THECR NETWORK

Salesforce MVP: The Evolution of an Advocacy Program

SPEAKERS
Erica Kuhl & Matt Brown, Salesforce & Hillary Boucher, TheCR

COMPETENCIES
Leadership

MATURITY PHASES
CMM2, CMM3

TOP FOUR TAKEAWAYS

1. Erica stated that one of the key best practices that contributed to the success of the program is that they did not over-govern the program with too many policies at the beginning. The idea was to grow the program with the MVPs. Therefore, as they started to grow and enlist new MVPs, they added policies, guidelines and expectations in tandem with the growth.

2. Erica shared that it is very important that the organization is clear from the onset of the program in how they plan to leverage the MVPs. This is critical in order to guard against the MVPs feeling used or abused. It also contributes to a successful transition from an informal to a formalized program.

3. Erica stated that one of the key learnings that she had from building the MVP framework was that in order to create a very successful advocacy program, it is imperative that the company elicits the feedback of the top MVPs in the creation of the program. If this group likes the program and have their say in refining it, it will be accepted by the greater population of MVPs.

4. Have MVP removal guidelines in place prior to the launch of the program. This was a lesson learned for Erica and her team because when the problem presented itself, they were scrambling to put something in place as the removal occurred.

Title

OVERVIEW

Erica and Matt gave an overview of the evolution of the advocacy program at Salesforce. The highlights of the discussion are noted below:

Introductions and Personal Backgrounds

- Erica and Matt introduced themselves and shared their experiences with respect to the topic at hand:

- Erica is the Director of Community at Salesforce. She has been with Salesforce for just over 11 years. Her focus in the last four or five years has been on building the Salesforce community. Specifically in the last two years that has entailed focusing on the top 1% of their most active community contributors to build a scalable advocacy program.

- Matt is the Advocacy Program Manager, having joined Salesforce fairly recently. Interestingly, Matt was a former Salesforce MVP. He has transitioned from the community to support Erica in her role of managing both the MVP program and the user group program.

Advocacy Program Purpose

Erica explained that the idea for this program was born from the fact that there are so many channels to manage (traditional channels, community channels, social channels, etc.) that it was becoming very clear that she needed to put a program in place to scale her duties as a means to stay current. The challenge, however, was to do this without a hiring budget.

Harness the Energy of Top Contributors

Erica's solution to this challenge was to harness the energy of the community's top contributors. The way to maximize these efforts was to focus on the top 1%. Statistics showed that a small percentage of the community were the ones contributing the largest amount of content. In order to prove that, they put an MVP program framework in place. Fortunately, they were able to enlist the help of Sean O'Driscoll, who created the MVP program at Microsoft. At the time, they had one of the most well respected MVP programs in the industry. Therefore, Sean was contracted to help build the framework. Erica knew that putting the effort in this step was important because they needed to have a baseline for the rest of the program. Consequently, they approached who they thought were the key contributors. Strangely enough, Matt was involved in building the program from the ground floor up as one of the top contributors.

The Framework

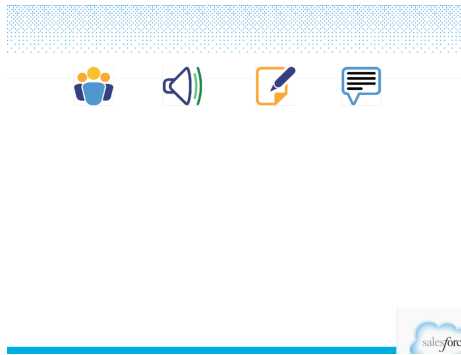The following slide demonstrates the framework of the Salesforce Advocacy Program:

Figure 1 - Planning Framework – Slide 6

- All advocates are not created equal. Since they have different strengths, a process was needed to measure and monitor the advocates and then map those to what Erica referred to as "currencies". Currencies are rewards used as motivators for the advocates.

- Sean was able to take this information and enlist the help of the advocates into this framework. With the combination of enlisting advocates, building the framework and then understanding what motivated the advocates, the MVP program was created.

- When the framework was first presented to the advocates, they balked a little bit. Erica welcomed this disagreement because the input from the advocates helped to solidify the program. If this group liked the program and had their say in refining it, it would be accepted by the greater population of MVPs.

The Meaning of an MVP for Salesforce

Once the framework was in place, it was important to understand the significance behind what it means to be an MVP for Salesforce. Salesforce pulls their MVPs from a series of different social channels, as well as community channels. The fundamental baseline qualifications for each of these channels are the following:
- The MVPs are active within their channel or multiple channels at least 9 or 10 days a month.
- The MVP must demonstrate leadership. Many people are doing great things within the community, but they do not necessarily represent the type of person that Salesforce is looking for to elevate to the status of an MVP in order to represent the greater community and the voice of the community back to Salesforce. Leadership is the differential.

- The third characteristic involves the MVP's expertise and accessibility. Of course, Salesforce wants the best of the best. These individuals will represent an extended army, not only for sales, but also for marketing and support. Therefore, their expertise and accessibility are paramount. Erica stated that these are the smartest individuals within their Salesforce community.

Program Details

Erica explained that it was very important to them that the MVPs did not experience program fatigue. Therefore, they incorporated this program into their product release dates. Salesforce releases a new set of features three times a year. As a result, they knew that their customers were already comfortable with this type of change. Accordingly, they tapped into that cadence to provide new sets of MVPs with those releases. The idea is that it would keep the program vibrant and the excitement level high at all times.

- A new set of MVPs are brought in three times a year. There is not a set number recruited. Salesforce decided from the very beginning that this would be organic. Therefore, they thoughtfully hand-picked these MVPs based on meeting the criteria and meeting the needs that they had for the program. This is based on the MVPs offline and online activities for the prior year.

- One of the key components to this program is that it is ongoing. Salesforce looks at six months worth of contributions so that they do not have people bubbling up out of nowhere, getting into the program and then dying off. The MVPs are rewarded after they have held their term for a year. Therefore, individuals are re-rewarded based again on their prior year of contributions.

- To this day, they have had very, very little attrition in the program. However, Erica stated that she did leave a little wiggle room because people come on board, they slow down in their contribution (or even die off) and then re-surface again. There are life realities. This is a special group of individuals and they have their own lives with multiple jobs and multiple responsibilities. That needs to be recognized, which is why the wiggle room has been built into the program.

Recognition and Rewards

The MVPs stated that what they wanted from the program was accessibility and to build their personal reputation. Knowing this, Erica stated that she, in turn, mapped the currencies to reflect those two motivators. Therefore, the MVP program provides the following rewards to their MVPs:

- *Special Recognition at Events and Online:* These are such perks as a photo opportunity with the CEO, reserved front row seating at events and an acknowledgement to the crowd of their status.
- *The MVP Badge:* This is an accolade that can be used on the MVP's resume, business card or social profile.
- *Exclusive Access:* This is access to Salesforce's internal teams, particularly product managers, marketing groups, focus groups, etc. In order to have this type of access, all MVPs must sign a non-disclosure agreement.

- *MVP Summit:* This is a huge accolade and benefit to the MVPs. Salesforce will fly all MVPs to a two-night stay and one full day of content and programming specifically for them. The Summit is hosted by the CEO and all of his executive team. The executives present their roadmaps and their special initiatives to this group in order to garner candid feedback and input.

  - Erica explained that this is a co-created event, which is how she likes to describe it because the Summit is created with the MVPs, just the same way that they were included from the onset in developing the MVP program. The MVPs help drive the content and decide upon the topics to be presented.

- *Private Chatter Group and Private Network*: This provides the MVPs with a place to connect, which at first Erica did not anticipate would be such a huge benefit for this group. It has turned out to be one of the biggest benefits for them as it provides an excellent networking venue.
  - The MVPs are very protective of the private network that they have created. Once they become MVPs they are brought into the MVP inner circle. They use Chatter as a communication tool, which has been invaluable to the success of the program.
  - These recognition venues provide the MVPs with the ability to team build with each other, which has been a factor in the success of the growth of the program because it helps them to feel invested in one another and invested with the company.

MVP Program Today

Erica shared that the program began with 15 members and they are now up to 104 members. MVPs contribute to brand mentions by about 5-7% on Twitter. They answer up to 40% of the questions to the community, which are the different channels that they have scaled and grown as a means to select their MVPs. They range from the actual Salesforce community to some of the greater social networks like LinkedIn.

MVP Program ROI Measures

Erica shared the following metrics:
- Engagement growth on all of the social channels
- Advocates to call on to defend the brand
- Customer driven relevant content
- Speaking spots at key events
- Voice of the community to Salesforce.com

Measurement of Community Success

Erica described the measurement of community success in the following slide:
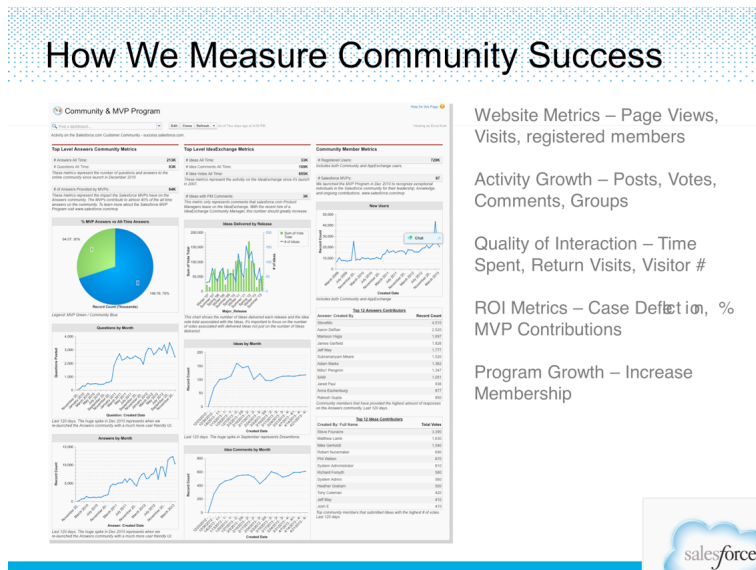

Figure 2 - How We Measure Community Success – Slide 14

This represents a snapshot of a dashboard that is distributed to about 20 individuals who are most interested in the program within Salesforce. These are overall community metrics, but they also incorporate MVP metrics so that management can constantly see the impact that the MVP program is having on the overall growth of the community.

BEST PRACTICES

Prepare an Elevator Pitch that Succinctly Describes the Program

Erica feels that it is critically important to have a one-line elevator pitch that describes the advocacy program. For Salesforce, the fundamental baseline of the program is to "recognize exceptional individuals within the Salesforce community for their leadership, knowledge and online contribution". This embodies the characteristics and critical features that make the community member an MVP. Those characteristics are leadership and outstanding, exceptional behavior within a community.

- Erica further explained that they took the time to brand it appropriately. Prior to the branding is the time that efforts should be made to refine the mission statement and elevator pitch as they are critical branding components. Once the branding begins with this incorporated into it, the mission statement and elevator pitch will strengthen in its meaning.

Do Not Initially Over-Govern the Program

Erica stated that one of the key best practices that contributed to the success of the program is that they did not over-govern the program with too many policies at the beginning. The idea was to grow the program with the MVPs. Therefore, as they started to grow and enlist new MVPs, they added policies, guidelines and expectations in tandem with the growth.

Be Clear from the Onset Regarding How the MVPs will be Leveraged

Erica shared that this is critical because the MVPs need to be leveraged in just the right way so that they do not feel used or abused. This also contributes to a successful transition from an informal to a formalized program.

In-keeping with this, Erica stated that the MVPs have access to pre-released pilots and features before they go live, they have the ability to provide feedback to features before they go live and they have access to individuals who roll out the community programs because these individuals need MVP feedback in order to tweak and modify the program.

Build a Team Structure for the MVP Program to Foster Scalability

Matt shared that it was very important to him to continue to build on the massive growth of the MVP program, but to do it in such a way that the scalability would retain that "family" feel that he had come to enjoy as an MVP. Therefore, he implemented a team structure that is composed of four teams:

- **Mentorship:** The individuals in this team are focused on mentoring new prospects within the community with the specific purpose of helping them to become future MVPs. This is by far the largest of the teams as Salesforce wants as many MVPs as possible engaged in mentoring.

- **Engagement:** This team is primarily composed of their hyper-engaged individuals with the MVP program. They are the bloggers, tweeters, LinkedIn contributors, User Group Leaders, etc. The focus in this team is increased contribution with greater access to Salesforce.com content.

- **Care:** This team is focused on retention and on-boarding of new MVPs. On this team, Matt explained that they want their MVPs to own the effort of keeping the MVPs together.

- **Strategy:** This is a smaller team of hand-picked MVPs who will rotate through the team every six months. These individuals will help strategize and further the evolution of the program in order to help coordinate the MVP events.
  - Matt explained that as they grow the MVP program, they want the MVPs to balance their participation between continuing to be a top contributor and owning their part of the program team.
  - At this point, they do not want to implement tiers and hierarchy and instead choose to focus on the collective as an important contribution.

- As mentioned, MVPs are selected three times per year based on the company's release strategy. They remain in the program for a one-year term with the option to be renewed if their contribution is still significant. Those not renewed are made MVP Alumni's.

- The middle "echelon" is the User Group Program. This is a larger program consisting of volunteer leaders who lead and manage their individual groups with soft support from the company. MVP's are poached from this program.

LESSONS LEARNED

• Erica stated that one of the key learnings that she had from building the MVP framework was that in order to create a very successful advocacy program, it is imperative that the company enlists the advocates right from the very beginning in order to elicit their feedback in the creation of the program.

• Hillary asked Erica if she had any challenges when super users transitioned into a more formalized program. Erica replied that they did not have any challenges, likely because these super users were consulted from the very beginning as to what type of program they would like to be a part of, what would motivate them, etc. These individuals were actually quite happy because they were participating informally in an altruistic way and a more formalized program – designed with their input – would now provide them with recognition for their efforts.

Furthermore, since the program was not over-governed in the beginning, they did not have to sign numerous agreements that might have otherwise scared them off. Instead, they were made to feel very special, hand-chosen and valued for their input.

• One participant questioned what made the program official for Salesforce. Erica described the process:

- The MVPs gained access to the program, meaning that they had access to this special group.

- They officially announced the program on a blog when the branding was in place. That became the jumping off point for them.

- Erica created a video, which was more of an industry-wide video about advocacy and the benefits of an advocacy program.

- Erica built a website, which was an MVP homepage that listed the MVP criteria. That in and of itself helped it to look more real and official.

- They created the icon, the image and the brand and then they created a private group.

- Next, they created the initial, tactical awards that would be received by the MVPs.

- The MVPs signed the non-disclosure agreement in order to access the internal groups.

• Matt shared that one of the things that really appealed to him as an MVP was being a part of an environment that helped him to build his reputation while also fostering that "family feel". That was a key part of the experience for him.

The extrinsic awards were nice, but the opportunity to be in touch with other MVPs and other peers who were not necessarily on the same social channels as him and becoming part of that family was critical. It is a forum that allows these MVPs to discuss and network and continue to build upon their knowledge as MVPs.

• Erica was asked if anyone has ever been removed from the MVP program and, if so, how it was handled. Erica replied that they have, but it is very rare (there has only been one individual removed in the two years). Admittedly, they had to come up with a process when the need presented itself and, as a lesson learned, they recommend that others build more of a structure around this practice before it actually happens.

They have now instituted clear guidelines and expectations that everybody must sign prior to joining the program. It outlines what is acceptable and what is not acceptable and who to escalate to if the need arises. It provides some guidelines as to what the MVP can and cannot say. It also explains that if they do go outside of the guidelines, they will be issued a warning. If they violate those guidelines again, they will be formally reprimanded.

Fortunately, they still have a close relationship with the one individual that they did have to release and this individual still contributes to the community. So, by that standard, the release was handled successfully.

• Jim asked how the community received the news of Matt moving into a role with Salesforce. In Jim's experience, he has heard mixed results when hiring from the community. Erica shared that, at first, she was very concerned. However, Matt was already a strong leader in the community and the transition was very natural.

- Erica explained that they were very careful and specific in how they announced this transition to the community. The job was open for others to apply from within the community, too, and many did apply. Erica made certain that she spoke directly to those individuals when they were turned down for the job and given pointers for where their skill set currently lacked so that they would be prepared for future opportunities. Matt was very well respected and a natural leader within the group and well known within Salesforce. Those factors contributed to a successful transition.

- Matt shared that one of the things that helped make this transition smooth for him was the focus on leadership. For Matt, it was his desire to build relationships with other MVPs so that he could be someone that they could trust. Therefore, when he transitioned to a staff member, it really just seemed a natural extension because that relationship and trust already existed.