



Interview with Pete Lawrence, Founder of Pic-Nic Village

How did the idea for Pic-Nic Village come about and how does it lead on from your work with The Big Chill over the past 15 years?

In the mid 90s, I came up with a concept for an event which became known as The Big Chill, which went on to become best known as a celebrated festival. As it gathered momentum, I was hugely inspired by the forum activity on The Big Chill's website and the sense of community that was emerging.

In many ways, the forum was a great early example of the effectiveness of social media and seemed as important to me as the actual events we put on in the real world. I developed a prototype, using as its base the idea of creating user profiles around a broad concept of skills exchange, underpinned by a self help philosophy whereby people were able to organise themselves, find the common ground and go on to meet up and create new friendships and collaborative opportunities.

The idea was never fully realised during my time at The Big Chill, because it was still evolving - and at that time, the technology wasn't available or up to speed, but recent years have seen some interesting shifts and developments in many directions, and having observed the impact that social networking is having on all aspects of our lives the time feels totally right to take the idea of social networking up a gear and onto the next level, which, for me, is more about building a community with soul and purpose. In hindsight, this was the thing I took most pleasure from during my Big Chill years.

What is Pic-Nic Village?

Pic-Nic Village, which we are planning to fully launch in 2011, will be a place where creative minded people – artists, innovators, entrepreneurs, marketers, musicians, photographers, film makers, designers and business professionals - can showcase their own projects and hobbies, pool ideas around shared interests, discuss and debate concepts, passions and seek advice - using a dynamic social media platform. With Pic-Nic Village, we're looking at wide ranging, real-time, participatory media produced and consumed via smartphones, iPads and home computers. The blueprint for this project has been developed over the last two years or so.

What makes Pic-Nic Village different?

There are several things that stand us apart from other social networking sites:

1. It's not just an online social network. It will exist offline too.
2. We want our community to be shaped by inviting members to fund its formation and development. The business will be underpinned by a progressive constitution, which aims to empower its members, and prevent any big business interests ever gaining a foothold in the company.
3. It's an advertiser and sponsor free zone. Because we aim to be funded by subscription, we don't intend to rely on advertisers.
4. It's aimed at bringing together like minded, creative people who share a sense of purpose and can bounce ideas off others and become key players in a dynamic new environment, based around a variety of common interest guilds. More on guilds later....

What are the underlying principles?

It's amazing what the combination of good friends, a conducive environment and a collaborative ethos can achieve. The potential is actually way beyond what I'm able to describe here...Brian Eno talked about the importance of "social glue"...For me, that sense of belonging in a community is the modern day equivalent - or some may say substitute for - the bonding of traditional village communities.

People have a desire to be connected and to not only organise their interests and their fun, but to go one step further by participating in a community which shares a common purpose, enabling them to hone their skills, and expand the possibilities around their favoured interests and passions. Empowering your inner entrepreneur, if you like.

Pic-Nic Village will help unearth each person's unique qualities and offer some exciting ways to explore and realise those talents - personally, spiritually and financially... We all have creativity in common, but what we want to do is to help people turn those ideas into reality, and maximize their own potential.

Of course, I'm expecting that our members will dictate and continually refine our ethos. For instance, I would expect that we can include a campaigning element in what we stand for. We're just getting the ball rolling really, what happens next is down to the community.

Why Pic-Nic?

The word picnic, for me, it captures the excitement of the excursion, bringing together old and new friends to share in an informal setting, indoors or outdoors, intimate or with family and friends, mixing ingredients against a backdrop of relaxed conversation, sunshine, scenery, recreation and celebration. In short, everyone is bringing something to the table.

Following the analogy through, the Village will be the community – the online meeting place, filled with creative dialogue, debate and exchange of ideas and knowledge - a melting pot of alternative viewpoints, passions and talents, offering potential collective solutions to specific issues.

What we're talking about is a unique opportunity to be part of an exciting new community which gives its founder members a degree of control and ownership, based around a 'social market' economic policy where business is ethically focused on wealth creation for all rather than profit maximisation for the few. Although the launch will be centred around the UK, the site is planned to be international with multi-language capability. I see no reason why Pic-Nic Village shouldn't have universal appeal..

How are you funding this venture?

We're using a quite radical way of setting up a business called 'crowd funding' essentially asking people to fund its development in return for a share and an involvement in the site from day one.

Wikipedia describes Crowd Funding as "the collective cooperation, attention and trust by people who network and pool their money together, usually via the Internet, in order to support efforts initiated by other people or organisations. There are a number of more traditional avenues open to us to get our business off the ground, and private investment is one of them, but Pic-Nic Village is all about doing things differently, so we are attracted to a different style of approach. I believe people want to take a more proactive, partnership role in the companies, products and services that they consume, and to take pleasure in watching it all come to life. Our consumer-generated media movement is just one example of this shift to consumer control. We want to respond to that demand with this modern-day co-operative approach. In essence, it's about people power.

A small team of investors have got us to the stage we're at right now and we're grateful that they had the confidence to believe in the idea from the outset. Alongside them we have had a team of people working in detail on the design and functionality planning for the site. To move this forward and have the involvement and input of our founder members from launch gives us the best possible chance of collective success and will allow our founder members to own a stake as well as playing their part in shaping what we hope will be a fast growing, dynamic community of like minds. So potential founders are being invited to buy a Founder Membership package which is detailed in our downloadable offer document.

And once that is in place and the site is built, what will subscription offer?

There are clearly some seismic shifts going on in terms of paid for content. Leaving aside Murdoch and his paywall concepts - and the alleged lack of a proper strategic business plan for monetisation from the likes of Facebook, Myspace, Spotify and others at their inception, there have been big success stories such as Soundcloud - I'm paying 9 Euros per month for standard membership and this basically allows musicians and DJs to upload and download mixes and tracks, make comment and put together basic profile pages. With Pic-Nic Village we're not just looking at music, important though that may be. We have some exciting plans to offer an evolved 'personal media centre' for each user (see offer document for further details).

We will also offer limited free registration to the site, but you will get the full functionality when you're a full member of the community...The culture of free often comes with a timestamp attached to it, and eventually people pay - either through loss of privacy (exposure to advertising for example) - or other commercial constraints leading to a diminution of value in the end, Free may have paved the way for a new way of collaborating, but ultimately, I believe that the trend is towards people now being prepared to pay for something that they value.

Paying can sometimes encourage a more regular participation, which would also make for a more vibrant inclusive community. In recent years a non-paying mentality had set in online, which has led to users expecting everything for nothing. With Pic-Nic Village we're hoping that having sampled what the site can do, and the quality of the ideas coming out of the community, people will support our ethos and sign up for full membership.

Will it be a commercial site? What about revenue from advertising?

Although Pic-Nic Village is a modern commercial enterprise, the thinking behind it is closer to that of a modern style of co-operative in terms of its constitution. We plan to invite founder members to vote on major company matters, including the election of appointees from their ranks to sit at board meetings, privacy issues, whether or not to pursue certain commercial opportunities, third party technologies, proposals for advisory panel candidates and the general development of the site.

The 'no corporate dominance' clause is designed to prevent any significant amount issued share capital being owned by commercial organisations with an annual turnover of over £1m and/or profits turning over more than £5m. The 'God, politics, and war' clause stipulates that no shares in Pic-Nic Village may be owned by any organisation which is specifically political or religious in nature, or which participates actively in the design, manufacture, sale, distribution or operation of weapons. There are also restrictions on directors selling shares, so we aim to prevent Pic-Nic Village ever being bought up by any corporate giants. When I was looking into private finance, people kept asking me what my exit strategy was...if I have one, it must surely be along the lines of to dying peacefully in the knowledge I've created something of value which brings people together and inspires them, and that my kids might want to pick up where I've left off.

Many people really dislike adverts in their face, and we are making a feature of the fact that we intend to be totally advert free, and obviously very opposed to any kind of 'commercial infiltration' which I would imagine our members will sniff out from day one; and this will reinforce our ideals of self moderation and further empower the community as editors and moderators in their own right. People really deserve the right to an uncorrupted social networking experience.

Tell me more about the functionality of the site.

The design aims to be clean, elegant and easy to use, and a lot of this aesthetic values have come from the ideas and talents of James Mayall. We see Pic-Nic Village user profiles as far more than just online profiles. They effectively become a personal 'media centre' and the storage folder aspect becomes key, by which people have a space where they can build their own portfolios. As well as being able to post content as ephemeral and fast moving as status updates, links to news and other favoured content, members will be able to chat, PM, upload photos, movies and music, the blog aspect of the site will link in nicely with 'projects'. Members will be able to join common interest Guilds each with a forum attached, and search or exhibit in a job marketplace.

Artists are also able to 'demo' a new project first via Pic-Nic Village – for instance a new musical collaboration, or a book idea, which they can litmus test via the community before going to the logistical expense of taking it out on the road or publishing. In this way, there's a good chance that they will already have a following, built up in super fast time.

So, for example, if you see yourself as a budding writer or publisher, you could post a descriptive page about your book, short story, review or regular blog, add photos, a movie of yourself being interviewed (which could either be specifically uploaded or linked from say YouTube), and add some relevant music, then add a link to where people could buy the book. You could then link to this 'project' from the books forum, targeting members who are actively interested in your project, who would be able to favourite, follow it and forward it, save your project to a folder of their own for future reference. You would also be able to get immediate feedback on it and discussion around it in that particular Guild.

We intend members to have a high degree of control over the look of their own profile, and the intention is for the site's functionality to be fully optimised for use with mobile phones and iPads. Most of this functionality will be available in limited form with free registration, as much as a sampler as anything else.

There will also be a good deal of attention paid to privacy issues. We're aware how important this aspect of web usage is and intend to make a high degree of individual control simple to operate and administer for every member, so that they can be as specifically public or private as they choose to be.

What is the concept of Guilds?

I was looking for a suitable name to describe the common interest groups which we have planned and which will have forum facilities attached. Like the name Picnic, 'Guilds' struck the right resonance when I looked it up on my Mac dashboard dictionary.. "an association of people for mutual aid or the pursuit of a common goal" and "a group of species that have similar requirements and play a similar role within a community" I particularly like that the word has associations with medieval society. I'd like to think that Pic-Nic Village might help give the word a new modern day context. You can get an idea of the breadth of Pic-Nic Village by naming just a handful of the many guilds people will be able to join – nature, relationships, technology, business, travel, urban, camping, health, design, dating, fashion, film, branding, food and drink, folklore, politics, to name but a few. As with other aspects of the site we'd like the community to lead on deciding which Guilds we launch at the site's inception, and I'm sure this will be one of the many topics that our forum members will want to discuss in advance of launch proper.

And you will be looking at the editorial aspect of the site's content..

Beyond projects and blogs, we plan to have an editorial team from the community, harvesting the most interesting, ground breaking and controversial content on the site to create our own news pages, which we anticipate will be some of the most widely read. Everyone on the site will be offered some editorial and moderating input and we would like to see every member potentially empowered as an arbiter and tastemaker as well as being the critic, the chooser, the endorser and the link builder.

The future of news is in the process of being redefined as we speak and one of Pic-Nic Village's primary aims will be to look closely at the news agenda. I recently read a quote from Arianna Huffington, cofounder and editor of The Huffington Post which says it all "I think we will see an explosion of news sites engaging their communities in the editorial process. We'll see a great expansion of the ways citizen journalists will help drive the news : recommending stories. Technology has enabled millions of consumers to shift their focus from passive observation to active participation." As well as recommending the stories, we would like to see Pic-Nic Villagers will actually be writing them.

Things are changing fast. How does Pic-Nic fit into the modern world context?

In a "post brand era" as defined by Jeff Jarvis in 'What would Google Do?', this reinforces the overturning of the old order, where the brand dictated and we consumed or listened. A new world is coming into play, and within it we are re-organising the way we relate to each other. We are using connective threads to move across borders, whether geographical, institutional or demographic. There is a growing belief that we no longer need companies, institutions and government to organise us. The zeitgeist is moving towards us as producers rather than consumers. In fact, brands are now listening to and craving dialogue with their 'market' in more and more immediate ways, and direct, two-way communication has now become the new holy grail. I am hopeful that Pic-Nic Village can become a hotbed of producers and innovators, who are able to share their inspiration with others around them.

And what about offline?

The idea of starting with an online community with events growing out of it is, for me, far more appealing than vice versa, and will ensure an open community who are not limited about what they can and can't say in a way that they might be in a more commercial business interest or event based community.

With Pic-Nic Village, our intention is that our members will decide what sort of event they want to put on, and put it all together themselves. We will provide the platform. I can imagine that a lot of people will want real life meet ups in a collective environment with friends they have made online.

We are also launching The Pic-Nic Village Foundation, which will have the sole aim of helping people achieve their potential. We are inspired and united by a desire to address the disturbing waste of potential of creative people, who often have good ideas but are unable to implement them due to difficulties in obtaining funding.

Who do you expect Pic-Nic to appeal to?

In saying that we're targeting creative people, I'm keen to stress that we don't want to put people off if they're not feeling particularly creative or confident in their own abilities. Some people enjoy reading about others' creativity as much as creating for themselves and we wouldn't want to alienate them. Pic-Nic Village is open to all comers. It will be more targeted community than say Facebook and as a result I expect it to have a much better 'signal to noise ratio'.

I have always liked the idea that you can start with visions of utopian ideals..That was the case with my original thinking behind The Big Chill and it will also apply here too. it's a great challenge to see how far we can get. I would like to think that Picnic Village could become a model of the sort of community that the web is arguably lacking right now – one which gives a great deal more mutual support and takes pleasure in helping others' dreams come true as well as people's own visions. I'd like people to be inspired most of all – to tap into the dialogue and discussion, to know that there's a strong mechanism of mutual support, the feeling of warm connection and common purpose. As my friend Mark Offord recently put it, "the love factor has been severely lacking in social networking".

Without putting too fine a point on it, given the incredible amount of things that I saw grow out of The Big Chill community over the years - not just artistic collaborations, but enduring friendships, relationships, marriages and even babies, the 'life changing' potential of PNV is something that excites me perhaps most of all. The Big Chill experience was an important part of shaping and molding my current thinking and in many ways, I feel like everything that has gone before was all a rehearsal for what we're about to do now...

We're in this to create magic, through collectively setting up an online community, which we believe will have a soul and a sense of purpose, and in doing so, we hope to blur the boundaries between work and leisure and have fun in the process.

So how can potential founder members sign up?

Go to picnicvillage.com and download our offer document via the 'Founder Members' link which details the full terms and conditions of the offer.