



Birds on a Wire: Programming for Knowledge Sharing Communities

 **SNAPSHOT**

SPEAKERS

David Scuito ([RSA](#)) & Hillary Boucher (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES

Content & Programs

MATURITY PHASES

CMM2, CMM3

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

David discussed successful engagement strategies for B2B customer and partner communities. The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

1. **“Birds on a Wire” is a hybrid engagement tactic.** It is used to engage phone conversations with customers and/or potential customers. It is similar to roundtable discussions hosted by a moderator who serves as the technical expert. The Birds on a Wire format is the same concept, except on the phone.
2. **Continue the conversation after the call.** When the Birds on a Wire call is over, invite participants to continue the conversation online. A good way to do that is to ask the expert who has been talking to them throughout the call to conclude with a question that he/she will discuss in the community. This is a great way to foster engagement with very little added effort.
3. **This type of format creates engagement and provides useful content.** A summary of the call should be created. If it is a long summary, break it up to provide additional fodder for other content that can be used over the coming weeks.

OVERVIEW

David is currently working on research for a doctorate in social networking in the education space to help new teachers with their professional development and personal learning networks. David has a passion for taking the strategies that work well in the education space and translating them into the B2B space. The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

1. **David's Background:** David is a relatively new member to TheCR, but has been a Community Manager for almost nine years. Eight of those years were spent with a company called NetScout in Westford, Massachusetts. He was their first and only community manager.
 - a. In David's doctorate research, he is employing a relatively new theory called "connectiveism".
2. **Reasons to Use the Birds on a Wire Format as an Engagement Tactic:** David shared some of the reasons why this concept would work for organizations:
 - a. This would be useful for those customers in technology as they do not have a lot of time to search for information online.
 - b. Birds on a Wire sessions can provide small companies with content.
 - c. The other reason to hold these Birds on a Wire sessions is to establish relationships with key community members. Active members in the community could prove to be helpful on customer advisory boards or community boards, etc.



BEST PRACTICES

1. **Work to Engage with your Customers:** David believes that this best practice is essential to success. Without customer interaction through the phone and/or in person, the customer is never completely engaged. In David's experience, many professionals – particularly engineers – rarely talk to customers. However, they should be doing this more regularly.
2. **Create a Content Calendar:** David has created a monthly content calendar. He calls several people during the month prior and asks them if they would be willing to contribute while also ensuring them that he is there to help. He then posts the calendar every week to the entire team of people who have agreed to provide content. This works quite well because if the person knows that they are on the hook for a specific time, it usually gets done.
3. **Follow These Steps to Implement a Birds on a Wire Engagement Tactic:** David offered the following steps for setting up a Birds on a Wire format:
 - a. Ensure a community of interest or practice is offered.
 - b. Include a committed expert.
 - c. Have access to a customer or community contact list (usually provided through sales).
 - d. Set up a conference line.
 - e. Recruit at least three participants with a maximum of 10 participants.
 - f. Include at least two hosts.
 - g. Announce the call through social media.
 - h. Ensure a specific topic is used for the call.
 - i. Let attendees know that there will be a summary of the call.
 - j. Invite participants to continue the conversation online.
 - k. Post the summary within 48 hours of the call.
 - l. Use quotes for further content.
 - m. Have a regular cadence for future meetings (Wednesdays and Thursdays work best).
 - n. Schedule calls at 12:00 pm or 3:00 pm EST.
 - o. Follow-up with attendees who asked questions.
 - p. Consider calls vs. webinars (more engaging).

LESSONS LEARNED

- David believes that the reason that most online communities fail is because of something he terms: “the Facebook anti-social media approach.” What this means is that today, most people are using social media – such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. – to stay in touch with people and never actually engage with them in any other way. However, social media is a means to an end. It is a gateway to community. It is a way to invite people to engage. That said, social media alone is not a full community, just like community without social media is not a full community.
- David shared that in some of his research regarding engagement, people generally engage in a community to gain some sort of notoriety by helping others, i.e. their reasons are more self-serving than altruistic. They are looking for specific information to help them do their jobs better. Accordingly, if the content is not there, they are not going to frequent that community.
- David cautioned that when first starting out with the Birds on a Wire concept, meet customers in their domain vs. where the company wants them to end up. As well, use more than just one tool.
 - Mature communities can be directed more easily, but members need to feel comfortable in the community, they have to frequent the community, they have to feel like they are a part of it and they must also be familiar with the tools. Start where the customers are and when they are comfortable, that is when they can be pulled to where the company wants them to be in the end.
- David inquired as to whether or not participants engage their customers on Twitter. One participant shared that they did create an official channel on Twitter, Facebook, etc. for governance processes. However, that was scaled out because it just added too much of a workload to already busy people; they didn’t put any thought or care put into the shared links or tweets. As a result, the company decided to offer training on engagement strategies that allowed for being more human-like online, as well as more open, more respectful and more authentic. A small amount of people took to it, but it has been a slow evolution and even a culture change as far as communication is concerned.
 - David acknowledged that we are in-between an older and newer culture of communication. That is one of the reasons that these hybrid approaches work. David believes social media should be used along with these hybrid approaches because with the changing demographics, there will be some radical shifts in communication, such as the elimination of email.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- David believes that the key to any kind of communication is to use all kinds of different communication tools. The more tools that people have to communicate with, the more engaged they will become because they will find something that works for them.
- Hillary asked if anyone on the call used a hybrid approach and whether or not it was successful. One member replied that he worked in a hybrid format with an advisory group. In one case, they reached out to a certain group of influencers who were in a specific part of the community. They were able to engage this group regularly on WebEx calls. It was coordinated by the company, but over time it became more and more driven by the agenda of the community. That was considered a hybrid because it became an avenue for live content that could be used to fill video feeds and foster discussion. So, there was a little more connectivity there. There was also an opportunity to extend that to live, face-to-face, global events. This participant sees a great deal of value in ensuring that the company has a hybrid model because it offers more a more human feel to the customer.
 - David felt that this was a good point. It is important to keep in mind that all participants on this call are reporting in some way to upper management and upper management wants to see numbers, trends, etc. Therefore, it is important to make sure that, as community managers, people are driven to the community to keep those numbers up. However, it is also important to educate executives and the management team as to the real reason behind community.
- One participant shared that they hold web chats on Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays. They also use polls (through WebEx) to make the call more interactive.
 - This participant has also recently initiated something called: “Office Hours”. They use WebEx and the back channel on the phone with experts from the product team, i.e. technical writers, support, architects, etc. The company is in the back channel, which is just a conference line. Customers come in on the WebEx chat and they ask questions. The team on the back channel decides who will answer the question. Afterwards, the entire transcript is posted in the community. This helps to build content, along with encouraging customers to answer questions. Another benefit of the transcript is that it provides value for future sessions and shows people that there has been participation. David thought that this was a great way to use all different kinds of media.