



# Best Practices for Presenting to an Executive Committee, a Board of Directors and/or a Steering Committee

## SNAPSHOT

### **SPEAKERS**

Jennifer Honig, Techstra Solutions and Georgina Cannie, TheCR

### **COMPETENCIES**

Leadership

### **MATURITY PHASES**

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

## TOP FOUR TAKEAWAYS

The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

1. Jennifer asked each Panelist to share their main points for this topic:

- Roland stated that the meeting is definitely about presenting an opportunity, but also a time to ask for input and guidance so that the executive takes some ownership in the project.
- Greg shared that it is important to connect the actions taken with the community to the value that it provides to the company.
- Christie’s main message was to “Be Prepared.” Know your data better than anybody else. As well, understand the true business drivers and the reason for the community’s existence in the first place.

2. Preparation is a selling opportunity for the community. It involves building relationships, understanding people’s points of view, understanding what they value and how the community can deliver on those values.

3. It’s important to view resistance or push-back from the executives as a positive sign vs. something to be afraid of or a sign of failure. It means that they are engaged.

4. Do not over-communicate. Less is more, especially with executives. Succinctness is key.

## OVERVIEW

The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

**Background:** This was the fourth call in a series of calls for the Social Executive. The goal of these calls is to focus on the executive's perspective on social community and business value.

- What has been discovered in this series of calls is that oftentimes the executive's perspective is very different from the perspective of community leaders or community managers. Thus, it is really important to understand the executive's perspective because how you tailor the conversation, how you approach the conversation and the data that is brought forward will have a direct impact on how that information is received.
- This call focused on how to present to an executive committee, a board of directors or a steering committee in order to make the most of the opportunity. In doing so, Jennifer set up a panel of speakers experienced in this topic to share their best practices and lessons learned.

Jennifer shared three observations that she had about the Panelists and their approach to this topic:

- These panelists approach the topic as a journey. In other words, the executive meeting is like a point in the continuum as opposed to the destination.
- The panelists are strategists who carefully orchestrate their moves in order to maximize their impact when they present to the executive audience.
- The panelists arm themselves with knowledge in many different forms and functions. They are confident, empowered and accountable. All of these key elements bring something special to the event and they are, therefore, able to get the results necessary to move their initiative forward.

## BEST PRACTICES

The following is a summary of the various best practices that emerged from the discussion with members. Prepare for the Three-Step Meeting Process: Jennifer outlined a three-step process, which the Panelists spoke to in detail:

### 1. Preparation

The Panelists approach this step from a strategic standpoint by preparing and considering all possible elements of the upcoming conversation with the executive. As such, Jennifer asked each participant for their thoughts on whether or not they took into account the executive's perspective and how it influenced their preparation:

- Roland believes that, in general, executives do have a different perspective than community leads, mostly because they play a different role in the organization. Some community leaders are fortunate enough to have a senior executive who is quite knowledgeable about the value of community, but that is the exception, not the rule.
- A good way to frame this question is to think about the senior executive approaching the conversation very focused on the highest level business goals associated with the company. These would be goals such as generating revenue, fostering innovation, reducing customer churn, etc. There needs to be a benefit to the company. In comparison, community leaders weight their perspective much more on "What does the community get from this investment?" Roland believes that it is the dialogue between those two perspectives that tends to foster the business plan or the framework for investment in community.
- At the end of the day, the community leader needs to help the executive to appreciate the business needs that he/she is trying to solve for the community and not just the company's needs. For a community lead to be successful, his/her customer is the community. Therefore, they need to understand and have empathy for that which the community is looking to achieve. That said, community leaders do work for the company and they need to find ways to address those business goals that are important to the senior executive. That is how the perspective differs. How polarized that is at the company will really depend on the track record of those individuals. Those who are fortunate to have an executive who has experience with community and who sees the value upfront enjoy greater success. They are also poised to push the envelope of possibility.

- Christie added that, basically, if you are engaged or hired by a company, it is because they need to achieve some form of revenue from your services. Every role in the company is there to either make money or help to make money for the company. Therefore, it is the community manager's job to make sure that the community contributes to that goal. To achieve that, she makes a point of trying to understand the fundamental business drivers for the company and the business need for having a community. The answer to that question will help community managers to always have these conversations with the executive. The community only exists because the executives and the company believe that it can help them in some way. Perhaps it is through raising awareness, "free marketing", customer support, goodwill, etc. There will be some fundamental, underlying reason for having a community in the first place because they have to pay you a salary to do this job.
- She also stated that when it comes to measurement, her analysis work always drives back to the above goal every single time. That is the fundamental, underlying key to helping the executive see the value of the community.
- Greg agreed that it is very important to be thoughtful and intentional about the "ask" of the meeting. Therefore, the preparation step should position that very early on in the conversation. In fact, it should be the point from which the context of the meeting is built. Furthermore, ensure that it matches up with the expectations and purpose of the meeting. The last thing you want is for the executive to have a completely different expectation than what was planned as the presentation, especially if action from them is required. Be upfront with that because executives have limited time and a limited attention span.

## 2. The Meeting

Jennifer asked participants to share how they handle the actual executive meeting:

- Building on what Greg discussed in the preparation stage and preparing the “ask” early on in the discussion, it is important to be able to read the conversation and look for sign posts. If possible, gather some intelligence about the people you will be speaking with (i.e. know your audience). As you convey your message, look for active, non-verbal signals, as well as the tone and responses to questions. Are these sign posts corroborating what you are conveying or do you need to make adjustments? It is important to be flexible to adjust to what is happening in the meeting.
- He also coached participants to view resistance or push-back from the executives as a positive sign vs. something to be afraid of or a sign of failure. It means that they are engaged in the topic. Greg is actually more nervous if there are not any questions. The push-back is an active sign that they are paying attention and they are invested in the discussion, especially if they are asking for clarification or expressing a different opinion. Ultimately, that resistance is a tool to help you to adjust your message. Often the goal is to get everyone aligned, but it is a process. Resistance to the message or the specifics of the message can ultimately be very helpful.
- Roland advocates succinctness in the telling of the story, i.e. “the ask”. You do want to make sure that you give the executive an opportunity to ask questions because when they do that, they are essentially shaping the project and taking ownership of it. If they feel like they own it and have influence over its direction, they will be much more emotionally attached to the program and be more likely to invest and support it.
- He also recommends asking the executive a question that requires them to answer with an outline of what he/she would do in a certain situation. That forces him/her to engage with you and see things from your perspective.
- Christie stressed the importance of succinctness, as well. She relayed a story about a meeting she had about three and a half years ago when she was in front of an executive board and actually over-communicated. She stated that she gave away too much information and it took the meeting off track to the point where the executive started debating whether or not they even needed a community.

### 3. Follow-Up

Jennifer asked participants to share what they do after the meeting, particularly with respect to responsibilities, accountability and timing of the next meeting in order to build momentum:

- Christie stated that, in her opinion, the follow-up step is the main reason for the meeting. The follow-up step is what helps you to sell community because it keeps you and the community in the forefront of the executive. The community manager is the salesperson for the community. It is up to him/her to help the executive to see the value that the community brings to the organization.
- As an aside, she said that she enjoys using random samples. She recommends that community managers get in the habit of doing the same. Instead of trying to speak to and understand 10,000 members of a community on an individual or even hierarchical basis, use a random sample. Send a survey out to a segment of the population and pick 15 random answers to help build an analysis. That data will show a trend. When presenting to the executive, speak to the trend and let him/her know that you can conduct a more wide-ranging survey of a larger proportion of the customer base/community in order to fully understand the number.
- Numbers can help, but you truly need to understand the business question in order to be realistic. It is impossible to know everything, but there are ways to figure out various answers. For example, if the executive vaguely asks about increasing marketing awareness within the community, it is up to you to figure out the KPIs to get at that answer. Truly try to understand what the executive is asking for and then talk to people (especially within his/her circle of influence) to determine a baseline. Then look to the community to see how it can help.
- Community managers are continually testing new concepts. These new concepts might not work or they could work really well. Take the information and go back to the executive and say: "This is what I did. I created this KPI and did this analysis and I think we can move forward to this level." Executives love this kind of data.
- After you leave the meeting, send an email clarifying what they need. They need to hear that you are actively driving a possible business change that will potentially impact revenue or the bottom line. You then set your targets for those KPIs and prove that those KPIs can be met because of the random sample or other type of analysis. Adjust or discontinue as you find what is working and what is not working. forward and execute on it.

- After you leave the meeting, send an email clarifying what they need. They need to hear that you are actively driving a possible business change that will potentially impact revenue or the bottom line. You then set your targets for those KPIs and prove that those KPIs can be met because of the random sample or other type of analysis. Adjust or discontinue as you find what is working and what is not working.
- At the next follow-up meeting, offer the following: “This is what I’ve done and based on this experiment, this is the result. Would you like me to continue?” Executives love that because they gave you a pie-in-the-sky concept, but you proved to them that the community is viable. The power that comes from that is invaluable. Knowledge is power.
- Greg advocates leaving time at the end of the meeting to clarify action items and next steps. Confirm and clarify what the action items are – specifically which action items you will be responsible for – in order to circle back to those items and demonstrate progress. This is the opportunity for you to demonstrate that you received the feedback and/or direction that was provided during the discussion and that you will move forward and execute on it.
- Tell a Story when Presenting to the Executive: Roland thinks of the preparation step as preparing to tell a story. Every good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. He tends to structure his presentation in a way that sets the conflict upfront in the beginning of the story. It usually begins with “What’s not working today?” Or “What opportunities are being missed?” Or “What is the business problem?” Roland will then focus on trying to “build the pain” upfront because great stories begin with a conflict. The rest of the story is about resolving that conflict. For Roland, that is the first part of establishing a business case.
- From his perspective, planning is really about creating a business case that takes the form of a conversational story. This helps to engage the executive. Collect stories and use cases and consolidate those into a larger narrative.
- Roland will typically talk about not just how they can make money, but also how they can save money.

- Next, Roland will break down the investment that is required into cash investment or capital investment vs. human resources investment. He will attempt to have everyone involved agree upfront on what success looks like, i.e. to paint that picture. Try and envision what success looks like and then tie that vision of success to some metrics that will resonate with the executive.
- A business plan also needs to depict the rollout of the plan over time. Furthermore, establish with the executive when you will follow-up and what will be achieved by the planned follow-up. By adding this step, it says to the executive: "I'm going to be coming back to you for additional investment." It highlights that the story is iterative.
- Roland highly recommends distilling the story down to no more than 10 slides. Remember that you are talking to an executive. At any one time, you might only have their attention for 15 or 20 minutes. You will not be able to tell every story. You need to tell representative stories. You can point to the fact that there are more stories that sit behind that one representative story.
- Supporting material can be put in an appendix to be referred to as you respond to questions. Part of your preparation is having everything fully loaded into your deck so that when asked a question, backup documentation is available to help you quickly respond to those questions. It also demonstrates to the executive that you are credible and fully prepared.
- Lastly, it is very important to understand the personality of the executive. Know their respective personalities and goals.
  - Greg believes that Roland's last point is critical, i.e. understanding the micro culture of the executive group. Know the pain points, hot buttons and their language so that the message can be tailored. Otherwise, you may have a great story or great pitch, but if you cannot connect in a way that speaks to that executive group, you may miss the mark. Therefore, Greg recommends some time spent upfront doing some data gathering on the micro culture of the executive group as a critical step.



## LESSONS LEARNED

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

- Roland shared that in his experience, the preparation step is not just about a single executive. In reality, there are usually about a handful of people who surround that executive and have a great deal of influence. If you approach that story in an iterative way and recognize that that story will evolve with feedback, you can leverage those people who surround the executive. You should be pitching to each one of them before you get to that one key executive decision-maker. They will be able to give you the information needed to tell your story in a way that connects with that executive. The other benefit is that when you finally get in the room with that executive, everyone else in that room is already on your side. The executive will turn to support from his/her circle of influence and you will already have their support. The meeting becomes more about formally acknowledging an agreement and less about trying to convince everybody.
- Christie agreed. Community managers are usually curious and interested about other people, so it should be natural for them to want to engage other people. But, it can be quite difficult as you go up the chain to even get a meeting with a particular executive. Christie also looks to achieve little wins for people across the organization with community. For example, if she happens to be in a meeting and people are complaining about the same thing, she can approach that in a way that does not attempt to force a meeting. Instead, she can present it as a possible solution to be further discussed. Try to turn every challenge into a solution with the community at the center of that solution.

Jennifer asked for strategies to help get the meeting back on track if it happens to veer off course.

Roland replied that he has several tactics:

- Tell those in the room that, in the interest of time, the issues that are taking the conversation off-track can be “parked” and re-visited at a later time or if there is time left at the end of the meeting.
- The odds of getting back on track successfully are greatly enhanced if you are prepared for the meeting. This includes having a preliminary discussion with the meeting participants ahead of time so that, to some extent, you have already gone through the “sales pitch” and it is just a matter of aligning everyone.

- Hopefully, you will have a good relationship with some of the people in the room and can call on them to help you get the conversation back in line.
- All in all, if you have done your homework, you have done your prep work, you have the story crafted with the “ask” clearly upfront, you can use that as your tool to get back on track.

Christie stressed that it is very important to understand the business drivers of the community and/or the business needs that it can solve. When presenting this data to the executive, ensure that you know the data inside and out. The executive will question every piece of it. Knowledge is power and that will impress the executive.

## ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Participants were asked to share their biggest challenge when approaching executives. Participants replied with the following:

- Proving tangible business value in order to get buy-in.
- Getting on the executive’s calendar.
- Convincing seasoned executives that social actually has business value.
- Translating understanding and agreement into action and funding.
- Funding and staffing.
- Finding good reasons to stay in touch with the executives in order to build the relationship.
- Dealing with executive churn, i.e. making traction with an executive only to have them.