - to protect your organisation and set your project up for success.

This guide summarises the key areas to discuss with a prospective service provider, and will help you determine if a moderation service is reputable, trustworthy and capable of meeting your needs.

5 KEY AREAS

Once you have examined the general market credentials of a moderation provider, there are five important areas to enquire about.

Before handing over custody of your online community, ensure your prospective service provider can address these satisfactorily.

- Regulatory preparedness
- Crisis training
- Mental health training
- Moderator protections
- Ethical operations

REGULATORY PREPAREDNESS

Australian online communities on both social media and hosted platforms are impacted by laws and regulatory frameworks at the federal, state and industry level.

It's essential any moderation provider you consider appointing has a thorough awareness of the current legal, regulatory and advisory frameworks that apply to your online community and your industry. Ensure they're across the legal landscape regarding defamation, and that they can identify and act on issues such as hate speech, harassment or graphic content in the Australian environment.

Engaging untrained or unsupported moderators may expose your organisation to significant liabilities, along with legal, user and reputational risks. Any perceived cost savings will return on the 'back end' exponentially.

Ensure your provider can brief you on the most relevant regulatory considerations for your industry and community; and that they possess the training and resources to manage those issues in practice.
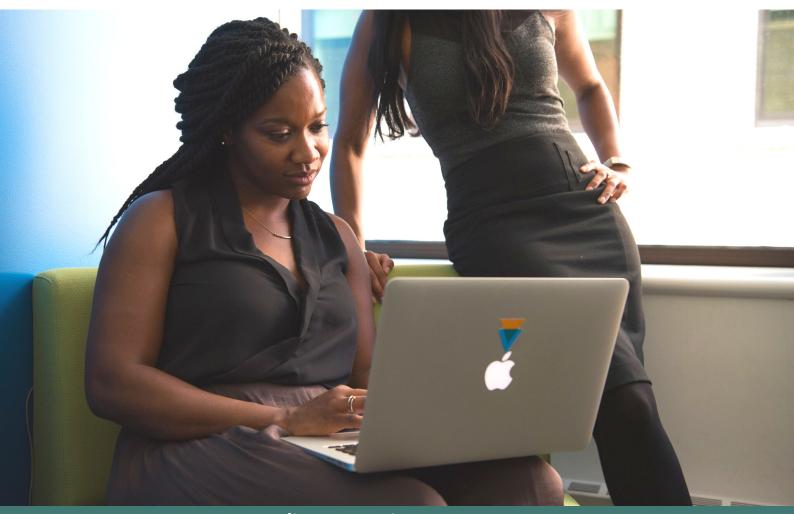
CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Does your provider have verifiable experience managing real-time crises with online communities?

Online communities, especially those situated within social media platforms, can be an early warning beacon for larger organisational crisis. And when crisis is unfolding, digital communities can be a barrier for defence, or a catastrophic amplifier.

Ensure any professional moderation service you work with has real-world experience preparing for and managing active crises - before, during and the aftermath. You need to trust you can deploy them to responsibly put out fires and best represent your organisation while doing so.

They should have established processes and protocols, and be able to integrate with your existing crisis communications and stakeholder management as needed. There are often specialists crisis managers within or consulting for organisations, however moderators are uniquely placed to front the heat of an issue while it unfolds.

MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

Do your community management and moderation professionals have training and/or credentials to deal with issues relating to mental health?

Online communities of high-risk individuals (such as a peer support community for those experiencing depression, or those in recovery from an addictive behaviour) need specialised attention around mental health. This is often implemented in conjunction with clinicians.

But it's not just high-risk communities. Mental health concerns can present in all online social spaces, regardless of membership or topic. Anywhere humans gather online, form bonds and participate in social exchange, distressing content and behaviour (such as threats to self or others) is a possibility.

Responsible moderation providers understand this and will manage it safely within governance frameworks and risk plans. Alternatively, they will be able to advise on specialist partners to accomodate that aspect of your moderation needs. ACM recommends all online community professionals, including moderators, undergo mental health first aid training.

MODERATOR SUPPORT

What processes or systems exist to support community moderators deal with potentially harmful aspects of their work, such as harassment, threats, or exposure to disturbing content?

Do they have clear legal guidance and resources? Adequate escalation points? Access to discreet counselling? Sufficient down-time? Do they and the organisation have resilience skills? Proactive self and team care strategies?

Ensure your moderation provider has both mitigative and reactive supports in place or in development, and ask them for an overview. If they are unable, or worse, disinterested, it's a warning sign they are ill-equipped to provide the level of professionalism you require.

These protections are best practice (including and especially any remote and distributed workers) and they help everyone deliver safely and optimally. Working conditions for moderators can be the subject of controversy and a trustworthy operator is usually proud to share their approach.
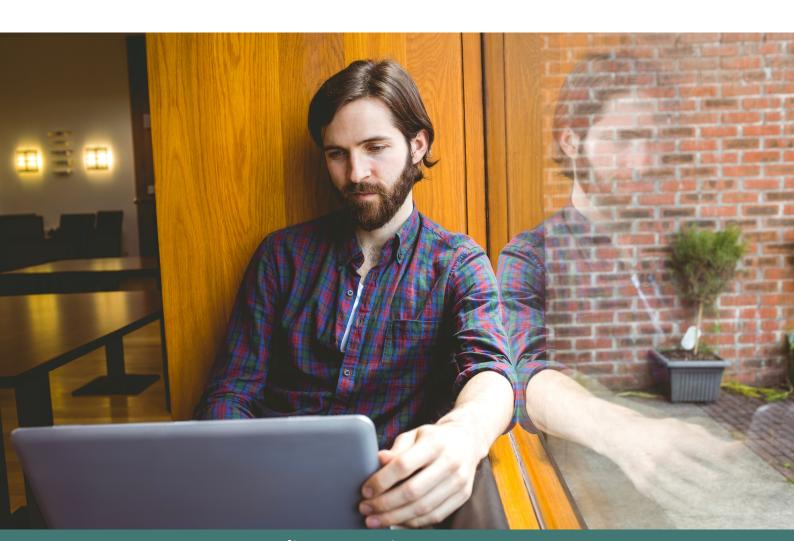
ETHICAL OPERATIONS

Anyone performing moderation on your behalf is representing your organisation in a public arena, subject to a network effect of amplification. Those lacking an ethical approach invite a reverse 'halo' effect, casting your organisation in a negative light by association.

Check that your provider is a signatory to the ACM national Code of Ethics for community management: www.australiancommunitymanagers.com.au/codeofethics

Internationally based providers may not be a signatory to the Code, or professional members of ACM. Ask for their local equivalencies and request that they review and adhere to the Code while working on your community. You may want to add this into contract stipulations.

Working with those committed to best practice in their discipline helps minimise problems, unwanted scrutiny, poor PR and damaging outcomes for your community and organisation.

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