

# Developer Communities: What Are They and How Do We Use Them?

 **SNAPSHOT**

**SPEAKERS**

Mary Thengvall (Persea Consulting) and Kelly Schott (TheCR)

**COMPETENCIES**

Strategy

**MATURITY PHASES**

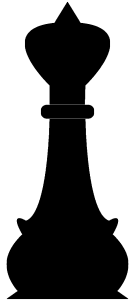
CMM1, CMM2, CMM3

## HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Interested in a definition for developer relations?** Mary gave her definition, supported by other member definitions, as well.
2. **Curious to know what Mary believes to be the necessary skills for developer relations success?** Mary shared her top 4 skills.
3. **Want to gather some strategies to increase engagement in your technical communities?** Mary offered 5 practical strategies.

## OVERVIEW

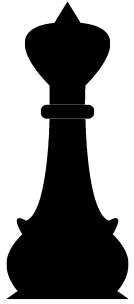
- **Background Mary Thengvall.** Mary has a journalism background. Due to a lack of jobs in the field when she graduated, she pursued public relations with O'Reilly Media. This is how she began to learn about technical communities, even though she didn't have a technical background.
  - While in the PR department, Mary wrote many press releases for a variety of technical books. She researched the topic so she could fully understand it, as well as the industry players and whether or not what was being written was actually meeting people's needs.
  - The more she did her research, the more she realized that they weren't talking about these books in the community as much as they should have been. That's how she moved into a community manager role.
  - She soon learned that most companies weren't focused on the developer audience. There weren't a lot of tools at that time that were geared solely towards developers.
  - She learned best practices along the way and noticed recurring patterns that were happening in various companies. People didn't really understand the true value of building these communities, how to measure them and how to maintain them.



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## OVERVIEW, CONT.

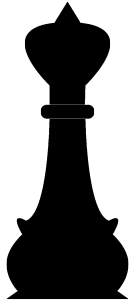
- With this lack of resources and lack of training that was evident in the developer industry, Mary started Persea Consulting. She also wrote a book called *The Business Value of Developer Relations*.
- **Developer Relations Defined.** This has been a topic of debate lately in the developer relations communities. A developer community isn't always made up of developers. It is anyone who is technical. It could be a developer, it could be an operations person or someone who can write code, but may not do it regularly. It causes confusion. It should perhaps be called "Technical Relations" or "Technical Advocacy." At the end of the day, Mary defines it as anyone who is the end user of a product that is geared towards a technical audience. It could be someone building the product, it could be customers, prospects or anyone else involved in the greater technical community who is trying to solve a problem. It's not limited to just customers, which is an important piece that many people don't recognize. The community isn't just people already using the company product. It's anyone who could be in the future.
  - In one participant's experience, developer relations refers more to the developer as a role. For this participant the coder is definitely in mind, but there may also be concentric circles that build out from there, i.e. what they are designing and offering. However, she did like how Mary encapsulated her definition in terms of how different people can also fit under the umbrella.
    - Mary agreed about the concentric circles. She advises clients to focus on their core community and their ideal customer, end user and the people who are contributing in the community. These people are already talking about the company product, so you can then work outward from there. Core community members are usually inside of the company customer base and then there are prospects and the larger technical community, as well. Beware also that people who are in this community may not be customers, but they are influencers in the security space or API space or a particular programming language. They are excited about what you're doing and talking about you as an external advocate.
    - Another participant also agreed with the complexity of the audience involved. He didn't understand that complexity when he first started in this space, but it has now become very clear. This participant has a very similar background to Mary. Without a technical background, he has had to work on internal perceptions because of how others see him as a result. He's had to focus on developing relationships and working with developers to help him gain the ear of those in the community. This helps him to speak the language of those in the community.



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## OVERVIEW, CONT.

- **Building the ideal team vs. outsourcing internally.** Mary headed up this conversation:
  - This will depend on the focus of the company and its investment strategy. If everyone in the C-suite can be in agreement, it's easier to lay out a strategy. For instance, with buy-in it will be easier to gain content for a weekly blog from the CTO and/or engineers will be given the flexibility to attend meet-ups and conferences, etc.
  - Mary has also seen companies begin with a developer advocate to start. As the program scales, they'll hire for particular programming languages or particular communities. This has also worked well. Oftentimes once that starts working well, the company will hire a community manager to coordinate the efforts of the developer specialists.
  
- **Needed skills for developer relations success.** Mary looks for the following developer skill set:
  - Empathy is the number one skill that she looks for, even though it has nothing to do with technical skills. That is a common skill requirement for community management across all industries.
  - Willingness to learn. This is especially true with technology. Given the fast-pace of the industry, if a person is not willing to learn and be flexible, it will be difficult to keep up and stay motivated.
  - Flexibility is absolutely necessary.
  - Ability to teach and explain concepts. From a technical standpoint for developer advocates, many managers look for those who may have been TAs in college. They have the experience to teach, mentor and explain concepts. Perhaps they don't enjoy being a developer on a day-to-day basis, but they have the ability to distill technical topics into information that makes sense across all skill levels. The other skills, such as writing and speaking, can be taught. This inherent teaching ability is, in Mary's opinion, much more important.
  
- **The benefits of developer relations to the organization.** In a world where there is far more than one solution to most problems, having a strong community is a huge advantage because you have community managers answering questions. Community members who have personal experiences and can offer feedback make the product stickier. Therefore, people will be less likely to leave.
  - Developer feedback will help with product improvements.
  - A reduction in the number of support tickets will reduce associated costs.

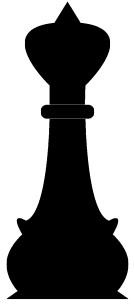


# Developer Communities: What Are They and How Do We

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Developer advocates come from a developer background. They code, give demos, help people with the bugs and connect with others in the community on a technical level. Mary said that some community managers now use the title “Technical Community Manager” to try and gain some credence with this audience. Community managers in this space need to be able to have technical conversations at a high level. They need to be able to answer some basic questions and then connect others with the right people in order to get the more in-depth answers. Don’t forget to follow-up afterwards to make sure that members received all the answers they needed.
  - One participant added that he makes a point to bring his developer outreach team into these technical meetings so that they can see everyone together in order to foster relationships.
- Mary added that the teamwork piece is huge. It’s important to have connections with others within your company who can help with content, technical questions, etc. She has created a “Hub of the Wheel” framework that shows the community manager at the center. She graphs it out so that it shows the community team and who they report to and who they work with, which departments support them and which departments they support. Show others in the company how much the community team works with others in the organization. This helps to set up boundaries so that you don’t end up doing the work. You are an advisor/consultant.
  - Likewise, the community team works with others to ensure that they have all the resources that they need. This can also help to ensure that the community doesn’t get pulled into too many projects.
  - Kelly stressed that that is what she is hearing in TheCR community, i.e. this cross-functional thread is woven throughout many conversations in the Network.
- Mary stressed that if you are the sole community manager or advocate, make sure that your manager supports and understands what you do so that you have the authority to make strategy decisions once your team grows. Set yourself up to be the future point person for the team.
- A product or developer community doesn’t necessarily have to be an online community. It could be a matter of just figuring out where people are having those conversations. Developers are having these conversations somewhere on your platform. It could be GitHub or Reddit, etc. Engaging people where they already are is key. If they don’t want to log into another platform, figure out which platform makes

the most sense for that community. Many developers simply adapt GitHub to their forum and it works amazingly well. You can still search open and closed issues, comment, tag, etc.

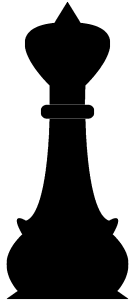


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### LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Mary was asked what she does to prove ROI and business value impact. Mary stated that it truly does depend on the company's goals. Every community goal should trace back to the company's goals. If the company goal is awareness and engagement, the community goals could center on content and syndicating that content to where the developers will see it. It could be speaking at, attending and sponsoring conferences that are popular with your developer community. It could be getting your most popular engineers on podcasts. None of these goals are tied to sales, but you are able to track usage or hits to the website based on activity just prior to the spike. The same can be said for traffic due to blogs, etc.
- In her book, Mary refers to "warm hand-offs" as a way to add value to the organization. Business professionals are familiar with the term "Qualified Leads." Marketing has done their job to get interested people in the door, which is then passed along to sales. Their job is done. They don't know if those leads turned into sales, but they did their job to get sales a list of prospects. The same idea can be applied to community. Not only can community pass along prospects, but they can also connect marketing with people who are great at posting in the forum and communicating. These people can write blog posts or help with technical documentation or knowledge-based materials. Community has made that introduction. Whether or not marketing can turn it into a qualified lead is not the value. Making the connection is the value.
  - Recruiting is another value. For instance, someone might be hired as a result of the community manager being at a conference. You are not the hiring manager, but you can pass along leads for open jobs to the recruiters.
- Mary offered strategies for increasing engagement in technical communities.
  - Hack-a-thons are a great way to get people to use the platform and integrate quickly.
  - Product Town Hall. This could be on your Slack platform or Twitter or a video call. Have the product team share what they are up to and ask for feedback.
  - Public roadmaps. These are open and visible product roadmaps that let people know what's on the horizon, the status of what has been done already and where people can offer feedback for what might be missing.
  - As for content, figure out what questions are being asked in your greater technical communities. This can help to identify gaps and needs and, subsequently, new products.

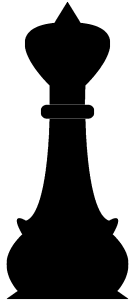
- Make sure that your content is discoverable. This is why Mary encourages people to syndicate their content. Make your community the go-to place for resources.



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### LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Mary has had many conversations lately about the future of developer communities. Developer communities have exploded over the last decade. This is because companies have begun marketing specifically to developers with new tools. This has been good and bad. There are many companies competing against each other for attention. If you are looking at beating your competition, Mary believes that you are coming at it from the wrong direction. Her train of thought is to work with the competition to solve problems. Competitors sell to the same audience. Look for gaps to be filled. This goes back to the value of creating community as it helps you to identify those gaps and needs.
  - The industry is in a growth phase right now. With that growth comes a word of caution, i.e. beware of those who put the product over the people. You have to discern who cares more about the sale than the community or the people within it.



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## ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

- Kelly asked participants to share their knowledge and experience with developer communities:
  - One participant works closely with his company's developer community, which is about 50% of their current community base.
  - Another participant has developers who are interested in creating a developer community. Currently they use GitHub, which they really like. This participant was on the call to learn how he could possibly work with GitHub to create a developer community.
  - One participant has worked with a developer community in his previous job.
  - Lastly, one participant was completely new to the term and was on the call to learn.

## RESOURCES

- Mary can be reached at: [persea-consulting.com](http://persea-consulting.com) or [marythengvall.com](http://marythengvall.com) or @mary\_grace
- As mentioned in the discussion: Mary's book: <https://amzn.to/2PGI9gJ>