THECR NETWORK

Turning Brand Haters into Brand Advocates: Building a Conflict Resistant Community

SNAPSHOT

SPEAKERS

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COMPETENCIES
Culture

MATURITY PHASES
CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

1. **Conflict is neutral; it is not negative and it is not positive.** It is how the individual reacts to the conflict that determines either a positive or a negative outcome. That being said, it is also important to remember that we cannot control someone else's behavior; we can only control our own behavior.

2. **When dealing with conflict resolution, an important point to remember is that each and every person is made up of multiple roles and multiple experiences**. An individual's background is, therefore, brought to each conflict situation. The reason it is important to note this essential fact is that as the conflict negotiator, you are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. There is more underneath the surface that we do not see.

3. **Conflict resolution can be compared to hostage negotiation.** In doing so, there are three important elements to recognize:
   - Contain the situation (development of a crisis plan is crucial)
   - Expand the emotional pie (by taking time to truly understand the person and his/her wants and needs to be considered in the conflict resolution)
   - Build relationships (transparency will go a long way in building trust and rapport)

OVERVIEW

Jason is a Conflict Resolution Specialist, Mediator and Facilitator. His main focus is helping brands deal with their irate customers in the social media space in a way that takes people from a place of passionate dislike for the company to actively engaging in a positive way with the company.

Jason framed the discussion by stating that conflict is neutral; it is not negative and it is not positive. It is how the individual reacts to the conflict that determines either a positive or a negative outcome.

That being said, it is also important to remember that we cannot control someone else's behavior; we can only control our own behavior. The more that we deal with conflict, the better we will become at dealing with it.

To emphasize this last point, Jason used a guitar as an example. A child playing a guitar does not sound near as pleasurable as someone who has experience playing the guitar. It is the same instrument, but in different hands it sounds completely different. The same is true with conflict. In experienced hands, the experienced negotiator can actually turn the conflict into a pleasant experience.

BEST PRACTICES

The following is a summary of the various best practices that emerged from the discussion with members:

Understand that Individuals Bring Their Personal Background to a Conflict

Jason stressed that each and every individual is made up of multiple roles (father, son, husband, grandchild, coach, mentor, etc.) that comprise his/her background. Accordingly, when attempting to resolve a conflict situation it is important to realize the background that each person brings to the situation. When a person has an experience with a company they are bringing his/her individual background, heritage, education, prior experiences and even what happened that day to the situation.

For example, someone may have had a horrible day before they called a company and whatever conflict faced them when they reached the company was what put them over the edge. In other words, the conflict may actually be much greater than the immediate issue because of what that person has brought to the situation. For the person attempting to resolve the conflict, it is wise to understand this best practice as a way to more readily diffuse the situation.

Recognize that Every Conflict in Today's World Happens in Real Time

This is an extremely important best practice to keep in mind because every conflict has the potential to go viral in today's world. Social media has changed the way in which business is conducted. The benefit of this is that it has humanized companies that practice social media well. However, as those in this field are well aware, it also has the potential to backfire if not handled well.

Jason further explained that when dealing with customers in real time, we are also dealing with their passion in the moment, as well. To elaborate, Jason gave Wikipedia's definition of passion: "Passion is a term applied to a very strong feeling about a person or thing. Passion is an intense emotion compelling feeling, enthusiasm or desire for something."

In today's world, organizations are dealing with passion in the moment and that is creating a very different atmosphere and a very different role for conducting business because the organization could be dealing with the passions of very positive people or very negative people in real time. If the situation is experiencing negative passion, that person has not had the opportunity to cool down yet and could vent that frustration via Facebook, Twitter or other social media network. These individuals are waiting to be heard and waiting to be responded to, which really changes the dynamic for how a situation needs to be handled.

Distinguish Between a Troll and a Negative Comment

Jason believes that there is a difference between a troll and a negative comment. In Jason's opinion, he believes that oftentimes individuals will label a comment as coming from a troll because they do not actually want to deal with the negative comment. It is human nature not to like negative comments because part of what is being said rings true.

Jason feels that in many cases, a negative comment is not a troll problem, but rather a listening problem. We are not actually listening to what that person has said because we feel the negative hurt of it. Therefore, it is just easier to write it off as a troll comment. Jason stated that he would be willing to bet that perhaps only 20% of the comments that are thought to be troll comments are truly troll behavior. The good news in this is that there is actually something very constructive about negative comments.

Jason believes that the big difference between trolls and negative comments is that trolls have the intention to hurt; there is no value-add in their comments. However, in a negative comment there is a nugget of truth that can offer valuable information if one is willing to learn from it.

Others on the call offered their definition of trolls vs. negative comments:

- Trolls do not look for solutions. They are simply trying to release emotions whereas a true negative comment is given in hopes of finding some kind of solution.

- Trolls bring intentionality to the situation; they hope to stir up trouble. A negative comment from someone who is upset with a brand, even if they are not looking for a solution, are not purposefully trying to be hurtful.

- Another participant felt that the relevancy of a post, as well as its volume, helps to define a troll, as well. Someone who posts the same thing over and over on threads that have nothing to do with the situation is troll-like. Jason added that this is definitely true when the repeated comments are not on topic.

However, online is different than in person. When someone repeats the same thing repeatedly in a face-to-face conversation it is because they feel that they have not been heard. In an online situation, sometimes it is because the person feels that he/she has not been noticed yet, which could be the case for multiple reasons. For example, it could be because they are always being negative, which tends to turn people off. Sometimes the person just needs to be heard and sometimes they just need to be acknowledged for their opinion.

Think Like a Hostage Negotiator

Jason explained that The Harvard Business Review wrote an article describing hostage negotiators within the context of social media. There are three main elements in this description – to contain the situation, to expand the emotional pie and to build relationships:

- **Contain the Situation:** This can be very difficult to do, which is why it is important for organizations to create a crisis plan. In Jason's experience, not very many companies have a crisis plan. For those organizations that do have one, the employees often are not aware of it or how to use it. Therefore, Jason has the following recommendations:

    - First of all, take the time to develop a crisis plan. Jason has a free resource that can be used to help with this task (see Resources Section for the link).

        - As part of this plan, define what crisis means to the company, the business or the brand.
        - Know when to activate the plan.
        - Know the type of people that will be best suited for the team, the different levels that will be required, the different responses needed and the different types of conflicts that may be encountered.

    - Develop a checklist that can be used during the conflict situation. Post it on a whiteboard for everyone to see or have it readily available on the computer screen of the person who is tasked with the job of conflict resolution. A checklist is important because it is very easy to forget even the most obvious step when in a heated discourse. The checklist ensures that all the bases are covered and that the individual is able to work through the process smoothly.

    - Monitor brand mentions, as well some of the influential people within the organization. Even when people post on behalf of themselves, if it mentions anywhere in that person's bio that they are affiliated with a company, all posted comments are automatically associated with the company.

    - Be cognizant of the timing when it comes to containing the situation. Using the analogy of putting out a fire, proper timing could mean the difference between putting out a small fire using simple smothering techniques or having the flames so out of control that the fire department needs to be called. In other words, addressing the situation in a timely fashion is extremely important to ensure that the "flames" do not get out of control.

Using an example to illustrate his point, Jason referenced KitchenAid and an insensitive tweet from one of its community managers.

This mistweet was posted from KitchenAid's official U.S. Twitter account and poked fun at President Barack Obama's late grandmother. KitchenAid's Brand Manager, Cynthia Soledad, was quick to circumvent the situation as soon as she was made aware of the tweet. There are several steps that she did well in responding to this crisis.

First of all, she introduced herself and put a face to the company name. She was quick to react and by the time the tweet rose up through the ranks and evolved into a full blown crisis, she was already ahead of it. She immediately apologized, acknowledged the error, explained how she planned to deal with it and that the tweet was in no way a reflection of the KitchenAid brand:
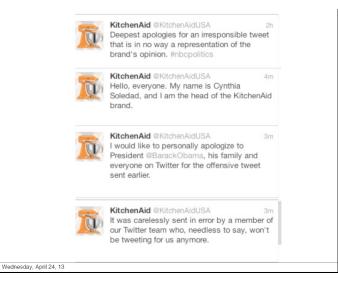

Figure 1 - KitchenAid Crisis Management Example - Slide 12

Expand the Emotional Pie

 Jason overviewed the steps involved at this stage:

● **Understand who you are in conflict with:** In-keeping with what was mentioned earlier regarding how everyone brings their individual backgrounds to a conflict situation, it is important to know who you are dealing with, i.e. their hot buttons. Conversely, what are the hot buttons for the organization and/or the person dealing with the conflict on behalf of the organization? Jason explained that whenever we are involved in any kind of conflict situation, we are deeply affected by it. It is so important for us to be knowledgeable and self-aware regarding it because that is going to help us when we are containing the situation. If we react, we are only adding fuel to the fire. The best way to diffuse a negative reaction cycle (people negatively responding to each other's comments) is to shift from judgment to curiosity.

● **Shift from Judgment to Curiosity:** The more that we are able to be curious about the situation, the less judgmental we will be towards an individual's comments. Whenever someone makes a comment, there is that gap between the actual comment and our response to it. If we react to a comment in the spirit of judgment, it causes a vicious cycle. If we are able to react to the comment with curiosity, it allows us to better engage with the person, diffuse the anger and get to the bottom of the real reason behind the conflict.

● **Understand the Difference between Monitoring and Listening:** In a social media situation, there is a big difference between monitoring and listening. Jason views monitoring as a passive activity. The community manager notices what is being fed through the Internet via mentions. Listening, however, is a very active task. Truly understanding the problem requires active listening vs. automatically assuming that we know what the problem is based on the background that we bring to the situation.

Jason believes that poor conflict resolution is a result of both parties not hearing each other, usually because emotions are highly charged.

● **The Iceberg Effect:** Most people are aware of the iceberg effect: we only truly see the "tip of the iceberg" and the real size of the iceberg is what cannot be seen under the water's surface. In other words, there is a great deal that we do not see when we are dealing with a conflict.

● **Understand Positions and Interests:** The point that Jason was trying to get across with this step is that people often come to a conflict situation shooting for the moon in terms of what they hope to gain and then settling for the stars. That means that the conflict negotiator should be asking the right questions through proper listening. The idea is to understand the other person's needs and wants and talk about what is behind these positions. When that happens a common ground can be reached between both sides. Reaching a common ground with common goals will help the negotiator work through the conflict efficiently so that both parties can get something out of it and an agreeable resolution can be reached.

Build Relationships

At this stage, the conflict negotiator has been able to contain the situation, has listened to the person, understands the problem and what is happening on the other person's end and is able to explain the company intent. As such, the negotiator should use words such as "Our intent behind this was to…". The idea is to build trust and rapport with the person. The more trust that has been established and the greater the rapport, the more willing the other person will be to hearing the words "no" if it comes down to that being the only solution.

Building a strong relationship and rapport requires transparency. Jason believes that that is where many companies fall short. A transparent company will foster a resilient community, which should be the company's goal. A great example of this type of practice is McDonalds. They have an "Ask" website for consumers to post any and all questions related to McDonalds. People post crazy questions, but McDonalds answers them all. Should McDonalds face a crisis, they will already have a resilient community. They are already giving answers to partially ridiculous questions, which has helped them to build relationships, trust and rapport with their consumers. They have already spent time ensuring transparency with their community.

LESSONS LEARNED

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

Jason asked participants to relay a conflict situation that mirrored the iceberg effect, i.e. the situation was not as it seemed and there was so much more to it that did not meet the eye.

- One participant explained that one of their clients is a company that provides roadside service. However, the subscription must be valid in order for the service to be instated. Unfortunately, a driver passed away in her car and the parents of this driver believed that the company was a fault. If the service had been working, they might have been able to save their daughter. However, the parents were missing the point that they did not activate or pay for the service. The family of the deceased driver was very public and socially active about this situation (an example of how conflict is expressed in real time in today's social world, as explained at the beginning of this call). It was a very difficult situation because even though the company tried to reach out and address the situation, it was not well received. Jason explained that this is a situation in which listening is of paramount importance because saying too much can open up the company to more backlash. The better we are at listening, the better we can be at closing the gaps toward a common ground in order to better understand and handle the situation.

- One participant asked Jason if he could give some practical strategies for talking to someone when he/she is very upset and the company cannot help, i.e. if there is a certain language that should be used in that type of situation. Jason replied that what he likes to do is reframe the issue and repeat it back to the person, not verbatim, but to at least show that he is listening and assuring the person that he/she has been heard. He also advised to avoid using the phrase "I understand" because in some situations, there is no way to understand what someone else has gone through unless he/she has actually walked in that person's shoes and experienced the same conflict (think of a cancer survivor, for instance).

Hillary asked participants to rate how comfortable they were – on a scale of 1-10 – with managing conflict:

For the most part, participants on the call were comfortable dealing with conflict, although many of them prefaced this reply by stating that the degree of comfortableness depended on their experience with the customer or client with whom they were dealing.