

A Guide To Monetizing Your Forum

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Embarking down the path of monetizing your forum can seem daunting at first. This guide aims to help forum owners by giving you a lay of the land, a benchmark for what to expect, and a start in the right direction. While there are lots of options, the good news is that only a few are really worth exploring for most small to medium-sized forums. The larger you get, the more sense it makes to test more sophisticated monetization techniques. If you're just getting started, our advice is to look for the solutions that earn revenue with the least amount of effort and the least amount of intrusion into your forum experience (check out [our comparison](#) at the end). This lets you focus your efforts on your most important job: building an awesome community. After all, without your community, there's no monetization!

In this document, we summarize the major monetization options to consider when monetizing your forum, some more obvious than others. These are then compared in the tables that follow, where we provide benchmark revenue numbers based on actual forums.



VigLink creates ordinary links that earn money. The largest network of its kind, VigLink maximizes earnings for tens of thousands of publishers and works with more than 30,000 merchants, processing billions of page views and over three hundred million clicks every month. Founded in 2009 and based in San Francisco, VigLink is backed by top investors including Google Ventures.

Sign up at www.viglink.com or give us a call at 1-888-828-8492.

Sponsorships

A sponsorship is a straightforward way to monetize. You'll charge a flat monthly fee for a company to display their brand message. Advertisers love sponsorships because it's one of the only ways they can reliably reach your audience. Whether they're [corvette enthusiasts](#) or [baby-wearing advocates](#), your audience is unique and you provide great value in bringing them together in one place.

After you find a sponsor (or they find you), you'll place a small banner ad featuring their brand and linking to their site. The only real questions are how big the banner ad is, where it's placed, and how much you charge. Stick to the [standard ad sizes](#) in case you want to swap it out later with other sources of display advertising. Placement is usually on the top, sides, or bottom, and the more prominent or relevant the placement the more you can charge. The rates for sponsorship are wide ranging, getting higher the bigger your audience is. The smallest forums might charge as little as \$50/month, the largest can garner as much as \$75,000/month or more.

Link Monetization

Many forums are dedicated to product and shopping-related discussions such as comparisons, deals, and reviews. With a company like [VigLink](#), these discussions can become an automatic source of revenue. There are two ways for a forum to earn money with VigLink. First, when a user posts any link to one of over 30,000 online merchants, VigLink will automatically “affiliate” that link. That means if a visitor clicks the link and makes a purchase, the forum owner earns a commission. Second, VigLink can insert affiliated links where none existed before. For example, if a user is posting a question about two different stereo receivers, VigLink might automatically link the model numbers to an online retailer.

To see VigLink in action, check out [AVSforums](#). The first thing you’ll notice is how seamless the experience is. Links added by VigLink are ordinary links that feel natural and appropriate. Hover over, and you’ll see a small notification explaining that the link was inserted by VigLink. In all other respects, they look and work like any other URL (except they make you money). Installing VigLink is easy, just [sign up](#) to get a snippet of code to add to your site. That’s about it. Some even say it’s a “no-brainer.”

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Donations

Smaller communities are run by passionate and dedicated users. They want their favorite forums to survive and thrive, and may even be willing to kick in some money in support. Some forum owners find that by simply putting up a virtual tip jar, they can earn some extra money to cover the bills. You won’t get rich this way, but it doesn’t hurt to add an option to donate. A simple link to [PayPal](#) is all it takes.

Display Ads

The display advertising industry is getting extremely complex and sophisticated. The buying and selling of online ads via “ad exchanges” means things are starting to look a lot like day trading on the NASDAQ. If you’re fortunate enough to run a large forum, then taking advantage of all the sophisticated technology to segment, sell, and optimize your “yield” can be worth your time. For many forums, however, display ads simply means running [Google AdSense](#) and calling it a day.

AdSense is the largest of the ad networks - it connects your forum to millions of advertisers who are already buying ads from Google AdWords. Using information from the content of your site as well as your audience, AdSense targets relevant ads. For many forums, AdSense is in the top one or two sources of revenue, and it’s relatively easy to install.

For some forums, smaller, more targeted ad networks are also worth looking into. There are ad networks that specialize in verticals such as games, automotive, or moms. If your site appeals to a certain interest, industry, or demographic, hunt for a relevant ad network and see if their ads perform as well or better than AdSense.

In-text and In-image Ads

There's a crop of companies that insert ads into the text or images of your content. The idea is to place ads where your readers are already looking, as opposed to along the edges of the screen. It's widely seen as an aggressive form of advertising, but with aggressive advertising comes additional revenue.

In-text advertising is the older and more mature market of the two and typically provides higher payouts. An in-text ad is usually identified with a double-underlined link. When you hover over this "link" you'll see an ad popup over the content. Major providers of this service include [Vibrant Media](#) and [Kontera](#).

In-image ads, a relatively new phenomenon led by companies such as [gum gum](#) and [Luminate](#), will place ads directly inside the images on your site. These ads can be animated or static, and usually the user can close it out to fully see the original image.

With both in-text and in-image, the companies are trying to tie the content - words and pictures - to relevant ads. Generally, the experience is far from perfect and can force a choice between generating revenue and creating a clean experience.

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User Group Targeting

One strategy often applied by forum owners is to set controls over who sees which types of ads. For example, often the most intrusive forms of advertising are shown only to guests. This keeps you on the good side of an active user and still earns revenue from a passersby. Some forums go so far as to turn off all ads for "premium" users, offering users the option to pay \$15 to never see another ad (and maybe get some bonus benefits as well).

Guests can't complain, while members can (and sometimes do). Even if it's a small minority of members that rant about your efforts to pay the bills, sometimes it's just worth keeping them at bay and turning off the ads. Every community is different and you'll need to make a judgment call (here's [one thread](#) where the community is actually asking for ads as a show of support).

What to Expect?

Nothing drives up your revenue more than the number of visitors. The more visitors you have the more you can charge for sponsorships, the more clicks you'll get on your ads, and the more commissions you'll earn with a company like VigLink. It also helps to have a forum targeted to a topic associated with some kind of commercial product or service. A forum dedicated to poetry may not be the money maker a forum dedicated to purses could be.

Whatever forum you have, you'll want to make the most of what you've got. The best way forward is to test the various options, that is, if you've got the time. If you're looking for a shortcut, visit the largest and most successful forums to see what they're doing. They've probably done a lot of testing and it's reasonable to expect their learnings will apply to your forum too.

It's up to you as the forum owner to strike the right balance between revenue and user experience.

In the end, it's up to you as the forum owner to strike the right balance between revenue and user experience. It's tempting to fill a site with ads and maximize revenue, but too much can turn users away and that's last thing a forum needs. Every time you add a source of revenue or make a change, look at two metrics: the revenue and the users. If you find user engagement going down, roll back the change.



















Monthly Revenue Benchmarks

Use these ballpark revenue figures based on actual forums as a benchmark for your forum.

| Site Size | Monthly Visits | Sponsor | Display | Viglink | In-Text | In-Image | Donations |
|-----------|----------------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Large | + 1mm | + \$500 | + \$2500 | + \$1500 | + \$2000 | + \$1000 | + \$100 |
| Medium | 200K- 1mm | \$200 | \$1000 | \$600 | \$800 | \$400 | \$50 |
| Small | 200K | \$50 | \$250 | \$150 | \$200 | \$100 | \$10 |

Solutions Compared

Here we've rated the various solutions according to their revenue opportunity, how much they intrude on your users' experience, and how much of your time is required to manage them.

| Solution | Revenue | Intrusiveness | Time Involved |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| Sponsorship |  |  |  |
| Display |  |  |  |
| VigLink |  |  |  |
| In-text |  |  |  |
| In-image |  |  |  |
| Donations |  |  |  |