



20/20 Vision: Community Lessons and Resolutions with Allison Leahy

 **SNAPSHOT**

SPEAKERS

Allison Leahy (Spotify) and Kelly Schott (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES

Community Management, Strategy

MATURITY PHASES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Interested in resolution best practices?** Allison shared 3 ways that she works to ensure her resolutions are met.
2. **Ever wonder what the most effective tools are for retention?** Allison offered 3 effective retention strategies.
3. **Want to know how time blocking can help you advocate for more resources?** Allison explained how this simple practice can demonstrate the need for increased resources.

OVERVIEW

- **Background Allison Leahy.** Allison is currently responsible for Global Social Care and Community Operations at Spotify.
 - Allison has 20 years of work experience with the majority of those years dedicated to developing herself as a community leader and to growing her career in customer service operations.
 - Allison has reported up through marketing and utilized marketing strategies and metrics to create customer service programs. She has a great appreciation for marketers, likely because she sees many of the local teams under-resourced. She recognizes that they can add a lot of value to the organization by supporting these groups with centralized community operations.
- **Background Spotify.**
 - Spotify manages their social teams around 2.5 million messages per week.
 - Their primary objective is to respond to actionable service inquiries. The frontline experience is the trusted voice of the community for its internal partners.
 - Their team spans the globe with nearly 400 people in 8 countries. They represent approximately ¼ of Spotify’s whole customer service operations.

OVERVIEW, CONT.

- **20/20 Vision.** To understand Allison's perspective, she wanted to share her journey:
 - At 8 years old, Allison developed an interest in computers inspired by watching her brother playing computer games and her dad running computer applications and using Excel macros. Over the years, she became fascinated by information technology in general.
 - When AOL Instant Messenger came out with its endless directory of public chat rooms and the ability to research and gather information, Allison was hooked. It was such a thrill to express herself and connect with people in real time.
 - Allison recognized the behaviors of trolling, language, bad acting, etc. Most impactful was realizing the power of anonymity, i.e. the idea of a screen name and the opportunity to masquerade and tell a different story or present something other than the truth. This made her think about authenticity and reputation.
 - Fast forward to the early 2000's. Allison studied English Lit and Social Psychology. Facebook had just launched and expanded from Harvard to a small collection of colleges. Vassar College – where Allison was studying at the time – was one of the first colleges to have early Facebook access.

- **Develop resolutions.** Resolutions are about creating new routines and habits and behaviors. Allison sees the edges of community fading into other arenas. There is a lot of discussion around automation, machine learning, customer experience, data science and visualization. In other words, technology, marketing and service. Accordingly, Allison wants to do the following:
 - Spend more time every week sharing thoughts and ideas with her perspective using her experience of community and learning what other people are doing outside of her regular circle.
 - Have a strategy for diversity and inclusion. The community is one of several key channels for voice of the customer. In order to be an accurate representation or proxy of your customer base, it should be a reflection of that user base or even of your target audience. Personally, Allison feels that she needs to develop a better understanding of her current member demographics and who they are reaching today through their community, who shows up at events and what barriers might exist for other people who want to participate.
 - To help develop new habits, a technique that Allison uses is “time blocking” or “horizontal time blocking.” Block time off in your calendar horizontally for strategy tasks and/or tasks related to your resolutions. It helps you to make sure that you are setting aside time to prioritize and strategize these larger tasks.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Stand your ground.** When Allison first moved to San Francisco from New York, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do. So, she started with something she was passionate about, which was LGBT advocacy. She started in a Program Assistant role for a non-profit where, like most non-profits, the IT budget was scarce. Their main communication tool was a monthly newsletter. She pitched them on a listserv. It was a huge success and helped them to grow their community beyond geographical boundaries and increased donations, as well.
 - Next, Allison found odd jobs on Craig's List, including freelance writing. She really enjoyed writing, but more so she enjoyed having a platform to reach different audiences. So, she started to engage with readers through the comment section and writing new posts, but that didn't pay the bills.
 - Next, she started working for Ning. Ning has launched over 2 million social websites. Allison's role was as a Community Advocate. This was a perfect entry level role at a company that helped people to design and build their own social websites.
 - In this role, Allison had the ability to engage with network creators directly. Ning's customers were community managers. She talked to them every day about community challenges, goals for their communities, strategies, etc. She loved that part of the job so much that she advanced to a Community Manager herself. Despite heavy research for this new role, there are some lessons that just can't be researched.
 - As Community Manager, she became a decision maker managing resources and a shared voice to help determine the direction of the product and communicating these decisions back to the community. It felt like an enormous weight of responsibility.
 - Allison naturally leaned into likability as a way to gain influence in this long-standing community. The job followed her everywhere. Everything was urgent. Technical issues cost them customers.
 - Following one particularly controversial product change, Allison was overwhelmed by direct mentions. She started to feel personally attacked, run down, etc. She realized that being nice wasn't going to cut it. After the third day, she reached out to the former community manager. He helped her to craft replies that were firm, direct and showed that she was listening by mirroring some of the terms and language. It worked like magic. The worst offenders backed off and taught Allison a critical lesson. It's imperative that you stand firm. It went against her customer service training to be empathetic, but community management calls for more of a balance.

BEST PRACTICES, CONT.

- **Be your community's historian.** Document major milestones, both external community milestones and internal team achievements.
 - After Ning, Allison landed her dream role with Fitbit. She began by launching their community forums, all within 2 months of starting. This was a huge growth curve for Fitbit. Within a month they climbed to 100,000 users with no pre-marketing, direct links or onboarding.
 - Nearing the end of the first year, Allison wanted to write an annual review to celebrate a truly ground-breaking year filled with many achievements. It took several weeks to verify the milestones, find photos, stats, stories to support the experience and to ensure that they were recognizing the right contributors. A best practice is to take the time to structure this for your community and team today by making it a living document. Share the responsibility to maintain it with monthly checkpoints to review wins and losses and at least one highlight so that you have a good cadence for keeping it updated. It's important to be intentional about your milestones and organize it in a way that you capture enough metadata to filter it in case you want to leave it high level or use specific milestones. This would include dates, lead contributors, and actions. The types of milestones might be around community health and growth, organic traffic, visitors; whatever numbers are meaningful for your community.
 - Once you have this drafted, you can publish it to the organization every 6 months to a year. Have it included in your company's onboarding toolkit, host it on your intranet and use it to inform your community newsletters and annual celebrations.

- **Define what capital "C" community means to your organization.** Community can mean so many different things to different people. For this reason, it's important for you to be able to clarify your team's role in supporting community and to define what community means. If you hope to expand your scope of responsibilities in service to this capital "C" Community, you will want to own that definition for your organization. As you review your vision, mission and purpose, it's a good time to get ahead of this and develop an opinion and a point of view. Work towards alignment with other groups around community, what it is and what it isn't and what your role and your team's role is in supporting that community.

LESSONS LEARNED

- In the wake of launching a new community in October 2019, one member is feeling the pinch when it comes to finding the time to strategize and introduce new programs, etc. He asked for Allison's advice to rank competing priorities.
 - Allison replied that she has increasingly worked to prioritize against her company's goals. She likes to look at least 3 years into the future, which is also a balancing act when trying to deal with the day-to-day. Yet it is so necessary in order to lay the groundwork for the future. Therefore, Allison creates a list of key results/measurable outcomes that she is working towards that will help to move the needle forward on either the company or business units. Typically, these goals – particularly as a business unit – center on growth, retention and profit margins. Allison will also look at the customer service objectives and try to do at least one big task tied to these goals.
 - Knowledge management is fundamental. It may not move the needle a great deal initially, but it's the compounding impact that will pave the way for the future returns. Allison will, therefore, work with not only her team, but peers, consultants outside of her circle, etc. It takes about 2 months at the beginning of the year to set out this longer-term strategy. Then she will try to save space by not over-committing. So, keep it lean, don't do it alone and think about the company objectives.
- When it comes to networking with people outside of her circle, Allison reaches out to various people in a lot of different ways. She shared a concrete example around community ideas. Once an idea hits a certain threshold, they will create a ticket for it. Spotify is a very organic company, so tribes of project managers, R&D engineers, etc. come together and then break apart. It's often like shooting in the dark. When they need input from the product team, they will tag whoever seems the most relevant and rely on them to point them in the right direction. Fortunately, the culture is helpful and open, so they do get pointed in the right direction. That can lead to some interesting conversations. So, 1/20 or 1/15 contacts will work out to be someone you can depend on down the road.
 - Allison always tries to share things that she thinks are interesting. She will try to spend a few minutes thinking about what might interest other groups around their wins, etc. It helps to create visibility.
 - Don't be afraid to ask for help. Some people will and some people won't help. That's ok. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- When it comes to driving engagement, Allison shared what has worked for Spotify:
 - For context, Spotify has several niche issues that affect certain customers at any given time. So, in their communities they have something called: “Ongoing Issues Board”. This is a great way to long-tail self-service. Customers can use self-service, but if they contact the company directly on one of their existing channels (email, chat, social messaging, etc.), there is an internal knowledge base for advisors. Whenever there is a known concern that has a corresponding issue in the community, they will share the link with their customers so that they can source updates directly and continue the conversation. They tend to have better technical support interaction there.
 - If it’s an edge-case issue, engineering will get involve. Whenever you can leverage your internal sales teams, customer support teams, etc. to generate conversation around a specific set of topics, make sure that the teams handling the one-to-one contacts know that there is existing content in the community. That will help drive users back to the community. Educate your frontline to encourage people to use community to expand on these types of discussions.
- When it comes to retention strategies, the most effective tools are automated. Email notifications are a fantastic tool for retention and for bringing people back to the community.
 - If a user has engaged in or created a topic and that topic is live and active, invite them back to the conversation through subscription mechanisms. Or if they are the author and haven’t seen the replies, ask them if it was helpful and/or if they would like to come back to answer questions.
 - The other way is profile completion. Whatever you do for member on-boarding, start to get an understanding of what your members are interested in from a topic perspective, their pain points around your product or their personal pain points. Collect that information and tie it to new content. Send an email “Have you seen...” and then insert the subject line of a new topic. Choose a frequency that feels right for your company so that you don’t prompt people to unsubscribe.
 - The main reason people visit a community is to get a question answered. This doesn’t lend itself well to retention. So, create social spaces so that once they have their question answered, there are other reasons for them to stay in the community and participate. You don’t want to rely on this all the time as it creates spikes and valleys, but do things that interest the community and market that to the community, such as an “Ask me anything” type of discussion using high profile people in the company.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Every year when you are thinking about your planning, think about ways that you can reduce the number of tools that you have to use. Then, ensure that each tool has a specific purpose. Stick to the strategy of the intention of that tool. If there are tools or features that blur the lines, re-think its use. Try to create processes that consolidate. In that vein, publish the purpose of the tool in order to help people to adopt its use in the intended strategic way. However, community managers that are forced to work across a number of different platforms and tools – i.e. internal and external communities – that’s when the idea of time blocking and prioritizing comes into play. It ensures that the most important tasks are the ones that are completed. When you are blocked off to do certain tasks at certain times, people have to wait for other things to get done. That can be a helpful tactic to ask for more resources. Clearly list the tasks that need to get done just to maintain business as usual. Then align those tasks to different days of the week and/or people. At that point it becomes clear. If you’ve failed to deliver on your Monday tasks consecutively, as an example, it means that you don’t have the time or resources to get it done. If tasks are continually not completed, that is your proof that increased resources are needed.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

- Kelly asked participants to describe one topic, goal, focus point that they want to prioritize this year:
 - Launching a community.
 - Bringing all of the sites back together as there are so many platforms due to rapid growth.
 - To really build a supportive customer community poised for positive networking.
 - To continue to create more community podcasts.
 - Prioritizing the support of 27 CoP (Community of Practice) leaders and helping them grow their respective communities.
 - Community assessment and to develop a 2020 roadmap.
 - To roll out the company's first online community.
 - To help the business understand how to leverage communities for continuous learning and collaboration in order to drive behavior change.
 - To increase participation and work with staff to create new, original content.
 - To identify "specific" ways to leverage community as a tool to impact high-level company metrics by meeting "specific" learner needs.
 - As for a personal focus, this participant would like to refine and increase advocacy for how co-workers, managers and companies can support their highly sensitive people.
 - Heather's focus is to set goals and plan for the future.
 - Others are new to the community role and looking to learn as much as they can in order to formulate goals.

RESOURCES

- As mentioned in the chat: Brené Brown's Netflix Show "*The Call To Courage*": <https://www.netflix.com/title/81010166>
- As mentioned in the chat: <https://youtu.be/1Ewgu369Jw>