Maximizing Community Engagement: Advanced Techniques to Keep Members Hooked

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Curious about the 5 environmental factors that affect your strategy?** Unfortunately, so many organizations aren't aware of the importance of this knowledge on their strategy. Consequently, the expected level of engagement doesn't fit within the organization's environment.

- **Wondering how to create a value proposition for your community?** Rich stated that 2 attributes could be used here, but he did also add a caution to be followed.

- **Want to create a position statement for your community?** Rich shared his easy 3-step formula for developing position statements.

- **Looking to use persuasive communication within your community?** Rich offered 3 very important communication tactics – along with an example for each – that work wonders for creating persuasive communication.

SPEAKERS

Rich Millington (Feverbee) and Kelly Schott (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES

Culture, Strategy

MATURITY PHASES

CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

THECR NETWORK

OVERVIEW

- **Background.** Rich is a Consultant for his organization, FeverBee. Over the last decade he has worked with some amazing companies, such as Apple, Facebook, Google, SAP, etc.

  - He is also the Author of several books: *"Buzzing Communities"* in 2012, *"The Indispensible Community"* in 2018 and, most recently, *"Build your Community"* in 2021.

  - FeverBee has a strong track record for taking almost any community that it works with and systematically putting in place strategies that increase the level of community participation. There are certain facts that need to be in place for that to work.

    - When Rich asks anyone how much engagement he/she/they want in their community, the answer is usually the same, i.e. they want more. Rich believes that a paradox exists here. Those in community management want more engagement. Community members, on the other hand, don't want more engagement.

    - Armed with that knowledge, Rich stressed for call participants to be mindful of the fact that for members, increased engagement doesn't necessarily mean bigger and better results. In fact, a more engaged community can become a more difficult community to run. Increased engagement could create an overwhelming amount of information, making answers more difficult to find. Furthermore, it can become a challenge for people to engage in the community. All in all, more engagement isn't necessarily better.

OVERVIEW

- **How much engagement do most brands have?** Rich asked a couple of questions:
  - For most brand communities in the average support space, how many users do you think make at least one post per month in their community? Typically, the numbers vary tremendously by the type of community and the initial audience. The mean is very much distorted by the large brands (+3000 users per month). Communities with about 1000 users per month are probably doing okay. Some brands will have more and some brands will have less, but generally around 1000 user posts per month is a solid number.
  - When looking at the number of posts per month, the mean is around 1100 or so. The median, which is probably a better reflection, is around 6000-6500. What's interesting is that this number is increasing. There's isn't a Covid dip and Rich is not sure why just yet.
  - Engagement won't continue to increase forever. Simply chasing as much engagement as possible is going to be disappointing over the long term because you are naturally going to hit the top. Once you get there, you will be challenged to go beyond that number.
    - The really important point that Rich wanted to make was that engagement is driven by mostly by external forces. In fact, he believes that most of the engagement that brands have today is driven almost entirely by external forces. One of the biggest predictors of how much engagement an external brand has is their level of search traffic.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Be aware of engagement predictors and factors that drive results.** FeverBee did a study of various communities in 2019 and examined their search results. They found that it varied a little bit. However, there was a very strong relationship between the number of searches a brand gets and how many people participate in its community. In fact, around 45%* of engagement variability can be explained by the average number of Google searches.

  - When you think about all the factors that drive the type of results a company wants, it highlights certain factors. Now when Rich analyzes a client's community, the methodology has completely changed.

    - First, they start measuring the results that an organization wants. Most want some combination of engagement, support, success, innovation, advocacy, retention, etc. The first thing they do is assess how the community is doing in each of these areas. Do they have a high number? Is it measured? Is it heading in the right direction? This way, you can determine if it's good or if it's bad. Each community should have a clear idea of its goals.

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- The results that a community enjoys are usually determined by what is being done within that community. This looks at factors such as technology, acquisition, on-boarding, discussions, content created, events and activities, how top members are nurtured and the benefits that members get from the community. Very often, this is where the strategy stops. The desired results are discussed and a strategy is written. Unfortunately, Rich is seeing that, more and more frequently, this approach isn't getting the results that the company wants. This is primarily because the evaluation of the previously mentioned factors is usually driven by the environment. The environmental factors here are critical. They affect which strategy should be implemented and how the design should be approached.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Understand the 5 environmental factors that affect your strategy.** Rich showed the following graph to illustrate his point. Unfortunately, too many organizations work in the middle circle rather than the broader circles displayed in the graph:
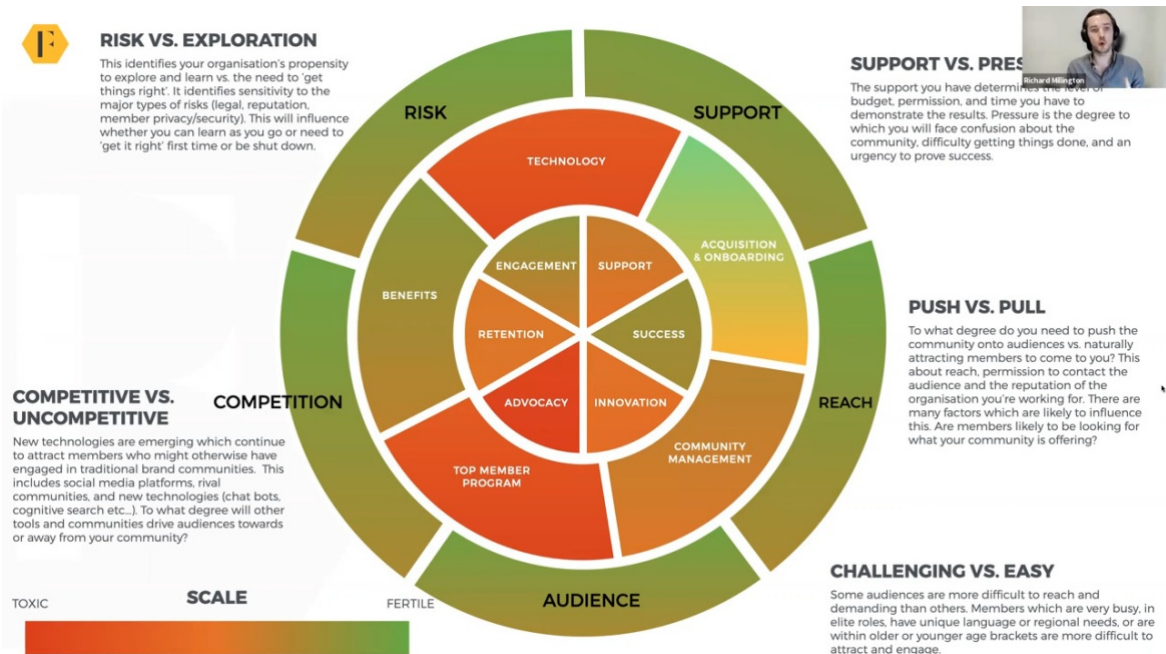

Figure 1 - 5 Environmental Factors that Affect your Strategy

BEST PRACTICES

- *Level of support vs. the pressure you have to deliver results.* Support determines the level of budget permission and time you have to demonstrate the results. Pressure is the degree to which you will face confusion about the community, the difficulty of getting tasks accomplished and the urgency to prove success.

- *Push vs. pull.* This refers to your reach and the degree you need to push the community onto the audience vs. naturally attracting members to come to you. This is about reach, permission to contact the audience and the reputation of the organization. There are many factors that are likely to influence this, such as whether or not members are likely to look for what is being offered by your community.

- *Challenging vs. easy audience to engage.* If you are targeting those in the Western world who speak English and are familiar with the technology and they are in the age demographic of around 35, that's a relatively easy audience to engage. Compare that to audiences with disabilities or audiences that speak different languages. Or they could be at an elite level that is more difficult to reach. Strategies very often don't reflect this environmental factor. For example, if your reach is relatively low, then the approach to develop your community will be completely different from a customer support community. Instead of trying to redirect the flow of traffic already coming towards you, you must nurture each member one at a time.

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- *Competition – competitive vs. uncompetitive.* Today, there are so many different emerging technologies, which continue to attract members who might otherwise have engaged in traditional brand communities. This includes social media platforms, rival communities and new technologies (chat bots, cognitive search, etc.) The degree to which other tools and communities drive audiences towards or away from your community is a question that needs to be answered. This will have a big impact on community participation.

- *Risk vs. the desire to explore.* This identifies your organization's propensity to explore and learn vs. the need to get things right. It identifies sensitivity to the major types of risks (legal, reputation, member privacy/security). This will influence whether or not you can learn as you go or need to "get it right" the first time or be shut down. The strategies for these 2 approaches are vastly different.

  - In Rich's experience, far too few strategies reflect the environment within which the organization works. Consequently, the expected level of engagement doesn't fit within the organization's environment. The strategy needs to match the environment.

  - Some environments are quite toxic and some are fertile. Successful communities today have very fertile environments. The opposite type of environment will present far more difficult challenges to create and grow a community.

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- **Pick the value that your members truly care about and go to the edge with it.** Oftentimes, you can pick 2 attributes to focus on that will create that unique value proposition for your community.
  - Be careful not to create duality, i.e. focusing on 2 different ends of the spectrum to please members. It's very difficult to be the most serious and most fun community. The same applies to the quickest and most detailed. These are opposite ends of the scale.
  - If this is done right, everything else becomes easier.

- **Be careful of your messaging statements.** Typical messaging for a community is usually something like this: *"A place where you can find documents, resources, ask questions, get help and connect with peers."* This sounds like a community that is trying to do everything, but is not particularly better at anything. Instead, Rich asked participants to consider repositioning the value statement to something like this: *"This is a place for members to get high-quality information that is personalized to them."* This statement offers 2 attributes that make the community unique and, through previously conducted research, is known to be what community members want.

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- **Create your position statement using the following formula.** Rich shared how he develops community position statements:

Figure 2 - Creating Position Statements

BEST PRACTICES

- An example of a position statement following the above formula is: "*The most exclusive place for engineers to exchange ideas.*" That is a powerful position statement.

- Rich suggests that this position statement should be the first thing that people see when they enter your community. It automatically tells him/her/them why your community is unique, i.e. this is what the community is about and why they would derive value from it.

- Your superlatives will push you to the edge. It's a promise you make to your audience. That promise will take you down your needed journey. If you say you are the most exclusive, for instance, then everything you do will focus on being exclusive to reflect that statement for your members.

- Rich stated that if you get this right, then your whole strategy will align to the promise that you make to your members, which will align to the value that members truly want. This will, in turn, adapt to your environment and deliver your desired results.

  - The positioning of your community is critical to its success. If you can align everything you do to your position statement, the level of member participation takes off like a rocket ship.

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- **Ensure the use of persuasive communication.** When hiring people to manage online communities, look for those who are good communicators. However, first define a good communicator. It's far more than just being able to write and speak without mistakes. It's really about being persuasive. It's about being able to persuade members to volunteer their time, knowledge and expertise to help others without any expectation or reward. There are many ways that community managers can be persuasive in their writing:

  - *Avoid clichés.* Rich stressed that you need to avoid clichés like the plague. So much of community communication is filled with clichés. The elimination of clichés creates authenticity.

  - Rich offered an example to hit home his point: Original statement: *"Community is an exclusive group dedicated to empowering leaders by sharing world-class expertise, exchanging insights and revamping industry best practices."* New statement: "*A private place to solve your toughest problems."* The second statement is far more authentic and persuasive.

BEST PRACTICES

- ***Beware of the argument dilution effect.*** Think of the following 2 communities. One community is where top experts share their best advice. The second community is where top experts share the best advice, connect to people like themselves and participate in exclusive conference calls. The first is far more direct and to-the-point.

  - There is a lot of psychology behind the way the 2 statements are positioned. When people read the second message, their focus is lowered to the weakest benefit. The weak message undermines the strong message.

  - Target what matters most to your community. Zero in on that and orient all messaging to that top benefit. If you focus on the single path of a message, everything else will be far more effective.

BEST PRACTICES

- ***Understand the power of contrast.*** Contrast is better than just stating facts. It's easier to understand something when you can compare it against something else. If you have a message like: *"Our community gives you quick answers"*, it's not as effective as *"Our community gives you quicker answers than contacting support."* Contrast is very helpful in both persuading members and engaging them.

  - Rich critiqued 3 website landing pages. His main message was that, when trying to ensure persuasiveness, work towards contrast and tell the audience what to do and the benefits of being there in concise language that doesn't use clichés. Entice your audience to visit the community and dive right in to solving their problems.

  - Rich doesn't believe in welcome messages on a community landing page. It's not a persuasive message. In fact, it doesn't really do anything for the audience at all.
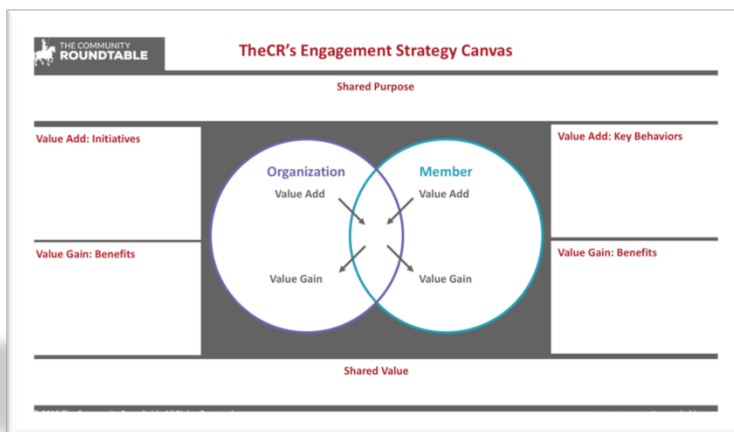
LESSONS LEARNED

- In order to increase engagement, you need a reasonable benchmark that reflects the organization's environment. Far too often, community managers don't do a good enough job educating the organization about its environment and the corresponding level of engagement that that type of environment can expect. Furthermore, they don't measure that environment very accurately. Therefore, if you want to get more engagement, one of the absolute best approaches you can take is to determine the support you have, the reach you have, the audience you are dealing with, the competition you're facing and the organization's risk tolerance. Then adapt the strategy accordingly.

- If your audience is in a toxic environment, you will need to change your audience or gain more support or change your organization's tolerance to risk in order to build a community. It is very, very important that your strategy determines your environment, it reflects your environment and it adapts to your environment. Otherwise, it just won't succeed.

LESSONS LEARNED

- When it comes to competition, communities that don't have the engagement they want are likely positioned poorly. There is a pervasive attitude among community managers that people will come into the community, explore and find what they want. The reality is that it is more like a shopping experience.

  - People can choose to visit your community or they can go to any other store or shop from home. The competition is intense and is becoming more and more intense each and every day. The competition for mindshare is ferocious.

  - Where does your community fit into something that offers a unique value to the audiences that you are trying to reach? It is very difficult to achieve success if there is something that delivers the same value as your community, is even better, is more convenient or is more trusted than your community.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- One of the reasons that Rich believes they achieve the results they do for clients is because they are quite good at repositioning a community to be in the right space. For example, if you were a customer looking for the most trustworthy and personalized information, where would you go? Customer support would have to be high in the community space. It just makes sense to contact customer support.

- Those aren't the only attributes important to a community. Getting a speedy answer, empathy, connection to peers, etc. are also important. However, convenience is even higher on the list. Community can be more convenient than calling customer support and it can also be more trustworthy. Nothing beats the community on these 2 scales.

- The goal is to have the community positioned to deliver value on the axis – i.e. the attributes that matter most to the member – that no other existing channel or competitor can match.

- Rich believes that in today's world, convenience is one of the most powerful attributes to draw a person to a community.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Interestingly, what we think members value is actually different than what they actually value. Rich's team has completed survey after survey and what they have found is that the sense of connection and sense of community often ranks far below convenience, the speed of response, accuracy, trustworthiness, etc. Those community attributes tend to be far bigger draws than the typical community experience.

- When there are political disagreements about community within the company, Rich believes that you first have to get at the source of the disagreement. Is it because the parties do not like each other vs. the topic at hand? Or is it territorial? Those are completely different discussions.

  - If it a genuine disagreement about the right way to tackle a community issue, Rich advocates for an interview approach. He tries to interview as many people within an organization as possible, all the way up to the senior level. Then he tries to bring people into a workshop for 1-2 hours so that everyone has a chance to voice their opinion. If they are all in the same meeting, they can prioritize what matters and everyone has a say.

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LESSONS LEARNED

- Covid caused an initial spike in engagement and accelerated communities into a more mature space. As well, more companies implemented communities and/or are seeing the benefit of communities due to Covid.

  - Moving into a mature space, however, comes with new challenges. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to reach an audience and sustain their attention. Most of the successful brand communities that Rich sees benefit from having thousands of people who have questions that they want answered. This is just a matter of directing and optimizing. However, many communities don't have that benefit. Email is becoming less effective and fewer people are reading newsletters. Social media is still a competitive threat because companies have it integrated into the strategy itself.

  - Rich doesn't believe that Covid caused a change in the engagement approach within communities. It just accelerated the community's advancement to maturity. He is also seeing engagement come back down to pre-Covid levels.

- Rich believes that the same approach described in today's call would work for internal communities. The community still needs a use case.

  - Many organizations handicap themselves with SharePoint or other internal platforms.

  - Rich always surveys members as a first step and then holds workshops. The one thing he does differently is he tries to hold the workshops much earlier on in the process. He believes that members should be involved in the design of the community vs. just dropping it on them.