THECR NETWORK

Build It So They'll Come: How to Launch a Successful Community

SNAPSHOT

SPEAKERS
Jake McKee (Ant's Eye View), Jim Storer & Rachel Happe, TheCR

COMPETENCIES
Strategy

MATURITY PHASES
CMM1

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS

Jake shared some thought-provoking best practices for launching a successful community.

1. *Don't* **plan for a grand launch day.** The reasoning behind this best practice is so that the community is not set-up to meet unrealistic expectations that tend to follow the hype of a grand launch. The hype and tunnel vision surrounding a grand launch can skew the metrics. This causes the community's maturity model to be locked in too early (it has not had the opportunity to evolve to see what kind of maturity model fits). Last but not least, it creates short-term, campaign-style thinking vs. a long-term outlook.

2. **Think in terms other than a grand launch date.** To do so gives the community a better chance to prove itself. Chronologically, there are various timeline points within the concept of the term "launch". For example, the day you have the idea or the day you start talking to your executive sponsors or the day you start developing the strategy, etc. These can all be considered launch moments, as well as the common milestones that are met after the community is up and running (e.g. at 50 members, 100 members, etc.)

3. **Eventually there will be a launch date.** Jake simply wanted to make participants aware that this type of activity should not occur on day one. Rather, it is something that occurs six to twelve months after you have truly launched. At that point you have some worthwhile results to share. That is a far better strategy than having huge expectations that are difficult (if not impossible) to meet.

OVERVIEW

➢ Jake is the SVP and Co-Founder of Ant's Eye View, a strategic management consulting firm. They focus on helping clients understand how to better engage with customers on a more strategic and a more planned level.

➢ Ant's Eye View has worked with B2B companies, B2C companies and all things in-between. Their clients tend to be large, complex organizations.

BEST PRACTICES

1. **Do *Not* Plan for a Grand Launch Day[1]:** This best practice was the basis of Jake's presentation. In Jake's experience, a grand launch is about the most destructive thing that could happen to a community. He explained why he feels this way:
   a. *Too Much Pressure:* A grand launch involves so much preparation and so much pressure that once it is over, it actually makes those who have been involved in all the activities leading up to the launch quite sad. It can actually lead the community in the wrong direction.
   b. *Skewed Metrics:* It is difficult to report low numbers to the executive in the beginning, even if those numbers are right on target and the right type of users are participating. Smaller numbers tend to disappoint in the aftermath of a grand launch.
   c. *Causes the Community Maturity Model to be Locked-In Too Early:* Jake would argue that when a community first launches, not much is really known about that community, let alone what the community model will eventually mature to because there has not been a chance to see how things work.
   d. *Creates Short-Term Vs. Long-Term Thinking:* If you are not thinking in terms of a long-term plan, then the community will likely start off big and then taper off quickly.
   e. *Creates a Mindset of Campaign Thinking:* Campaign thinking is short term. It is disastrous to condition people to think that the community will end.

2. **Understand the Essence of a Launch Date:** Think of a launch date in terms other than a grand launch because to do so gives the community a better chance to prove itself. Take a step back and consider different timeline points within the concept of the term "launch":
   a. *Phase 1:* The day you have the idea is the start of the launch process.
   b. *Phase 2:* The day you start pitching the idea and asking for support.
   c. *Phase 3:* The day that you start developing the strategy and building the technology.
   d. *Phase 4:* Once the community is up and running, there are common milestones for members/users that when reached, also deserve celebration.
      i. At some point there will be an official launch date. Usually, it does involve a big launch with a press release, internal road shows, etc., but it shouldn't occur on day one.

BEST PRACTICES, CONT.

4. **Recognize the Various Steps to a Community Launch:** Jake showed a slide with the following six points, which can all be considered the "sexiest" part of a community launch:
   - The day the team is in place and the technology is completed.
   - The day we have our 50th member sign-up.
   - When colleagues start tripping over themselves to be included.
   - The first time we get media attention around the community's success.
   - The first time members share a truly moving story made possible by the community.
   - The day our community makes its first significant, attributable revenue.
     - Jake stressed that the first five points are all important. However, if the goal of the community is to advance business goals, then these five points are basically a means to make the last point achievable.

5. **Be Aware of the Various Steps to a Community Launch:** Jake showed a slide that represented some of his go-to points. Of note were the following comments:
   - It is important to craft a belief statement. Your belief statement is one that helps rally interest in your community and sparks participation.
   - The idea of a "real and full strategy for growth" is also a concept that gets missed in the details when building the technology. The strategy is really being built from day one and should include all of those aspects of community development, such as the mile markers that are considered important checkpoints (e.g. at 50 members, 100 members, etc.).
   - Use the early days as a test bed for those ideas. That should help you set aside some time (hopefully a few months) in which the expectations are smaller. No launch is instantly successful. It takes a period of time where it may look like it is failing (but it really is not), but you have afforded yourself the time to make adjustments.
   - Tweak the model at 50, 150, 500, members, etc. However, Jake also tries to start with a group of about 15 people who can be the voice of the community for him and keep him on track (so as not to fall into the big launch mentality) as he prepares for the launch.
   - Businesses inherently need dates, but try to stay away from hard launch dates where possible.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Jim asked if anyone had any strategies for ensuring that a new community does not get caught in a short-term campaign mindset. One participant shared that it is important to make certain that the executive sponsor understands the long-term goals of the community. Show him/her best practices and a couple of proof of concept communities.

- Unfortunately, many communities get shut down too early because they did not reach a quote/unquote "acceptable" scale. It is helpful to have proof points to show executives so that they can see that the community is on the right track. One participant shared that he is in the process of adopting Badgeville as it offers in-depth analysis in this regard. In particular, it helps to foster champions. If you can band those champions together both internally and externally, they can keep the fire going to make sure that the community moves to the next stage (especially in small communities or communities that are in danger of being shut down).

- If a community needs reinvigorating, it requires different management techniques, particularly if the community is starting to die off, the technology becomes outdated, there is a change in the community's mission, the marketplace has changed, there is a change in expectations, etc.

- Jake uses revenue as a very broad term. Metrics like cost avoidance, cost reduction, net promoter scores, brand favorability metrics, etc. are all related to some form of revenue.

- One participant shared that they have put in a new process this year whereby participation in the organization's internal community is part of the performance appraisal process. The next step is to measure and define participation. Accordingly, they are investigating to measure participation.
  - One participant shared that at one time, they asked for best practices to be submitted as part of the performance appraisal process. People simply submitted whatever they could find and dumped it into the system. In the end, they received very little value from the process.
  - Another participant shared that they try to measure the participation against the value that was given by the member. They do that through a combination of the member's participation, the number of posts and the value rating that they receive in terms of positive ratings.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Jim asked participants on the call to share whether or not they have already launched a community and if they have not, whether they have plans to launch in the near future. Of the participants on this call, the number was even in terms of those who have launched and/or are prepared to launch in the near future. A few participants have launched communities internally and are getting ready to launch externally (which is a different set of dynamics altogether).