Porsche 356 Registry Forum - options analysis - May 1, 2021

Introduction

The Trustees have selected ClubExpress (CE) as the platform for the new Porsche 356 Registry website. One of the most important website decisions to be made by the Trustees is a careful assessment and plan for our current 356Talk forum (established March 8, 2008) to ensure important data is preserved and our members are happy with the updated platform and service options.

CE includes an integrated forum capability, which we agreed will be evaluated as an option for 356Talk going forward. The following is a briefing for the Trustees to support informed decisions, however additional independent research, interviewing members, and/or a member survey may be reasonable before you vote.

What is 356Talk?

356Talk is an online member service accessed via the www.porsche356registry.org web site. It is a bulletin board software package which offers threaded conversations arranged into topics in a hierarchical structure. There are several components: 1) the software running the forum 2) a database holding all the configuration, text, user credentials, etc. and 3) storage for file attachments.

The forum serves multiple purposes. It's an interactive tool for members to exchange/archive information on approved topics related to the Porsche 356 Registry's mission. It serves as a tool for group conversations, 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world, on technical, historical, and personal topics of interest to the group and to establish/maintain relationships among members. At times it is a "chat room" of sorts, with members joking around with their friends. Volunteer Moderators keep conversations within bounds to maintain goodwill, eliminate offensive posts, and keep the forum posts organized.

Since all information posted is archived, since 2008 it has become a huge store of information on many valuable topics, especially on technical matters and member multi-year restoration journeys. Because it supports both text, photos, and other file attachments it is essentially a self-publishing platform for members to share their knowledge. It contains many posts with advice from experts who have left us.

Full access to the forum was listed on a recent survey as the primary reason about 25% of new members joined. Non-members may read the content, but must join the 356 Registry to post. The forum contents are searchable via google and other search engines. Because there is so much relevant content and people stay on the site for a long time, the algorithms rank the forum high in certain search results. This likely leads a number of people to discover the club...so the forum should also be viewed as a recruitment tool.

What is the history of 356Talk?

356Talk was first founded in the 1990's as an email "listserv" to connect Registry members. When emails were sent to a certain 356Talk email address, the listserv rebroadcast the email to a list of subscribers, either in real-time or in a "daily digest". Over time, the technology's limitations created a push that led to a transition to a web-based forum in 2008. Discuss of this can be found on www.thesamba.com in their forums, which preceded that of the 356 Registry.

> _President Chuck House announced in 2008:_ _"The 356 Registry's 356Talk email list has been around for nearly 15 years ever since Robin Hansen started it with help from Rick Dill. It has been a source of invaluable 356 information and camaraderie over the years for all 356 enthusiasts. From time to time over the past few years, discussion has occurred about changing the format of this list. There are some who prefer a bulletin board (BB) forum style while others prefer the immediacy of the existing email listserv. It was not a matter of old vs. new tech, instead it was about what worked the best for the subscribers. Unfortunately in the past, it was not possible to please both sides on this issue. However, I am happy to announce that you can now "have it your way". Thanks to the Herculean efforts of Brian O'Kelly with assistance from Barry Brisco, the 356 Registry will soon change to a system which will incorporate a fully featured bulletin board forum with the added capability to subscribe for email delivery. Therefore, those who want and have been clamoring for the BB forum system with its ability to post photos and better organize threads should be ecstatic and those who want to keep getting email like they have been getting can still choose to do so with minimal impact. It should be the best of both worlds."_

The transition to the current Forum was rocky, with users facing a learning curve and some acceptance issues.. Sadly, the contents of the 15 years of email based 356talk was not fully preserved; the text was moved into an archive database on the current website and without the photos/file attachments this historical information is much less useful. The 356Talk Archive has about 9500 threads containing from a few to 50+ individual posts… about 100,000 +/- posts total. That legacy 356Talk archive can be accessed and studied via this link: https://porsche356registry.org/archive

Today the Forum is actively used by an enthusiastic subset of our 6800 global members. Although it is viewed by some as archaic (Ron Ladow called it "steam powered" recently), if one investigates all the options available, (BB) forum software is the best option considering cost, long-term control of data, flexibility, and features. Our forum is based on phpBB® Forum Software; a free, open source BBS. www.pphbb.org This means we have full rights to use and modify the software, and this gives us the ability to continue to maintain all of the data (posts, threads, photos, files, etc.) for many decades if desired.

A few statistics on the current 356Talk Forum:

- Over 350,000 posts and 39,000 topics
- Over 70,000 file attachments (43GB); photos, diagrams, documents, etc.
- Average of 73 posts a day and 8 new topics
- Some topics have been viewed over 250,000 times
- User posting statistics (captured in 2020):
    - ~2800 users have posted > 5 times
    - ~1100 users have posted > 25 times
    - ~560 users have posted > 100 times
    - ~100 people have posted > 500 times
    - Top posters have posted nearly 10K time
- Typically more guests are viewing the site than members (Google analytics are not installed so we have no data on visitors)

Pros and Cons of the current 356Talk platform and implementation

Pros
- Substantial store of 356 related "intellectual property"
- Internal search and indexed by Google, Yahoo, and others; high search ranking
- Users are familiar with how to use the platform
- Open source platform
    - We own rights to the software source code
    - We can modify the code any way we wish
    - We have complete control over the data, forever
    - New features are being developed by open source community
- Relatively low costs
- Many plug-in enhancements are available

Cons
- Separate Forum requires extra costs and management complexity
- Integration to the main site for member convenience can't easily be as seamless as today due to limitations in CE Web Services.
- Currently has no functionality deployed to "like" a post; leads to "+1" posts.
- Expensive and difficult to migrate data to another software platform (true of all forums including CE)

Pros and Cons of the CE forum

Pros
- No additional cost for forum hosting or maintenance; "essentially free"
- Reduce management complexity vs separate forum
- Forums well integrated with membership database & permissions
- More features may be added by CE in the future

Cons
- Moving our existing forum data into the CE Forum is not practical.
  - ○ "Very expensive" and not recommended by CE
  - ○ All file attachments would be lost
  - ○ Usernames of past members would be lost (Charlie White, Ab Tiedemann, Joe Leoni, Mike Robbins, Pat Daily, etc.
  - ○ URL links within the forum will no longer work
- Our users and moderators will have to deal with learning the different CE forum.
- Little ability for the Registry to customize the Forum to adapt to future needs (If CE is willing to implement the requested changes, it would result in additional costs.)
- Because it's a proprietary platform; all the data is trapped within the CE database; our ability to move it out is limited, and we'd have to pay them $140/hr.

Options going forward - 3 main choices

1. Keep using the existing forum platform, as we do today.
2. Keep the existing forum as a read-only reference, start using CE forum for all new posts.
3. Have CE import text from existing forum to CE forum, shut existing forum down, use CE forum exclusively going forward

The choice isn't simply 1, 2, or 3 but also the timing. We could choose #1 during the initial phases of CE implementation and then explore options 2 and 3 for 2022 or 2023.

The Website and Technical Committee members recommend the Trustees choose #1, at least for the initial implementation of the new CE-based website. By focusing on the website portion we increase the chance of a successful launch and can focus on content and other potential user acceptance challenges such as finding "old" information in new locations, placing / answering classified ads, etc. We can later pilot and test the CE forum by soliciting member input, study results and consider a transition plan once the new site is up and running.

If we choose #2 or #3, these questions should be considered:

- What are the compelling arguments from the member perspective to change from the existing forum?
- Will our members accept the rationale of the Trustee decision? Will there be widespread dissatisfaction like when the forum was closed to guests?
- If the CE forum turns out not acceptable, some of our forum content will be trapped within it.
- If we choose #2, should there be a plan to extract or migrate data eventually to allow us to shut down the existing forum?
  - What will it look like, how much will it cost and who will do it?
- If we choose #3, is loss of photos and other context acceptable?
- Is it acceptable to lose the high search ranking of our current forum?