THECR NETWORK

Zero to Pilot: Building Community from the Ground Up

SNAPSHOT

SPEAKERS
Hillary Boucher (TheCR), Eileen Foran (Limelight), & Maria Ogneva (Sidecar)

COMPETENCIES
Strategy, Community Management

MATURITY PHASES
CMM1

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

TheCR invited two community leaders to discuss their case studies by sharing how they built their communities from zero to pilot.

1. Both Eileen and Maria stressed that it is imperative to invest in the timeline upfront. Eileen did not believe that she would have launched on time without it. Maria added that no matter how insane a timeline is, there is always room to step back and think; never come in and just start doing.

2. Eileen shared that a big lesson learned for her is that executive buy-in does not necessarily mean dedicated internal resources.

3. Maria shared that a big lesson learned for her is that focus is critical. Each week, Maria goes through an exercise of deciding on the top three tasks that absolutely must be achieved and focusing her efforts on ensuring that they are completed that week.

OVERVIEW

The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

Eileen Foran – Limelight Networks: Eileen was the first to share her case study:

- **Background**: Eileen is the Senior Community Manager at Limelight Networks. Limelight is a global leader in digital content delivery. A distinguishing factor for Limelight is that it provides a private Internet that offers a private freeway for quicker access to data.

- **Community Concept:** Eileen explained that the concept itself is new to Limelight and with that means a great deal of education. There were a few executive sponsors who – in their roles at other organizations – had either witnessed or participated in a successful community. Eileen did not need to convince them, but the rest of the company needed education and convincing.

- **Eileen's Role:** Eileen was hired to build a community that complemented their very aggressive new strategy, which was "customers for life".

  - There has been some history and turmoil regarding the support of customers and putting them first. The organization itself has transformed into a company that really understands the value of building and retaining its customer base. Accordingly, over the last year and a half, "customers for life" is Limelight's new mantra. There has already been a great deal of work done in the support and customer care arena. The third piece is the community.

  - Eileen was hired to educate and interview internally. In that process, she educated the executive staff all the way down to the actual participants in the community. Equal to that was customer education. Therefore, the pilot was limited to English-speaking, North American customers.

  - Many of these customers were not familiar with community, so when Eileen interviewed them she focused on what might help them with their own business goals by participating in the community. Community is Housed in the Marketing Department: Eileen explained that while she is located in the marketing organization of the company, this is not totally a marketing effort. That was a vital piece of communication that she stressed over and over again outside of the marketing effort. This has required education so that people within marketing understand that the community embraces all aspects of the company culture, as well as its customers and evaluators.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- As part of the pilot program, Eileen also tested and optimized their community platform. The community began with a platform that was fairly inexpensive. Even though that causes some pain points for Eileen as the community manager, she believes that it was the right decision because they need to prove the ROI on the initial investment before investing in more expensive platforms.

- An obvious part of community management – as well as the pilot program – was to maintain the content calendar. Eileen's goal was to keep content lively and to keep conversations going. That required Eileen to reach out to people outside of the marketing organization to create value for their customers.

- Lastly, Eileen is responsible for reporting and optimizing regularly. This included analytics and benchmarking with both quantitative and qualitative data.

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- **Community Approach:** The community approach for the pilot was almost the same approach that Eileen used to publicly launch the community. That approach was, first and foremost, to build relationships. There is a long and delicate process between introduction and building trust and transparency in regular relationships. The same is true for community. It cannot all be about self-talk which, quite frankly, is common with many marketing organizations. Instead, it requires the WIFM concept, i.e. what's in it for me?

  - Eileen accomplished this by interviewing internally and externally and finding the sweet spot for every single person she interviewed. Frankly, not everybody was a fit for the community, which was fine. If they did not have an interest or they did not think that they would participate, Eileen did not want them in the community. However, if they had an interest and they felt that the community could help them solve a business goal, they were invited into the community.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- **What's In It for Me?** Eileen uses this concept quite frequently. She does not believe that people can be motivated and excited and involved until they understand what they will get out of it. This applied internally and externally for Limelight's customers.

- **Training:** Eileen explained that since the company was not very familiar with the community concept, she felt that it was very important to train everybody who planned to participate in the community. This involved an hour-long training. It included best practices, a number of formal documents that they were required to read and adhere to and, of course, legal. Legal was daunting, but Eileen felt it was necessary to educate Limelight's internal team about possible legal ramifications, such as a violation of copyright laws or features/releases that were not yet made public.

- **Pieces in Place:** Eileen explained that once the platform was in place, she was able to get the internal contributors in place. They have select customers, content and programs. For the pilot, all of these things were important so that the company could benchmark and understand what resonated with the community.

- **Timelines from Zero to Pilot:** Eileen shared that she was hired in October and the pilot was planned to be released in December. Obviously, there was much to do in that short time. The only way Eileen was able to keep sane and achieve these goals was to have a rigorous, down-to-the-task timeline, as shown in the slide below:

OVERVIEW, CONT.
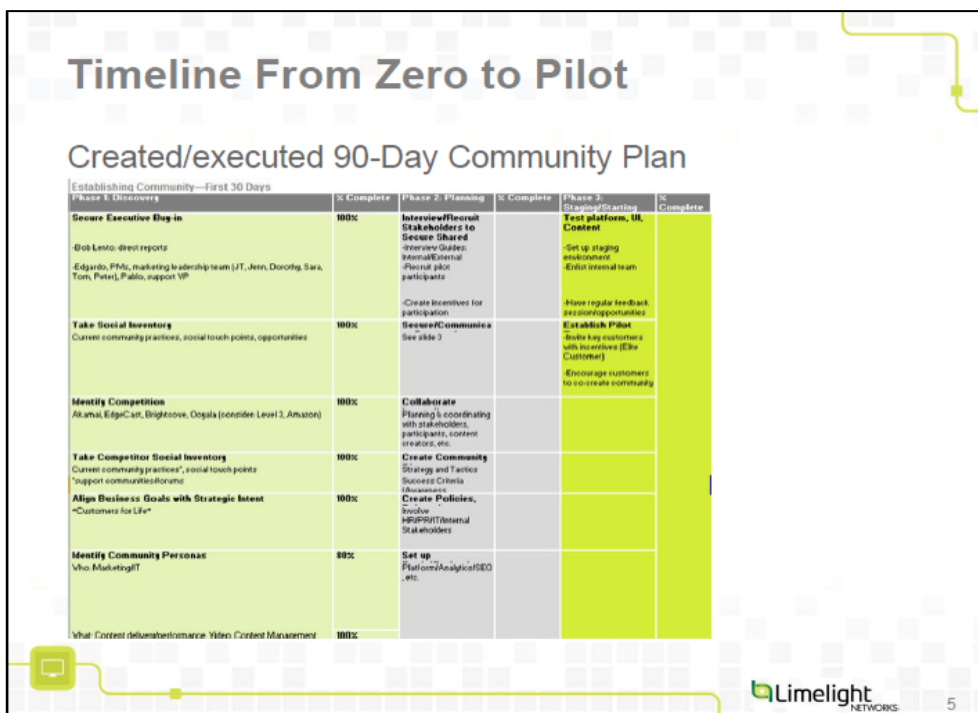
- Eileen believes that an investment in this type of timeline is critical. This timeline included feedback from her manager and her manager's manager. Eileen was able to execute on this 90-day community plan as a result of this timeline.
  - This is an example of the first 30 days of the timeline.

- **Status:** Eileen shared the current status on the pilot program:
  - They have recently launched publically.
  - They did some extensive awareness building and implemented a promotion program through multiple channels, such as social newsletters, Salesforce, etc. Eileen is the gatekeeper for posts.
  - All posts need to go through the administrator (Eileen) and the owner. Eileen has another person who reviews content before it is posted. Eileen plans to use this process for about three months to gain some benchmarking data.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- Eileen is testing the scalability of the platform. They purchased an inexpensive platform to begin with, but whether or not it will continue to scale remains to be seen. Eileen's hope is that they outgrow it.

- Eileen is working on formalizing a content calendar and analytics.

- Lastly, Eileen will set goals for FY14 second half.

Maria Ogneva – Sidecar:

Next, Maria shared her case study:

- **Background:** Maria recently joined Sidecar, which is a peer-to-peer ride-sharing service. The community is the company's product, which is a fascinating learning curve for Maria, who has been with Sidecar for about two months now.

  - Maria stated that she joined Sidecar because it is a very interesting community problem; the community has to motivate the market. The community is needed to motivate a group of people to basically be the company's supply of drivers – even though these drivers do not work for the company.

  - This is a huge undertaking because without the drivers, the company has nothing. The brand experience is fixated not just by what Sidecar professes itself to be, but by the experience that every rider has in the driver's car.

- **Sidecar Concept:** Sidecar is a community marketplace for people to give and receive rides from each other via their mobile phone.

  - For the rider, it involves much more transparency. Riders need and want to know upfront how much their ride is going to cost. Riders also want control over the ride experience because they can pick whichever driver they want.

  - For the drivers, they can pick the ride they want. Drivers are the primary customers of the community and, therefore, have more control over their experience. They can pick up riders on their commute to and from work, they can take short rides around their city, etc. They also set their own price.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- **Maria's Role:** Maria was hired to head up the community. Her biggest challenge has been the online strategy. Therefore, Maria pulled back everything and began to build an online community that was conducive to all of the drivers. She has worked to eliminate some of the fragments of a regional community approach that did not work.

- **Maria's Objectives:** Maria shared that she has two main goals:

  - Maria's first goal is to build the community alongside of the drivers. The community is how the drivers connect to each other and mentor each other. It is Maria's goal to help the drivers represent the brand values of Sidecar so that they can be successful. That means receiving value from being a driver, making money and being happy to be a part of the company. These drivers need to feel a sense of belonging to the community.

  - Maria's second goal is to strengthen and deepen the company's relationships with drivers so that they can become the type of company that truly puts community front and center. As mentioned previously, without the community, there is no product. The drivers are truly the backbone of the entire company.

- **Maria's Timeline:** Maria had about two months to pull this together. Adding to that pressure was the hovering fact that time is money in this business.

  - **Step One – Assess**: Maria stressed that no matter how insane a timeline is, there is always room to step back and think; never come in and just start doing.

    - Maria did just that – she pulled back, assessed, laid out the entire community toolkit and what was to be done and not done. For example, there was a regional Facebook group through which all communication was run. Maria felt that it was an organized disaster because it was hard to administer. Most of the drivers were not even in the Facebook group. While Facebook is great for engagement, it is not so great for communicating and aligning people around an initiative. Maria knew there had to be a better way. Maria did quite a bit of discovery work by talking to drivers, listening to problems, understanding where the drivers did not feel "plugged in" and also trying to understand the behavior flows that would be necessary.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- Next, Maria involved the internal stakeholders. She talked to the different constituents internally to gain an understanding of how they would interact with this online community and their team's goals for the community. She secured a commitment from the head of product, the head of engineering, the head of marketing and communications, the head of operations, the CEO and CTO to ensure that they would be active in the community. Furthermore, that there would be certain pieces of the business process that their team would own, such as product ideation.

- **Step Two – Plan**: The second step of this timeline was to plan. Maria and her team wrote a casual plan that they wanted included with the timeline. Fortunately, Maria was able to negotiate her proposed budget in its entirety. This budget looked at not just funding the online initiative, but also blending the online and offline national strategy and local strategy.

  - For the platform, Maria looked at demos from many community platforms. Maria was quite surprised at how this industry is still in its infancy. There is not a single platform that offered 100% of everything that Maria needed. She actually thought of building the platform, but did not feel – in the end – that it would be a viable solution. In some ways it was cheaper, but the cost of ownership was deceivingly high because of maintenance. Without a developer on her team, the proposition was too daunting. Therefore, Maria went with a hosted solution for the time being.

- **Step Three – Mobilize People Around the Idea:** Maria explained that their solution for this was to kickoff a community leadership program. The leaders in this program are called "captains". They are the best of the best from inside the community. It was important to build the community with them so that they felt a vested interest in it, not just something that was thrust upon them.

  - Another initiative within this program was mentorship. The premise was to encourage experienced drivers to mentor less experienced drivers as to what that should look like on and offline.

  - Alongside of this was internal buy-in, internal training and asking for early feedback on the platform as it progressed.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- **Step Four – Technology and Design:** Maria explained that it was very important to come together as a community engineering and design team to create something that looked like it belonged at Sidecar. The result was their online community, aptly named: "The Garage". Maria is hoping that it will become its own entity, a place where the drivers can connect with each other and the captains, receive tips from each other, share driver news and be a place for all the company's marketing messages.

  - Fortunately, The Garage has been off to a solid start. This just launched a week prior to this call and, so far, the drivers love it. Word of mouth is spreading and it is intriguing people.

  - Maria stated that she launched The Garage with some content and some FAQs, but she did not want to do too much as she wants this to be a community built by the drivers.

  - They are currently reviewing the on-boarding flow, the group structure and the kind of content that should be housed in this space.

  - Maria has created a private space for all of the captains to talk to each other so that they can strategically lead their city. Maria sees them as extensions of the company's community team.

- **Step Five – Growth:** Maria explained that they are not planning to announce that The Garage exists on mass – not just yet. They are inviting drivers in waves so that they can "kick the tires" and create something together that will work for them. Ultimately, it is their community.

  - There are very specific view stations that the company has outlined for the next few weeks. They are currently beta testing a product. For the people who are beta testing this new product selection, they have been invited into the Garage as a private group to give feedback and field questions about that product.

  - In Maria's opinion, finding these critical moments where the community can create these AHA moments is important as a way to make the community "sticky", i.e. to encourage people to come back to it.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- Maria stated that once she feels there is enough "goodness" in there, she will integrate all the channels. Her idea for keeping people plugged in is to have great content that will be included in their email marketing. Maria stated that their email marketing is very strong. Their email open rates are north of 50% every week and that is with several emails per week. In Maria's experience, email is a great way to lead people back to the community.

- The sign-up process has been simplified. Maria has worked with the engineering team to make sure that an account can be created at the same time that the Sidecar driver's account is created. They are attempting to remove any integration friction for the driver.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following is a summary of lessons learned as shared by participants within the discussion:

- One participant asked Eileen what the goals were for the output of her community (the results), as well as how she was able to measure them. Eileen replied that the high-level goal for the community is "customers for life". This includes retaining customers, building trust and transparency, providing a venue for these customers to ask Limelight questions and to ask each other questions. Eileen explained that Limelight's customers do not necessarily know who the other Limelight customers are within this community. They may be in different industries and they may have different roles, but they likely use the content delivery network in the same way.

  - The metrics used for measurement are engagement and activity. Eileen stated that they use quantitative and qualitative measures. The platform used has analytics tools that show which topics have been viewed most frequently. Google Analytics provides another layer of data, i.e. the number of questions or posts that have answers and high-fiving answers, approving answers, etc. That is a form of engagement. The qualitative measures are when someone says that a post helped them out or a thank you to a fellow customer for helping them work through a problem.

  - Eileen added that they were at the pilot stage and have just recently launched into the public community. As a result, they are still benchmarking. Each company needs to figure out for itself which criteria will work. Starting with a pilot helps with this understanding. It will not help the company to fully understand because exponentially there are more customers and evaluators once the site has gone public. But, in the pilot stage, it has helped Eileen to understand which topics resonated with customers and where they find value in their contributions to the community.

  - This measurement was not just about guessing. Eileen did some extensive interviewing and then catered the content around what was learned through the interviews to see if it actually resonated in real time.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Eileen was asked how this pilot launch might work if the community manager was hired mid-stream and not involved in the planning. Eileen replied that she could not really answer the question because she did not have personal experience. In fact, she makes a point of ensuring that there is thorough documentation throughout any planning stage so that someone could come in and pick up where she left off.

- Without that type of documentation, it would require extensive internal interviewing to help the community manager get up to speed. She would also hope that the expectations from above were reasonable for any person stepping into this type of situation.

- Further to the above, this same participant asked how the industry could educate people who do the planning and strategy work for communities to include the community manager role in the early stages of strategy implementation.

- Eileen agreed that having some kind of best practices in this area would be smart. However, companies are all over the place when it comes to the support of their communities, knowledge of their community, the expectations of what the community could accomplish and in what timeframe, etc.

- Eileen believes that education should occur in the interviewing process or on-boarding process.

- One participant asked Eileen if she used a phased-in approach for customers to help them test out the new pilot. Eileen replied that she described the pilot program to them.

  - They have had an incentive program internally with their account managers who nominated customers who they felt would be interested in participating in the community. They also reached out through TechValidate for customers to opt-in to be identified or contacted. They also used their e-newsletter to promote the idea of the pilot.

  - As a result of those efforts, they received several names of potential customers. Eileen still interviewed each one of them to make sure that they were a right fit and that the community that what they were building would help solve their needs and their business goals.

  - Frankly, some customers who were interviewed were not chosen as the interview revealed that they were not really interested in the community and that their daily jobs took precedence. Therefore, be warned that only a small percentage of those who state that they want to join the community will actually participate in the community.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Eileen shared her lessons learned from this pilot:

  - First of all, it is essential to be flexible and responsive to internal and external requests, feedback, etc. It is very important not to be reactive as that will cause problems later.

  - Secondly, executive buy-in does not necessarily mean dedicated internal resources. That was a huge lesson learned. Everyone has their day job. Eileen is finding that to be one of her biggest challenges.

  - Thirdly, finding out what's in it for the participants and finding a return on the investment is essential. That ROI can be qualitative and quantitative.

- Maria shared her lessons learned:

  - Focus is critical. Each week, Maria goes through an exercise of deciding on the top three tasks that absolutely must be achieved. Usually these items are related to the online community and the captains; everything else is just noise. Maria stressed that without focus, a project like this will cause you to feel overwhelmed.

  - Apply leverage to those tasks that can be assessed. Community is always in a position to bring forward all the items that are working and not working. It is a massive magnifying glass on your company. Some things are outside of your control, but they will manifest themselves in the community. Therefore, it is imperative to figure out where to step back and perhaps even let people fail. That is a hard lesson. (See the link to Maria's "Dark Side of Community" in the Resources Section).

  - Implement a concept that people can really get excited about, such as The Garage. Maria has never used a concept like this in the past, but it is proving to be incredibly helpful.

- Maria was asked about the percentage of people who followed through to be captains. Maria replied that it was between 90-100%. They approached it differently in that they had a group of informal captains prior to this launch. However, in this first pass, the captains did not have anything in it for them.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Maria did not get a chance to discuss this, but there are financial incentives for being a captain. This time around, they have set expectations – what the captains can expect from the company and what the company expects from them in return. It was written collaboratively. So, in essence, they already had captains that were interested in the concept, but were not properly mobilized because they did not know what they were supposed to do. They just knew that they loved Sidecar and the community.

- As such, Sidecar built upon that desire to be involved. They sent an email to their entire driver base to see who wanted to get involved and asked them to sign a form. They received hundreds of responses. Maria went through those responses and interviewed those with high ratings. This way, they also had fresh blood coming into the mentor program.

- One participant posed a question to both Eileen and Maria asking how big their pilot programs ended up:

  - Maria stated that they have about 50 people currently and are adding more the week of this call, as well as the following week. As part of their communication plan, they plan to communicate to their existing Facebook pages first, which are about 10% of their drivers. This will outline the communication plan and the timeline, as well as when they plan to shut down Facebook. This gives them a call to action, i.e. to create their account in The Garage.

  - Right now it is small; just captains. However, as they add the use cases, more drivers will be invited. There will be 30 beta testers for the new product feature mentioned above. Then drivers will be recruited based on interest.

  - Eileen shared that they had 20 customers and about the same number of internal participants. These participants were very technically focused and customer savvy. For the pilot that was just launched, they now have about 110 people. The split is, again, about 50/50. The current community is open to the public, so it does include customers and third party participants.