Chapter 2: Ning

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*N*ing.com, which bills itself as "the social platform for the world's interests and passions online," is an easy-to-use platform for creating a Web presence with built-in social networking capabilities. In addition to text pages, Ning offers customizable options for member profiles, blogs, forums, photo and video uploads, and other social marketing tools.

The power of Ning rests on the idea that real communities of shared interest will hold people's attention and participation over time. In business, that idea translates into building a community that addresses the content area in which customers operate, what they do, and what they care about. In turn, that concept builds customer loyalty, which translates into word-of-mouth advertising and increased sales.

Privately held, Ning was founded in 2004 by Gina Bianchini and Marc Andreessen, a coauthor of Mosaic (the first widely used graphical Web browser) and a founder of Netscape. By May 2010, Ning had grown in flexibility, scope, and ease of use to support more than 2 million networks worldwide, register 43 million members, and absorb 5,000 new networks every day. It's strictly a paid membership, so set aside some of your social media budget if you decide to join Ning — unless you're a K–12 educator.

TIP

Ning, like all social networks, is constantly evolving. Watch for any changes it makes on the Ning blog (`http://blog.ning.com`) or history page (`http://about.ning.com/press/history.php`). Be sure to check out Table 2-2, later in this chapter, for a list of helpful resources.

Integrating Ning into Your Web Presence

You have several options for working with Ning. Because you can point a unique domain name to your individual network, a Ning site can become your primary Web presence. Alternatively, if you already have a Web site, you can link to your Ning community from the navigation tabs on your site. By pointing a subdomain to Ning (for example, `http://community.YourDomainName.com`), you can maintain better brand recognition and search engine ranking. A Ning community without its own domain or sub-domain name looks like `YourCompany.ning.com`. (Though search engines still index those pages, they're more difficult to promote online.)

The CurrySimple network on Ning (`http://CurrySimple.ning.com`) shown in Figure 2-1 is an example of this integrated approach. The site is a reward-based, recipe- and information-sharing community for creating Thai curries. Users can redeem reward points for products at the CurrySimple online store on its primary site at `www.currysimple.com/servlet/StoreFront`. A link in the navigation of the primary site (not visible in Figure 2-1) opens the community site.

Deciding Whether Ning Is Right for You

The possibilities for Ning are limited only by your imagination. Because Ning can become the hub for your online presence, you can use it to achieve all the goals you might have for any other Web site, as well as some that are specific to its community-building features.

REMEMBER

Engaging customers in a social community takes patience and sincerity. If you're looking for fast results, building a network may not be the right solution for you. However, if you're willing to commit to an authentic, long-term effort that results in solid customer relationships, you may find that a community network is an excellent approach.

Figure 2-1:
iLove
Curry
Simple.com
maintains
a Ning
community
(top) with
a link to its
online store
(bottom).

Courtesy CurrySimple®

Whether you have a business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C) environment or a product- or service-based company, a Ning network may work well for you. Consider your budget and available time, and look at the strategic (goal-oriented) and tactical (objective-oriented) marketing issues before you decide to use Ning. This list describes some of the goals you can achieve with Ning:

✦ **Build a Web presence:** Use Ning as an inexpensive way to launch your Web presence, linking to a variety of third-party providers for services such as online shopping. After you have established traffic that contributes to your bottom line, you can afford to build a custom site or add features to your Ning site.

✦ **Enhance branding:** The more times viewers see your name, the more likely they are to remember it. By expanding opportunities for customers to interact with your company in a positive way on a name-branded site, you can increase recognition.

✦ **Network with colleagues, vendors, and prospects:** Whether the connections are between businesses, professionals, or your customers, Ning sites provide multiple ways to network by using profiles, forums, and more.

✦ **Increase customer loyalty and repeat visits:** Drawing repeat Web visitors is a key parameter for assessing the online success of your relationship-building efforts. A social networking site attracts, by its nature, repeat users. Quantcast estimates that 34 percent of Ning users are "regulars" who visit from 1 to 30 times per month, and 2 percent are "addicts" who visit more than 30 times. Together, these groups account for 83 percent of all Ning visits. Repeat visitors can be considered "self-qualifying prospects" — if they weren't interested in what you have to offer, they wouldn't return. In theory, attracting repeat visitors should increase the conversion rate on your primary site.

✦ **Improve or expand customer service:** Members of social networks like to share, by definition, common interests or experiences. Though profiles on sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace are listings in huge worldwide directories, Ning communities are tightly focused. Be creative. Ask yourself whether you can host a network of technical professionals, or at least an active user group, interested in addressing particular problems or helping you define a new product. Then decide whether you can attract an audience of *passionistas* — users fervently interested in politics or issues such as global warming. Determine whether you can define multiple private groups for conferences, workshops, campers, alumni members, team members, or future classmates.

Making the most of Ning

Use the independent Social Network Directory at `http://jensocial.com` or the microblogging community for Ning creators at `http://ning shouts.shoutem.com` to see how similar businesses, or even direct competitors, use Ning. A little competitor research never hurts.

TIP

To find some inspiration, review how the following businesses use their Ning communities (and don't forget to read the later sidebar "Posh Designs Scrapbook Store is a Ning community"):

✦ **AJ's Mobile in BC:** AJ's, a small, family-owned, home-and-auto detailing business in lower British Columbia, provides B2B or B2C, on-location, detailing services for autos, RVs, boats, and trucks. AJ's pairs its community site at `http://ajsmobilebc.ning.com` with its primary site at `www.ajsmobilebc.com`.

✦ **Automotive Digital Marketing:** This Ning-only, B2B community of more than 2,000 car dealers, car companies, Internet sales managers, and other automotive professionals (`www.automotivedigitalmarketing.com`) is ideal for networking, resource sharing, and strategic discussion.

✦ **Design Stories Social Network:** This 800-member B2B network (`http://mydesignstories.net`) is a Ning-only Web site that brings together interior designers, architects, and industrial designers to post profiles, upload portfolios, and find collaborators and subcontractors. The small technical forum at `www.allrealms.com` works similarly for programming professionals who want to discuss software or client-server projects.

✦ **Linkin Park:** A freestanding rock band site, the Linkin Park site (`www.linkinpark.com`) offers music videos, downloads, tour information, an active fan community, and links to purchase band merchandise, premium passes, and music from several third-party e-commerce sites.

✦ **Pickens Plan:** One of many political- and public-action-oriented sites on Ning, the PickensPlan (`www.pickensplan.com`) is T. Boone Pickens' site to promote a reduction in U.S. dependence on foreign oil. It offers multiple ways for viewers to get involved and to join a community of like-minded activists in their state.

✦ **Taste and Share:** This Ning-only community, which has more than 1,200 members, carries its own domain name at `www.tasteandshare.com`. It's also a dedicated destination for publicizing wine-tasting events and food festivals.

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Posh Designs Scrapbook Store is a Ning community

Posh Designs Scrapbook Store (`http://poshscrapbookstore.com`), based in Montreal, Canada, opened its Web presence in 2005 with an eBay store selling prepackaged, designer scrapbooking kits. Building on that success, founder Natasha Martin opened her own online store in 2008.

With a staff of eight plus her husband, Martin has initiated a broad strategy for social network marketing, including

- ✓ **A Ning community network:** `http://poshscrapbookstore.ning.com` (shown in the figure)

- ✓ **A blog:** `http://poshscrapbookstore.blogspot.com`

- ✓ **A Facebook page:** `www.facebook.com/pages/Montreal-QC/Posh-Designs-Scrapbook-Store/36013541671?ref=ts`

- ✓ **A Twitter account:** `http://twitter.com/PoshScrapbook`

Posh Designs targets an almost all-female market segmented by craft area (for example, scrapbookers, stampers, and cardmakers), predominantly from the United States and Canada, with some additional global membership.

Getting on Ning was a bit serendipitous, explains Martin. As she struggled to integrate social features into her Web site, she received an e-mail from a friend who insisted that Ning would be like having her own Facebook page. "I decided to give it a try and loved the fact that it's a gallery [for photos], a forum, and so much more, all in one!" Martin enthused.

Martin found Ning so easy to set up that she didn't need a programmer or Web developer. Together with her design team, she created a visual theme to match her online store. Every team member now tries to spend at least a few minutes a day on Ning. Their online presence is quite important as users watch for responses to queries and for new postings.

Posh Designs relies particularly on forum, photo, and profile pages to connect with customers. The approach seems to have proved its worth, as shown in traffic statistics from Google Analytics. Martin says she has definitely seen an increase in traffic and sales, and an improved conversion rate.

To promote its Ning presence, Posh Designs uses the Broadcast Message option on Ning, a link on its Web store, and a Ning badge on its blog, with a clear statement of benefits in its call to action: "Get exclusive VIP product news, monthly contests, product giveaways, free layout projects and ideas, challenges, sketches, and more!"

Though Posh Designs uses the Ning community site primarily for active interchange with its clientele, the design store uses Facebook and Twitter to update its followers on sales, new product arrivals, and various events. Design team members use the blog to share their craft projects and ideas with readers. The suite of social marketing techniques gives users multiple ways to interact with Posh Designs while allowing the company to cast a wide net for scrapbookers. The company supplements social techniques with e-mail newsletters, print ads, and banner ads.

"If you haven't tried Ning, you really should," recommends Martin. "This platform goes beyond the usual 'threads' and 'blankness,' found in regular forums. Ning allows you to build a community for your business, which helps you add more value *and* truly connect with your customers."

Exploiting the demographics of Ning

To be successful on Ning, you have to target the correct demographic. Table 2-1 shows that U.S. visitors to Ning are predominantly female, as are many social sites that emphasize two-way communication. Teenagers 13–17 and African American audiences also significantly outpace their presence on the Internet overall, though a lower-than-average number of users are over 50 years old. If you're targeting a different demographic, Ning might not be the place for you.

Table 2-1	Ning Demographic Profile (U.S. Visitors)
Category	*Percentage of Users*
Female	545
18 or younger	25
18 to 34	34
50 or older	13
Caucasian	58
African American	26
Asian	3
Hispanic	11
Other ethnicity	1
No college	47
College	39
Graduate school	14
Income $0 to 30,000	16
Income $30 to 60,000	26
Income $60 to 100,000	28
Income $100,000 or higher	31

Source Quantcast.com www.quantcast.com/ning.com estimates through May 2010

REMEMBER

Fish where the fish are! If you plan to build a Ning community, see whether its prospective members fall into this demographic. Determine whether they're comfortable building their own profiles, blogging, participating in forums, and uploading photos.

Getting Started with Ning

Ning is fairly straightforward to implement, at least until you try to get fancy. We review the important marketing decisions in this section to get you started.

Signing up

There are several routes to sign up as a member, which allows you to post to many public communities and to create a Ning community. While you can view public communities without becoming a member, membership allows you to see how other sites operate in greater detail and to post to others' public forums.

Follow these steps to first create an account with Ning and then to set up a basic network site.

TIP

1. Sign up for a free Ning membership by clicking the Join Now link in the upper right corner of the Ning page.

If you decide to fill out the boxes on the Ning.com homepage to create your own Ning network first, reverse Steps 2 and 3.

The Sign Up page appears, as shown in Figure 2-2.
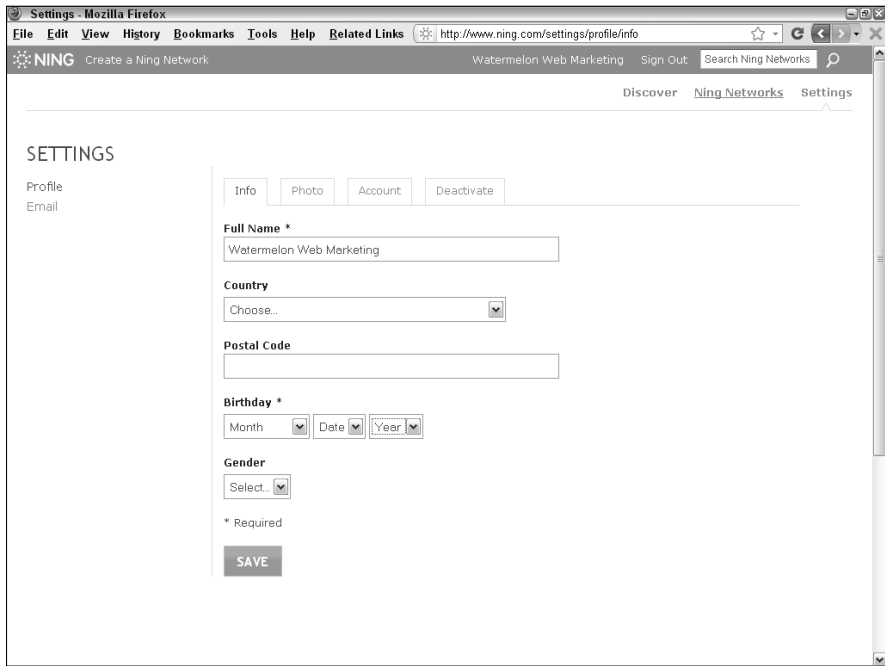

Figure 2-2:
Sign up
for a Ning
account.

2. Enter your business name, business e-mail address, and password. Click the Sign Up button.

Be sure to enter a birthday that makes you at least 21.

Ning e-mails you to verify your e-mail address.

3. Click the link in the e-mail to go to a log-in screen. Click the Sign In button.

The Setting Profile screen appears, as shown in Figure 2-3.

4. **Enter your business name and address fields. Use a birthdate that make you over 21, and skip Gender. Click the Save button.**

A dialog box appears in which you can upload a photo. If you don't see the dialog box, click the Photo tab.

5. **Upload your company logo rather than a photo. Click Done or Skip**.

The Create a Network page opens, as shown in Figure 2-4.

6. **Enter your business name in the Name Your Ning Network box and domain name without the extension in the Pick a Web Address box. Click the Create button.**

For now, enter the same or a related name for branding purposes in the Pick a Web Address box. (You can assign a different domain name later, as we explain in the following section.)

The Describe Your Ning Network page appears, as shown in Figure 2-5.
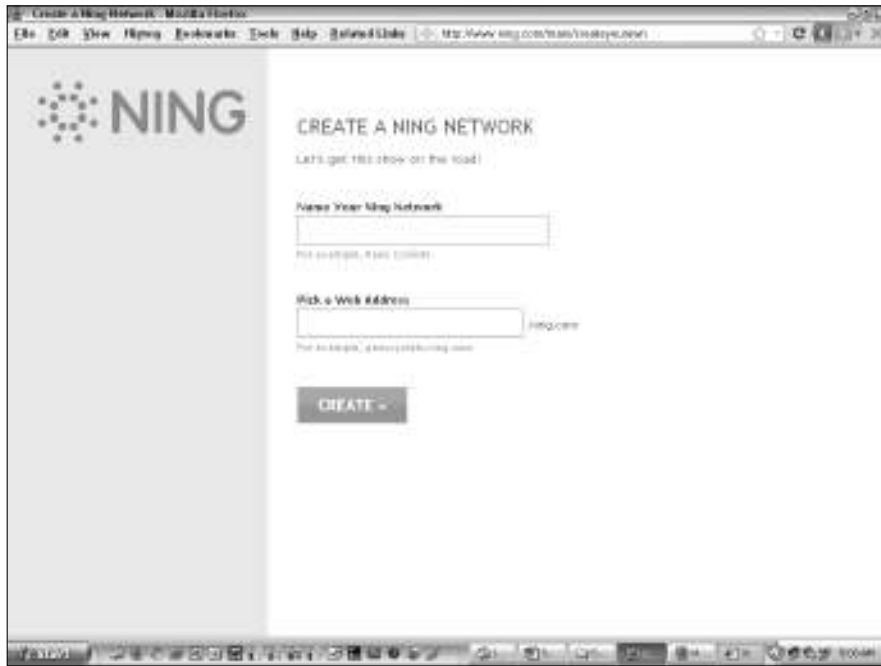
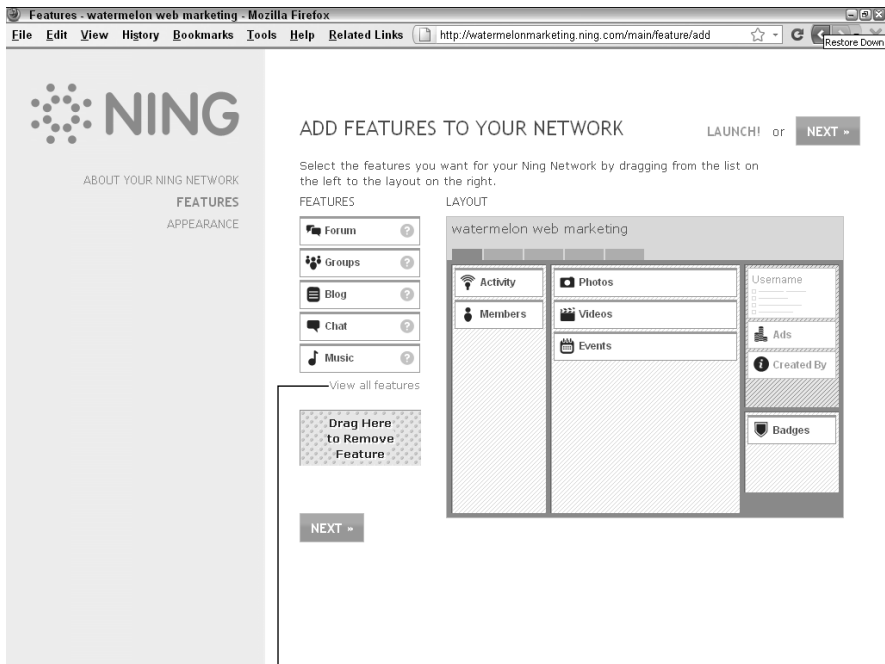**Figure 2-4:**
Finally! You
can create
your Ning
network.
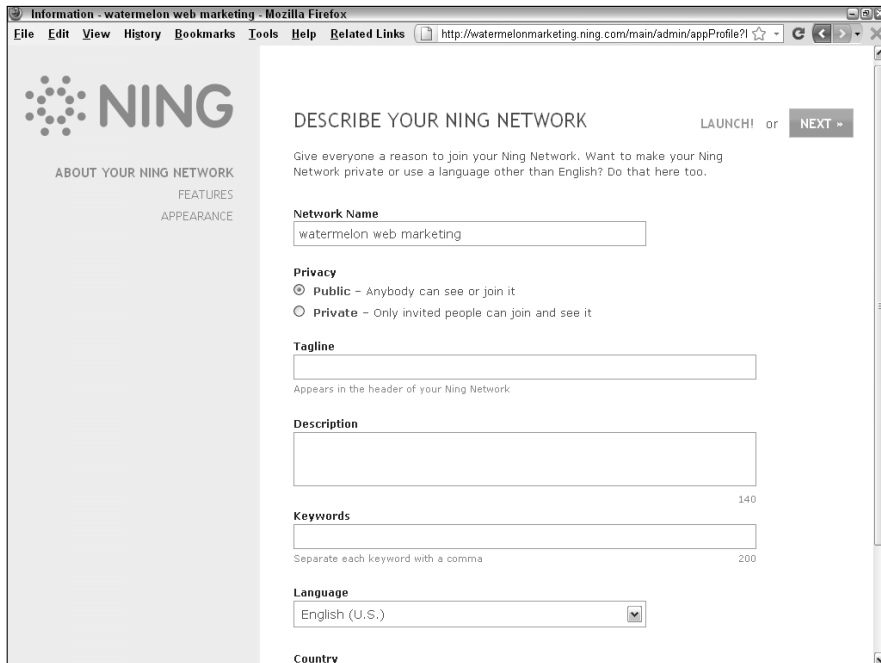
Figure 2-5:
Give Ning
details
about your
network.

7. **Fill in the following fields on the Describe Your Ning Network.**

   • *Network Name:* Enter the network name you created in Step 6 (refer to Figure 2-4).

   • *Public or Private:* Select the Public option for almost all business applications.

   • *Tagline:* Enter your five-to-seven-word marketing tag.

   • *Description:* Enter the optimized page description tag from the home page of your existing Web site (if you have one); you may need to shorten it to 140 characters.

   • *Keyword:* Enter up to 10 keywords or phrases, separated by commas, to a maximum of 200 characters. Be sure to include your primary set of keywords for search engine optimization purposes. We discuss how to select keywords and write metatags in Book II, Chapter 2.

8. **When you're done, click the NEXT button in the upper right, or click the Features link to the left.**

   The Add Features to Your Network page appears, as shown in Figure 2-6.

Figure 2-6: Add features to your network.

Click to see all features available on Ning.

9. **Click the View All Features link to reveal the full list of features you can choose from. Add any features you want to include on your network.**

Drag and drop features to the location on the template where you want them to appear on the main page, as shown in Figure 2-7.

Drag features from this column   To these columns
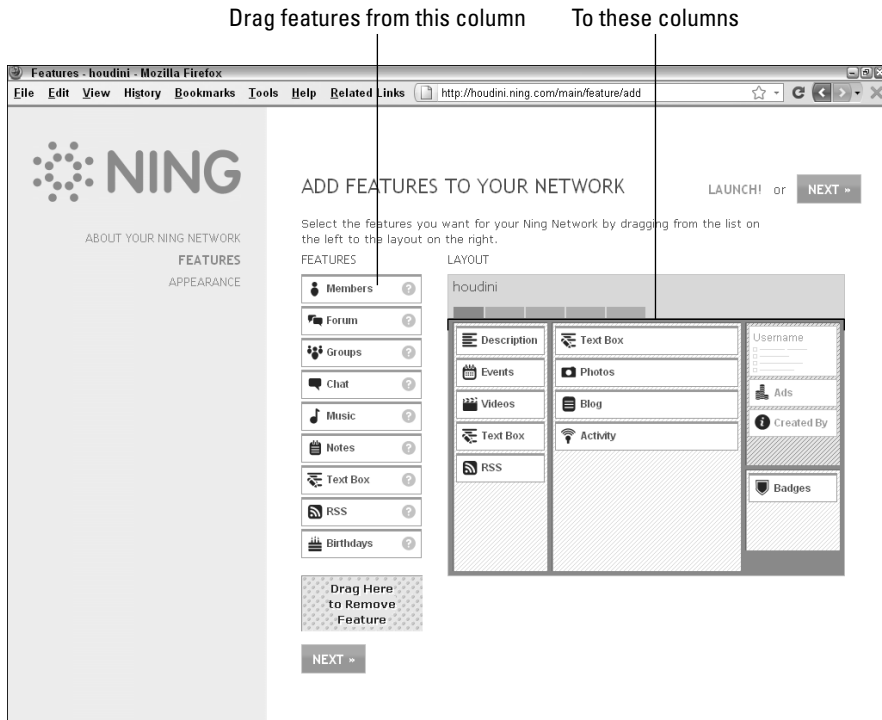
Figure 2-7:
Drag and drop the features you want.

![TIP]
Place a text or description box, which you can make fairly small and unobtrusive — just large enough for a few search terms in a title — at the top of the left or center column for search engine purposes. (Because search engines can't "read" photos or video, putting a text box at the top may improve your ranking on search engine results pages. For more information on search engine optimization, see Book II, Chapter 2.)

![REMEMBER]
We discuss these features in detail in the "Choosing features and display options" section.

Remember the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid). Start off by adding just a few features and tabs; add others later as you need them.

10. **When you're done, click the Next button in the upper right, or click the Appearances link to the left.**

The Customize Appearance page appears, as shown in Figure 2-8.

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View more themes.
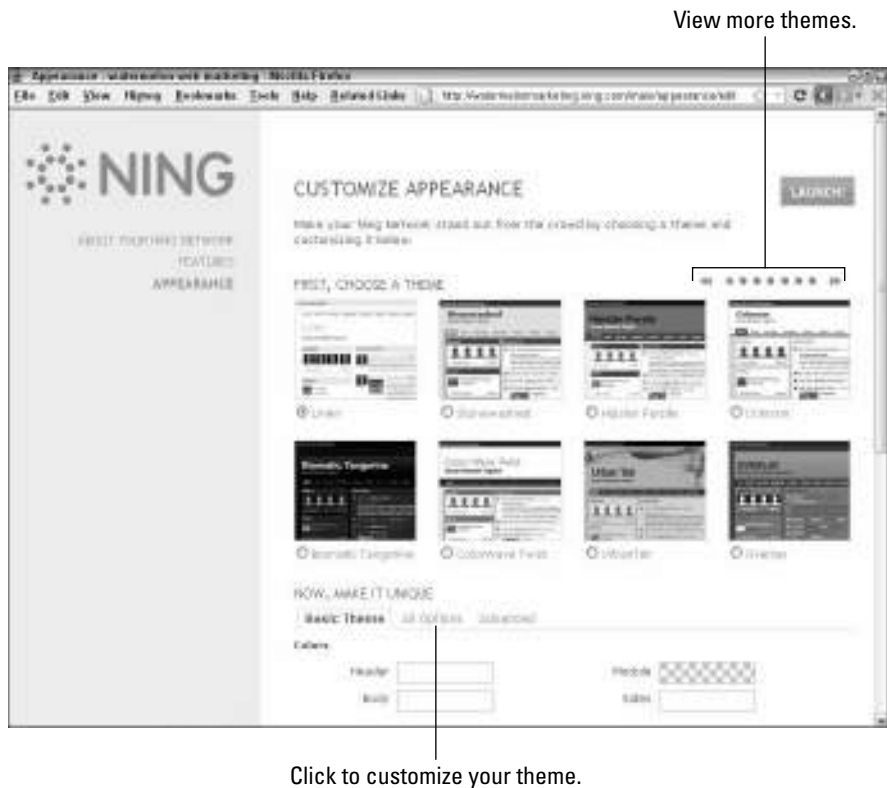
Figure 2-8:
Now is your
opportunity
to customize
your
network.

Click to customize your theme.

11. **Choose a basic theme.**

    Click all the buttons or arrows above the templates to see all 52 choices.
    Click the radio button below your selection.

12. **After you've made your selection, scroll down the page and choose
    the All Options tab to display all available customization choices.
    Scroll through the options until you finish. Click the Launch button at
    the top right when done.**

    Choose the Advanced tab instead of the All Options tab if you want to
    redesign the Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to match your primary Web
    site or to a custom design. Unless you feel comfortable working with
    CSS, hire a developer or contract for Ning support to customize your
    site. You may also need help with RSS feeds and widgets.

    Your design appears on the next screen, as in the example shown in
    Figure 2-9.

Figure 2-9:
You almost
have a Ning
network.

13. **Click the Edit button in any block to start adding content, following the directions on the site.**

    The Manage tab, which appears only to you as the site manager, takes you to the control panel shown in Figure 2-10. You can modify the layout, appearance, and many other parameters as often as you want.

    Your site launches with navigational tabs (refer to Figure 2-9), but you have great flexibility.

    To modify the primary and secondary navigation, choose Manage⇨ Customize It⇨Tab Manager. Then you can add, delete, or change tabs and subtabs that link to internal or external pages.

After you launch your site, Ning sends you an e-mail with links to invite other members to join your community or make changes.

Modify navigation with Tab Manager
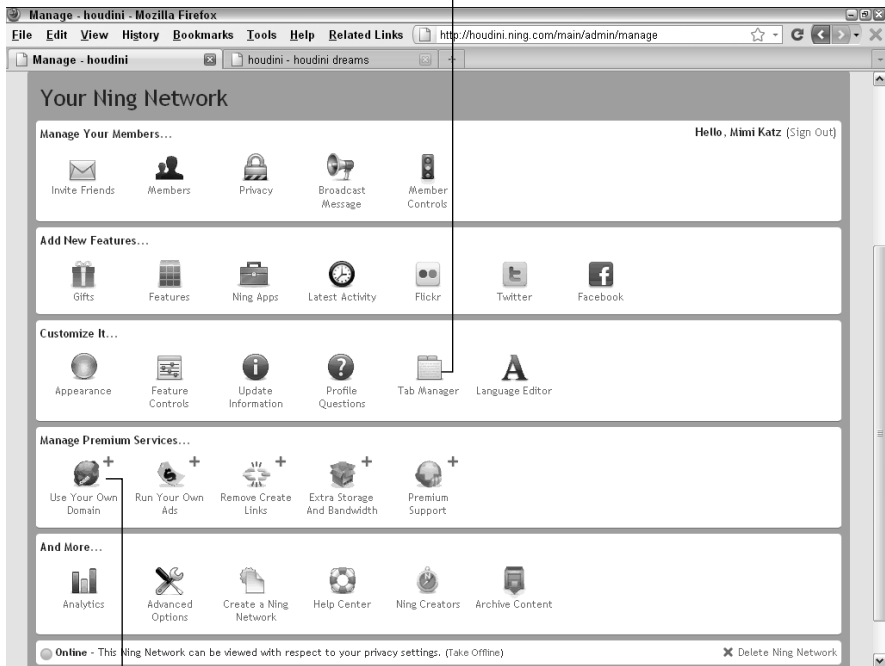
Figure 2-10:
You can
manage
your
network
from the
control
panel.

Change your site's URL.

If you plan to use Ning as your primary Web site, you might want to seek assistance from a graphic designer, copywriter, or photographer (or all three). These services are even more important when you don't have an existing site whose look and feel you can duplicate or whose content you can repurpose.

Naming your Ning community

As we mention earlier in this chapter, you have three ways to name your Ning community:

✦ Display the Ning name as the host server, as in `http://crimespace.ning.com`

✦ Buy a new domain name and point it to the Ning community, such as `www.womenssoccerunited.com`

✦ Link from your existing Web site or blog, and point a creative subdomain name to your Ning network, like `guruforum.yourcompany.com`

To change your site's URL, choose Manage⇨Add Premium Services⇨ Use Your Own Domain and follow directions.

WARNING!

Premium Services carry a modest fee. With Ning's new pricing structure, which we discuss in the "Selecting Your Pricing Plan" section later in this chapter, it isn't clear which premium services will be incorporated into higher-priced options and which will remain available *a la carte*. For more information about the old set of Premium Services, go to `http://help. ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_ faqid=2973`.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Even template-based sites have technical challenges. Though Ning offers extensive online Help and an online forum for questions, you may find that hiring a professional Web developer, or contracting with Ning for additional support, saves time, flattens the learning curve, and helps you avoid mistakes while trying to point to a domain name, for example.

Choosing features and display options

After you decide on a theme for your site, you get to choose which features to display on its main page. Ning offers so many choices that your site will end up being unique even if you choose a standard theme. Although you have more than 20 choices of features, try to limit the number of features to 12 to 15, at least at the start, to keep your Ning network from slowing down.

TIP

If you're matching a Ning network to your Web site or blog, try to maintain consistency in the navigation tabs as well as in the design.

Ning advises that the use of photos, videos, latest-activity reports, members, and events helps your Ning network grow "because they are visually pleasing, fun to use, and easy to interact with" (`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3584`). Add two or three text boxes and one optional RSS feed, or perhaps a widget or blog, and you're done.

The following list offers some marketing considerations for the key features to include in your Ning site. My.KicksonFire.com includes many of these elements on its community page, while maintaining a consistent look-and-feel between Ning site and its blog at KicksonFire (`www.kicksonfire.com`), as shown in Figure 2-11. The two sites cross-link in their navigation bars.

Figure 2-11: KicksonFire positions four key elements near the top of its Ning site. It maintains a consistent visual identity on its blog.

Courtesy Furqan Kahn for KicksonFire.com

✦ **Photos and videos:** Although photo and video features eventually use up your storage budget, place these features at the top of your site (before users begin to scroll), on the main page. Including these two most popular Ning features raises your probability of success.

The visual appeal of photos and videos attracts the human eye quickly and encourages user interaction. Enable members of your site to upload and share photos and videos. For even greater visibility, automatically offer them the option to embed their branded photo slide shows and videos anywhere on the Web, with a link back to your Ning network.

✦ **Latest activity:** This feature can motivate members to participate, especially as your network grows. However, you generally don't want to advertise a low activity level. You can control the display of information in the Latest Activity box, so you might want to show only a summary of What's New postings (even if they're yours) until you have more member activity to report. Ning recommends keeping this feature near the upper-left column of the screen, because it attracts and holds viewers.

✦ **Members and profiles:** Again, Ning suggests keeping the member mosaic displayed near the upper left side of the main screen. Seeing other people encourages new viewers to join. Be sure to select featured members — friendly faces with quality profile photos. Establish profile questions for incoming members by group and allow members to customize their own profiles within limits. You can even customize the advanced member search based on profile questions such as location, graduation year, or team name.

✦ **Events:** This module is an effective way to publicize happenings, sales, readings, performances, trade shows, and more. You can limit event creation to yourself or let all members post events, depending on your site. If you allow open creation, review other people's events before they post. Outdated events are automatically removed from the Events listings, keeping your site looking fresh. Figure 2-12 shows how BroadwaySpace displays its events: The two items in the left column link to detailed Events listings with links to buy tickets or make event reservations, as well as RSVP boards and a calendar.

✦ **Text boxes:** Add text boxes to your main page to use for a weekly column or special promotion or for your own changing photos, video, or graphics. Though you can have as many as ten boxes, try to keep the number to two or three. Be sure to include some search terms in your text boxes!

Figure 2-12: Broadway Space informs visitors of its upcoming events in the left column.

You can gradually add more features as your social network grows and you become more comfortable working in the Ning environment. Try the features described in this list:

✦ **Blogs:** Think carefully before enabling blogs for every member of your Ning network, because you don't have much control over the content. Consider constraining blogs to your own — at least make yours the only featured blog — and let others post comments. Even if you display only your own blog, limit posts to text, display only five to ten posts, and choose to display only titles on the main page to keep your site loading fast.

✦ **Chats:** Real-time chat, or *instant messaging,* is appropriate for only some sites. Is yours one of them? Without moderation, this feature can be "taken over" and distract from your primary business goals. If you enable chat, moderate it.

✦ **Discussion forums:** Though a forum encourages interaction between members, moderating it and nurturing it with lively discussions takes time. You can keep it simple (with a single thread that you create), or establish a multithreaded forum with topics from your members, with categories and attachments. This feature is one you might want to add later.

TIP

If you see that your blog is getting a lot of comments, with an active interchange among respondents, you might want to add a forum for ongoing conversation. All this talk takes time! You may want to ask a reliable and knowledgeable member of the forum to moderate it for you.

✦ **Groups:** You can enable groups as special interest areas or for specific regions. Each group can have its own images, comments, RSS reader, text box, discussion forum, and privacy settings. As the network creator, you can choose its features and privacy settings and control who can create groups or moderate groups before they're posted.

✦ **Moderation and privacy levels:** Ning lets you moderate just almost any of these features, from reviewing members before they join to pre-screening photos, videos, groups, events, and music. You can choose to make your Ning network public or private for members only. The settings you select for moderation and privacy depend on your goals and audience. For instance, you might want to arrange private groups by conference attendance or class membership. Or, you might want to allow people to restrict who can view their profiles, especially if they're young.

✦ **RSS feeds in and out:** For easy updating, pick your favorite RSS feed from your blog or Web site or another news source. For speed, choose to display titles only rather than use Detail view. You can turn just about any feature on a public Ning site into an outgoing RSS feed. RSS feeds, which make your social network look active and fresh, are often placed below the fold — far enough down the page that a user must scroll to see the content. For more information on RSS feeds, see `http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3000`. RSS is one of the feature blocks that you can add to your page layout (refer to Figure 2-7).

✦ **Widgets and third-party applications:** A *widget* is a small piece of code from an outside provider that's embedded on another Web page, in this case on a page of your Ning network. The widget can be a YouTube video, game, poll, survey, or Twitter feed or even another media player. You generally copy the embed code that's provided by the third party, paste the code into a text box or page on your network, and click Save. The list of Ning widgets at `http://developer.ning.com/ningapps` focuses on shopping carts, social giving, shared documents, polls, and blogs, though third-party sites offer hundreds more.

TIP

Pick no more than three or four embedded widgets on your main page. A page loads only as fast as its slowest widget, and you risk too much of an increase in your site's download time. Even a single Flash Player can slow your site! To keep your site fresh, you can occasionally rotate its widgets.

REMEMBER

Posting to blogs, forums, and chat rooms — and even posting photos and media items — takes time, so be sure to budget time for this task. Moderating these functions is essential; otherwise, your Ning communities soon become filled with spam and irrelevant information.

Table 2-2 lists many helpful resource URLs.

Table 2-2	Useful Ning Resource URLs
How-To Resources	*URL*
Ad Publishing	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3155`
Application list	`http://developer.ning.com/ningapps`
Compare pricing plans	`http://about.ning.com/announcement/plans.php`
Creators' network	`http://creators.ning.com`
Directory	`http://theningdirectory.ning.com`
Domain name usage	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3640`
	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3643`
	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=2920`)
Google Analytics	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3003`
Groups	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3411`
Help	`http://help.ning.com`
Product summary	`http://about.ning.com/product.php`
Selecting features	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3605http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3000`
SEO on Ning	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3708`
Workshop and tutorials	`http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/workshop.php?`

Applying the four-second rule to your Ning network

You have no more than three or four seconds to grab a viewer's attention on any Web site, including your Ning network's main page. Try to make a powerful graphical statement that hooks viewers by convincing them that "there's something in it for me." Viewers often abandon a slow-loading site before they even get to see it!

REMEMBER

Include a disclaimer about not being responsible for the accuracy of the content that others provide, and state clearly that posters must own the copyright for any material they post or have permission to use it.

Selecting Your Pricing Plan

Ning has moved from a free base model with individually priced premium services to set pricing options. The plans have three pricing tiers:

✦ **Ning Mini:** A minimal feature set at a low price ($2.95 per month or $19.95 per year) to maintain inexpensive access for many existing small communities of 150 members or less. Ning suggests that this plan works well for "classrooms, community groups, small nonprofits, or families."

✦ **Ning Plus:** A moderately priced option ($19.95 per month or $199.95 per year) that is positioned as a branded social network (with your own domain name), a larger set of features, and customization capabilities. Ning Plus permits unlimited members; it may be an excellent, reasonably priced solution for most businesses.

✦ **Ning Pro:** The high-priced solution ($49.95 per month or $499.95 per year), enhances Ning Plus with more features, better integration with other sites and social media, premium support, and additional bandwidth for users with sophisticated needs or heavy video usage.

TIP

According to its blog, Ning has found a corporate sponsor to subsidize Ning Mini networks for K–12 educators. Teachers and students in primary through secondary school can use Ning for free in their classrooms.

For a more detailed comparison of Ning's pricing, see `http://about.ning.com/announcement/plans.php`.

Marketing Your Community

Recruiting active participation to your community may require a marketing campaign of its own. Finding and keeping community members isn't easy. To increase participation, you might aggressively combine search engine optimization (SEO) techniques, invitations, and broadcast messages on Ning

with tried-and-true online techniques such as e-mail, reward programs, contests, drawings, e-newsletters, and calls to action on your Web site and on other social media pages.

REMEMBER

You must recruit actively and continuously. Unless social communities are nurtured, they may age quickly and lose members.

Using search engine optimization techniques

Ning gets you off to a running start with SEO by following the same best practices described in Book II, Chapter 2. Ning automatically provides descriptive URLs and content page titles, for instance. Keep in mind a few other important guidelines if you want search engines to find your Ning network:

✦ Your social network, except for some private forums, needs to be public, not just the main page.

✦ Make sure that your social network appears in search engines by submitting it to Google, Yahoo!, and Bing, as long as it has an independent domain name (see Book II, Chapter 2).

✦ Insert your keyword-loaded page description and primary search terms into the Keyword field of the Network Information section of the Manage page.

✦ Tag individual pieces of content with additional content-specific keywords in the Tags field for that item. (For the Events feature, the tag field is Event Type.) You then have the opportunity to broaden the list of search terms that point to your site.

TIP

Use traffic statistics to see which search terms people use to find your community site. Then be sure to integrate those terms into at least one page of your Ning community site.

Using traffic-building techniques specific to Ning

Ning offers several ways to promote your site to new members and to keep existing members in the loop:

✦ **Broadcast messages:** To send an e-mail to all members of your Ning network at one time, click the Broadcast Message link on the Manage tab. This helpful technique lets members know about new features and content.

✦ **Share specific content:** Go to the page that lists the specific item. Click the Share link and then More Options. Your members receive a nicely formatted HTML message along with a thumbnail or an icon representing the content or its creator.

✦ **Send invitations through Ning:** From the Invite tab, follow the directions to enter e-mail addresses or import contacts from your address book or e-mail client. Ask your contacts to upload some photos or videos to get them involved and to get your site up and running.

✦ **Use a Ning badge:** You can post a Ning badge on your Web site, like the one shown in Figure 2-13, or on other social media pages to link viewers to your Ning community. To create a badge, go to `http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=2901`.

✦ **Promote your site online:** Use Ning apps to connect to Twitter or Facebook or to embed media players on other sites. The Facebook app places Ning-branded content onto your Wall, including your logo, network name, and a link to your network. The Twitter app sends a shortened link and displays your network name whenever a member posts a tweet from within your network. Access and install both of these apps by choosing Manage⇨Add New Features.

Ning badge

Figure 2-13: Zork Planet invites visitors to its main site to join its Ning network by using the linkable badge and call to action in the right column.

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Ning

TIP Marry your Ning community to a loyalty program that rewards visitors for forum participation, blog postings, or creative uploads. You can do this with widgets for prize drawings or contests or use third-party programs, such as Loyalty Lab (`http://loyaltylab.com`), to award points that can be applied to a future purchase.

Measuring your Ning results

Use Google Analytics or another statistical package, as discussed in Book VIII, Chapter 1, to measure traffic to or within your Ning community, or to monitor traffic between your Ning community and your primary Web site. Other than installing Google Analytics on your Ning community, you don't have to do anything special to generate results — Google does it for you.

Ning communities are completely compatible with Google Analytics. To install this feature, go to `http://help.ning.com/cgi-bin/ning.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=3003`.

TIP For more information on Google Analytics, see *Web Analytics For Dummies,* by Pedro Sostre and Jennifer LeClaire.