


Exploring Engagement: The Dance Floor Theory

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

1. Kevin asked everyone to visualize themselves hovering above a dance floor. What they would likely observe is the development of an engagement pattern. Let's say that the most engaged people are a "five" and the least engaged people are "neutrals". Those people who are the most engaged will aggregate towards the center. They will move closer together and will radiate the most energy. Conversely, those people on the edge will stand apart from each other with their arms likely crossed; they will not participate at the same level, nor will they emit the same level of energy. This will form a curve of participation. This same pattern of engagement be seen in community engagement.
2. In order to increase engagement, the idea is to move the neutrals up to the ones, the ones up to the twos, the twos to the threes, etc. There are cautions to this, however. Do not try to drag a neutral out into the middle of the dance floor with a bunch of fives. What will happen is that the fives unwittingly, but literally, attack the neutrals. The fives and the neutrals literally repel each other. This is an important insight for community management. The community manager must get to know who their fives are, as well as the rest of the people dynamics, in order to help effectively spur engagement.
3. Feelings are contagious through peer behavior. When people get in that conductive dance floor place, it is the actual movement of other people that triggers the mirror self. People feel enthusiasm and it spurs action in others. The key concept here is peer. People are far more influenced by those that they consider to be their peers.

 SNAPSHOT
<p>SPEAKERS Kevin Prentiss, Red Rover & Rachel Happe, TheCR</p>
<p>COMPETENCIES Culture</p>
<p>MATURITY PHASES CMM1, CMM2</p>

OVERVIEW

Kevin gave an overview of his Dance Floor Theory by first sharing his background to give the discussion context:

Personal Background:

Currently, Kevin is the CEO of Red Rover, which is Kevin's fourth company and his personal favorite. The world of Internet architecture and, more specifically, social architecture is a passion to which Kevin has dedicated his career.

Using technology to shape the human experience and, more broadly, the experience of humanity has been something that has always fascinated Kevin. He feels that it is an extraordinary opportunity in our lifetimes to help individuals meet their potential by organizing the community around them. Additionally, this can be structured in a way that could never have been done before due to the toolsets that are available today. Learnings that used to be trapped in language and conversation and phone calls are now trackable inside of these various technology tools.

Company Background

Red Rover has been in existence for approximately six years. They have worked with the Government and various branches of the military organizing the social architecture around bases, as well as several Fortune 100 companies.

Engagement:

Kevin felt that it was important to draw attention to the term "engagement". It is an idiom that has been overused and, as a result, carries some skepticism with it in terms of its meaning. Therefore, Kevin stressed that when he uses the term engagement, he is including the concepts of feelings (feelings of loyalty to the company, feelings of enthusiasm) as well as behavior. Kevin prefers to ground the definition in the behavioral concept because feelings are more difficult to quantify. Kevin feels comfortable in the ability to count actual behaviors in these social structures. For example, on a dance floor it is easy to count dance moves per minute. Accordingly, it is safe to say that highly engaged people will have a proportionately higher number of dance moves per minute.

The 8th Grade Dance

To set the stage for explaining his theory, Kevin asked everyone on the call to think back to the 8th grade and their first co-ed dance experience. The first thing that most people can relate to is the evident awkwardness – boys on one side of the gym and girls on the other side of the gym. The group that will usually commence dancing first is a group of girls. The girls form a circle with their good friends and that circle is so tight that it is impenetrable, especially by the opposite sex.

Kevin explored this image further: when people are asked what makes a good dance or a bad dance, 99/100 people will answer that the music makes or breaks the dance. However, Kevin would argue that it is relationships. Referring back to the group of girls above, if the relationships are strong enough in that circle of girls on the dance floor, the DJ could play the worst song in the world and it would not matter to those girls having fun in the middle of the dance floor.

Understanding the Curve - This is the key to Kevin's theory:

Engagement Pattern and the Curve of Participation: Referring back to the 8th grade dance (in actuality, this could be true of any dance), Kevin asked everyone to again visualize themselves hovering above the dance floor. What they would likely observe is the development of an engagement pattern. Looking at Slide 4 on the left hand side below, let's say that the most engaged people are a "five" and the least engaged people are "neutrals". Those people who are the most engaged will aggregate towards the center and radiate the most energy. Conversely, those people on the edge will stand apart from each other with their arms likely crossed; low participation and low energy. This will form a curve of participation – Slide 5 on the right hand side. The interesting thing about this curve of participation is that it does not matter which country, which language or the type of music being played; people will always arrange themselves in this pattern. This is known as "Pareto's Curve".

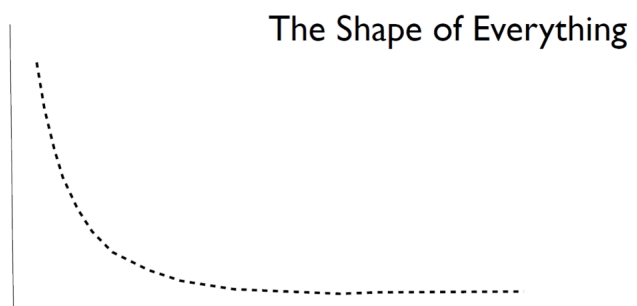
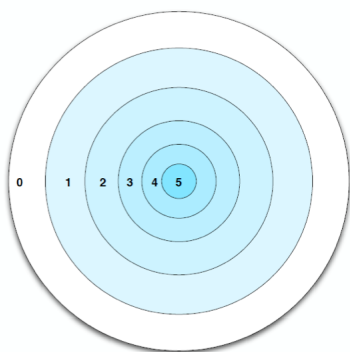


Figure 1 - Engagement Pattern and the Curve of Participation - Slides 4 and 5

Rachel asked if the curve would be different in a Greek wedding, for example, where 80% of the guests would be dancing vs. a German wedding where perhaps 20% of the guests would be dancing. Kevin replied that the curve would be different, but the shape of the curve would be the same. This is a common shape for just about anything. It could be the shape of economic distribution – the rich get richer because they are rich. Now, different cultures across the world will have a different curve on what percentages of people are participating at a high rate or what percentages of people are participating at a low rate. Nevertheless, the curve will pretty much stay the same.

Observation Number One: Many feedback groups of similar engagement create the engagement curve.

In other words, the fives get excited. Fives have a feedback loop that contains a great deal of energy. Kevin likens it to a dance floor with a microwave nuclear pile where individual personalities could be conductive, semi-conductive or resistant to the energy that is available. The DJ's job is to literally take power out of the wall, turn it into modulated wave forms that are supposed to resonate and excite individual people to the point where their bodies move and jump around so that they can react with each other and form these positive feedback loops of engagement for fives, fours, threes, twos, ones and possibly even the neutral side.

Kevin wanted to point out a couple of important points when looking across the dance floor at this point. The fours and the threes and the twos are there to protect the neutrals from the fives because if they are not there as a buffer, the lower energy, less engaged people will unwillingly be pulled onto the dance floor, become embarrassed and either simply remove themselves from the dance floor or, worse, go home. Using the analogy of a community manager as a DJ, it is important to welcome every state of engagement, embrace it and move it around gently.

The most important point in this observation is that feelings are contagious through peer behavior. When people get in that conductive dance floor place, it is the actual movement of other people that triggers the mirror self. People feel enthusiasm and it spurs action in others. The key concept here is peer. People are far more influenced by those that they consider to be their peers.

Observation Number Two: Smaller dance circles make up a dance floor.

There are many small dance circles that make up the larger dance floor. Again, going back to the 8th grade experience, the neutrals will congregate in circles often to make fun of the fives. The ones will nod their heads in little circles. Those are usually based on relationships that were pre-existing. Individuals will form small groups of engagement at the state of engagement that is most comfortable for them. It is the aggregate of all those small groups that makes up the average of the dance.

Input → Process = Output Model: On the dance floor, the input is the music plus the context. The context is the lights and the other elements of the space. The process is all the people and their individual personalities and all the things that happen between people in their relationships that equals the aggregate engagement. Kevin explained that if the music is great and the people aspect is figured out, engagement will be high. However, what typically happens is that the people “stuff” gets in the way (the person does not know anyone, has a fear of looking silly, may lack skill, persona, etc.). Usually, alcohol is added to bridge the unease. It is easy to appreciate the myriad of ways that humans can mess up this process. In general, it leaves people feeling the need for alcohol to improve the engagement of the output.

There are other ways, besides alcohol, that can be used to help improve engagement. This would involve the individual introducing himself/herself to others in the crowd, to find out more about the other person and continue this process while also introducing others to each other. If this happens, it creates a culture that is full of connected relationships, which has the exact same psychological effect as drinking. It makes people feel more comfortable. It also makes people more susceptible to peer influence while increasing the efficiency of the process so that that same input (the same music) can improve the process if the relationships are strong enough. In this scenario, even a little bit of bad input will lead to high levels of engagement. Relating this to a community, the process of strengthening relationships is one of the major levers in a community.

A simple way to remember this is to think of a spatula. Imagine the dance floor as a mixing bowl with the hot in the middle and the cool on the edges. The job of the baker (or the community manager) is to gently reach out to the neutrals and mix them in with the ones, the ones with the twos, etc. Ensure that the mixing is not too strong (as explained earlier – do not mix the neutrals with the fives or the neutrals will be scared away). Gently mix the batter (community) and pay particular attention to the overall dynamics.

Rachel added that the best KPI for community management is how many introductions can be made in a day. Kevin completely agreed.

BEST PRACTICES

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

Understand the Engagement Pattern in a Community:

In order to increase engagement, the idea is to move the neutrals up to the ones, the ones up to the twos and the twos to the threes. There are cautions in this, however, as explained above. The fives and the neutrals literally repel each other. A neutral will try to get back to their neutral zone as fast as possible because like states of engagement attract like states of engagement. For people who are in a state of neutral, it is more comfortable to hang out with a state of neutral. They may be able to be bumped up to a one, but it has to be gentle and there has to be some connection.

This is an important insight for community management. It is important for community managers to know who their fives are within the community, as well as the rest of the people dynamics, to help spur engagement. The fives are likely the ambassadors or the super users, but they need to know how to speak with those who are less dynamic in their contributions so as not to turn off others. Knowing these people dynamics will help the community manager to foster engagement.

Measure based on Learning – Validate or Invalidate the Experiment:

Eric Ries termed a phrase called “Innovation Accounting”. Basically, it is important to measure the cause and effect between the input and the outcome. It is not enough to measure what was done because you can do a lot of things that do not work. Therefore, through experiments, the cause and effect can be measured between the input and the outcome.

The Innovation Accounting model is made up of three distinct but overlapping pieces:

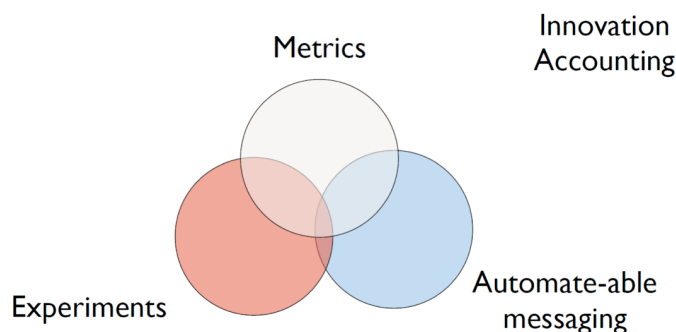


Figure 2 - Innovation Accounting - Slide 31

The first piece is the metrics. Metrics can be measured using Google Analytics or the analytics package of any technology tool.

The next piece involves the experiments. It is important to have a place to brainstorm, i.e. a place to house all of the experiments, along with their ideas. Preferably, the ideas should be focused to the experiment. For example, if the community manager is focused on activation and helping users to create their profile for the first time, the ideas are focused to that specific metric. Kevin stressed that experiments are far better when they are focused on a specific metric.

The last piece is automatable messaging. By automatable, Kevin stated that once an experiment has created a successful loop (the goal of the experiment has been achieved), the loop needs to be automated. As an example, perhaps the experiment produced a successful on-boarding experience for new employees.

The experiment was one that sent an automated message to the new hire two weeks after he/she began working with the new company. This message asked for tips that he/she may have for other new employees, perhaps something that was learned on the job that would have served them better to know in the on-boarding process. In this experiment, it yielded a 50% response rate to that question, which was deemed adequate. It was decided that as long as the 50% response rate was met, the system would send out the question two weeks into an individual's new job. As long as it lands two weeks after people start, the answers are sent back to a board. The brand new employees receive these tips on their first day. It is a simple engagement loop of content where the content is harvested. The HR leader can curate it if he/she wants to and then it is distributed back to the people to whom it would be relevant (the new hires on their first day).

The whole flow from harvesting to curating to distributing makes one tiny dance circle that can be automated because it is easy to create an on-boarding bot that has a pre-determined trigger. The trigger is the 50% participation rate. Kevin stated that this is a dance circle that is fully working and as long it keeps getting the input on the time trigger that has been defined, it will continue to work.

Kevin shared that there is a huge opportunity in the very near future to be able to define the context with enough data to be able to use a copy and paste function to share this across the organization or across companies. In other words, if the experiment is validated in one organization that action can be copied and pasted from one organization to another. It will become a recipe that can be shared.

Use the CRM System to Increase Engagement: As already mentioned, it is imperative for the community manager to understand the engagement pattern of his/her community. Before addressing the community, it is important to know who the fives are, who the fours are, etc. because there are very different motivations behind the personas of each of those levels and it will require a very different conversation.

Kevin's company has patented a tool called "Intercom". It takes all of the activity streams of all participants inside of the CRM. The tool will tell them if somebody makes five posts, as an example. According to the pre-set criteria, this would be considered a motivated persona. As a result, this person would receive a conversation that fits his/her psychological profile. There is a live auto message that is sent out when a person meets a certain criteria. When that happens, they are awarded a badge. The individual is updated to a leader level, meaning that the community manager can now ask different engagement type requests of that persona. Since the individual has been given notice that he/she has been upped to a different level, it gives the community manager permission to talk to this individual differently. That is a strong best practice for moving people from the threes to the fives, i.e. to ask them for their help and to implement their feedback in different, meaningful ways.

LESSONS LEARNED

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

- Rachel brought up the point of cliques within communities. Kevin welcomed this because it is such a huge part of our social system. Kevin shared that they create “blender events”, which is the idea of a blender to break up the cliques and spread out the engagement. For example, when he did some work with the Navy, they were struggling to help sailors to break out of bad cliques (the rowdy crowd) and focus those energies into a more positive social clique (such as fixing cars or something that would prove more useful to the community and the individual overall). Kevin and his team did a lot of work mapping the current cliques and helping them to create new connections and new cliques. Cliques are a great place to start because they are a source of energy and feedback. The danger is that communities can get stuck in cliques, which benefits no one.
- With respect to the experiment piece of the Innovation Accounting model, one participant noted in the chat that some communities will take off on the first experiment and other communities may take quite a few experiments to find success. Mark shared that Trello boards are essential. They help to track all of the raw hypotheses, which is very important because there needs to be a place that can house all of the ideas in one spot. This helps the team to focus.
 - When Kevin uses this method, he color codes all of the metrics. For example, with an activation metric, yellow is activation and orange is engagement and red is referral. This is based on the high-level business strategy, which helps them to focus on the activation steps that were validated. This way they can see which experiments worked to get people to sign up for the platform and which experiments did not work. It is all part of the learning process; the validation and invalidation part of the Innovation Accounting model.
- Kevin stressed that activation and retention are two very distinct goals. Using the Dance Floor Theory, getting people to the dance is the activation. It does not really mean much. People showed up, but that does not mean that they will dance. In the community analogy, people may have activated their profile, but that does not mean that they will participate. Retention is the goal of getting people to participate and stay.

- Rachel stated that one of the things that she likes about Kevin's work is that it recognizes the importance of the initial behavior change that is needed in organizations. That behavior change then draws in everyone else, but it is something that is missed with many vendors. Rachel believes that communities have the opportunity to change the cost structure of a business process. However, that will never be accomplished without some type of significant behavior change that optimizes whatever it is that the organization is trying to do, whether it is learning or marketing advocacy, etc.

- Kevin added that there is an appreciative inquiry model surrounding change management where one of the things that he is excited about with social architecture is the ability to change behavior by surrounding a person who is not yet engaged with people who are relevant and slightly more engaged. So, if the neutrals can be surrounded with the ones and the ones with the twos, etc. it does not actually change what is happening, but they are changing the organization or the visibility of what is happening. For Kevin, that is a very exciting direction.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Rachel asked participants to describe which engagement technique that they used within their communities that ended up surprising them because they actually worked:

- One participant replied that they picked five members of their community at random and sent them each a personalized post card as a means of reaching out to touch base. In doing so, they saw engagement pick up by almost 35%.
- As expressed by another participant, they worked on the theory that people will more easily discuss hot topics and areas of concerns with their peers vs. management. Therefore, they asked their super users to put their ears to the ground and feed information back to the community managers, which has been quite successful.
- Another surprise shared by one participant regarded an in-person meeting held at the company's home-base city. However, since they are a global community, they sent a link out to members to see if anyone would like to host a similar meet-up in his/her city. They had a significant number of responses (40 or 50 people) reply. The surprise was that the people who offered to do this were not all that active in the community. However, they were clearly identifying with the community and felt that it had value.
- Another participant oversees an IT-based community that is very slow to participate. They uploaded a post regarding how to tune up the outflow property to receive less trash in an individual's inbox. It was surprising how many people contributed ideas.
- One participant said that she ran an award program to coincide with the Oscars and pitted the communities against each other. They received a high-level of responses and it stoked the competitive spirit of the communities. This participant was shocked because she thought the idea was kind of cheesy – but it worked!
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- Incorporating video into the forums helped one participant to increase engagement.
- Another participant shared that she was surprised when a sales employee for a hardware store posted the question: “What size tool from your store would you grab if the Apocalypse came knocking on your door?” It garnered a great deal of attention from everyone. It was fun, it was funny, and it was unplanned. However, it was one of those organic actions that brought attention to the platform.
- As shared by another participant, their in-person meet-ups were dwindling in attendance, so they shifted the meetings online. This helped increase participation and engagement.
- A simple action shared by one participant is to use the word “invitation” when corresponding with others. Using this word has helped to increase the open rate in email campaigns for this participant.
- A monthly member spotlight helped one participant increase engagement within her community. The individual in the spotlight earns a badge. This helped engagement as people wanted to be that person with the badge each month.