THE COMMUNITY **ROUNDTABLE**

TRANSCRIPT

Community Conversations - #90 – Margaret Hedderman on Scaling Community Impact

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Jim Storer, Margaret Hedderman, Shannon Abram

Jim Storer 00:07
Hello, and welcome to another edition of community conversations. My name is Jim storer. I'm the founder of the Community Roundtable. And I am here with my capable co host, Shannon Abram, Shannon.

Shannon Abram 00:18
Thanks, Jim, we are super excited to have a brand new guest with us. Welcome Margaret Hedderman.

Margaret Hedderman 00:24
Thanks so much. I'm really glad to be here.

Shannon Abram 00:26
We are excited to have you. I would love if you could introduce yourself to our audience a little bit about who you are, where you work and the kind of community you work with.

Margaret Hedderman 00:35
Sure, yeah, so I am the Communications and editorial director with startup Colorado. We are a 501 C three nonprofit that supports rural entrepreneurs and small business owners in Colorado. And we have a online community for those rural entrepreneurs, and the ecosystem builders who support them. Well tell us a little bit more

Jim Storer 01:01
about how you really interact in that community and how you connect with the constituents that you work with.

Margaret Hedderman 01:08
We start Colorado's online community, we are actively trying to foster connections between rural entrepreneurs, and the resources that they need to succeed. So we have a live feed where people can get into the network, ask questions, introduce themselves, hopefully find resources, like we have our funding database, as well as a Business Resource Center where they can look up different templates and how to articles about launching a business in rural Colorado. And we also have a community engagement manager who is in there, kind of training people on how to use this live feed and this network that we've built, and creating different ways for them to interact. We also have events both in in real life in person, and online that helps drive engagement within this network, as well as drive membership. And so we've seen that in a lot of different communities, it helps to have somebody show up in person, develop trust in real life, and then send them into that network where they can start engaging and interacting with other business owners.

Jim Storer 02:23
So I wanted to ask about that, because I've been to Colorado, it's a big state, I can imagine that you're driving, you know, all over Hillandale to meet with these individuals before you welcome into the community. How have you been able to scale that so that you can have folks that are there in person to connect and build that trust?

Margaret Hedderman 02:45
Well, that's what we were doing. Before we had our network, we had a person, our western slope Regional Director and our Eastern Plains Regional Director, and they lived on opposite sides of the state. And they were on the road about 50% of the time going to these different communities and hosting workshops or joining events and learning about what was going on in these communities. We are not a top down organization, we try to uplift the different business support organizations and initiatives that are already in these communities, we don't want to come in and just introduce something brand new. So we approach a community by understanding what's already there and helping the activity that's already happening flourish. So before the network, though, it was just a lot of road time. And that was actually why we ended up launching it was we wanted to be able to scale that work, we also saw a need for it. And I can I can get more into that that type of research a little bit later on. But in terms of scaling the work, we use the network as a way to help make those one to one connections that we're doing via phone calls those in person events, and dropping it into the live feed and tagging people based upon their profile data so that they can then connect with all of those other people that we might have eventually sourced or push them to, but not at the same level as a one to one call.

Jim Storer 04:17
I love that you're you're using it in a way that it's it's augmenting what you were already doing in person. And it's me it definitely sounds like it's making your organization more scalable by bringing it online. Yeah, well, we

Margaret Hedderman 04:31
had to do that type of one to one in person networking, to be able to build the trust that we needed in order to launch a community like this, because we say this a lot about rural Colorado is that it doesn't

have the same density as an urban environment. And so if you launch something like an online community for rural entrepreneurs, and you don't do it correctly, if it's not a addressing their specific needs, or you're trying to force something on them that they don't necessarily want, you're kind of burning and you don't get the opportunity to try. Try it again, you don't get a lot of second chances, just because the density isn't there. So we had to be building those connections and understanding what they needed before launching a online environment such as this. So

Shannon Abram 05:25
once you decided to launch a community, which platform did you choose?

Margaret Hedderman 05:29
We chose hive right after a pretty extensive research process.

Shannon Abram 05:34
So I would love to hear about that process.

Margaret Hedderman 05:36
Yeah. So as I mentioned before, we were on the ground, a lot of engaging in real life with both entrepreneurs and business support organizations, people we call ecosystem builders. And this was right at the beginning of the pandemic, like it hadn't quite hit yet, that we were starting to research whether or not we even needed an online community, a lot of people were saying, Oh, this would be a great thing to have. But we wanted to really understand if it was actually necessary. So we put together a steering committee that represented the people that we serve both entrepreneurs and business support organizations, and conducted several rounds of surveys with them trying to understand one, if they needed a community and to what that community would look like a lot of people suggested, oh, just do a group on Facebook just have a Slack channel. And kind of instinctively, like, we knew that that wasn't going to work. But we needed to arrive at that conclusion that we needed something that was our own closed, private network, to really be able to build out the type of resources and community engagement that we wanted to. So that was that probably all started in January of 2020. And we had an intern who was who was helping us with this, she was fantastic, a master's student at the University of Colorado. And once we kind of got through that whole research phase, then we started looking at the different types of platforms that were out there. So we, we started with the why before we got to the how and the one. And we looked at a lot of different options. And finally we narrowed it down to hive, right, and one other platform. And, you know, we went back and forth as a team, just the startup Colorado team. And we presented our findings to our steering committee and got all of their feedback, and finally arrived at the decision that we wanted to go with high fright. And part of that was its functionality, and customization. But the other side of it was that we were looking at the business behind the platform, and we wanted to find an organization that was going to be in it for the long haul. And that we felt had like really stable footing as a business, and would be able to support us, you know, with customers who support basically, and tech development. And yeah, great has been pretty great to work with.

Shannon Abram 08:09

So I just want to commend you or congratulate you. So many people don't have these are the luxury or the idea that they should start with the why like, why are we doing this? Who are we serving? Some people just aren't get told, like, well, we need a community, so do it. And they're like, but so and they're like, make a community and they're like, ah, or some people just don't they assume they know what they're doing. And don't spend time doing that legwork. And it's so important. So I just That's amazing advice for anyone out there that if you're starting, if you have, you know, like Margaret had a network of people in the real world and you're recognizing this need, don't forget about them. They're your why. Right. And so that work is incredible to hear about.

Margaret Hedderman 08:52
Yeah, and we, you know, we definitely felt pressure from a lot of different stakeholders to to produce something. But because we knew our audience, and we knew that if we just put something out there, that wasn't right, we would blow it and we might not get another chance with them. So we really wanted to make sure that we were being intentional about the product that we were that we were offering and making sure that it was actually something that people needed and wanted. So

Shannon Abram 09:21
from you start thinking in January 2020, you do the sort of vetting process you're talking about, about how long did that take?

Margaret Hedderman 09:29
I think we signed on with hive, right in May of 2020.

Shannon Abram 09:34
That's a lot of time. I love that. And then so from that to tell me like process to launch.

Margaret Hedderman 09:41
We definitely we thought it was going to be something that we could launch in a couple of months, which was definitely not the case. We officially launched the platform in November of 2020. It was right around Thanksgiving and we had a party and online party for launching This new product that had never really been done before for rural Colorado, we called it farm to spaceship. And it was an interactive event in which we sent out mocktail recipes and ingredients to about 100 different people within our community, and had dinner live interviews and games and activities for people to do. And at the time, you know, this was this was November of 2020. Like, we were all still most of us were still in some form of quarantine, and just hankering for real human engagement, but at the same time, totally burnt out on Zoom calls. So we wanted to announce this network as something that would be worth being excited about. And so we thought having this event, this activity would be a great way to push people into the network and kind of set the tone for the type of culture and vibe that we're wanting to create. Even though we we launched in November of 2020, it didn't take off right away, once we started getting people into the network, there wasn't a lot of activity, people didn't know how to use it. And they didn't know what they were supposed to do once they got in there. And so it took about another year and hiring a Community Engagement Manager to really start seeing energy and momentum taking place in the network. And so I think we're probably in 2021, at this point into 2021, in which we're really starting to see growth. And that type of success that we're that we were looking for, that really

Jim Storer 11:38

tracks with a lot of our research, I think I just want to highlight that because I think it's really important for people to hear that you don't really get sustained engagement right out of the gate. And it can take some time. It's not like a marketing program where you apply dollars and you see immediate return, you just you need to put in the work and sounds like you did, and you're getting a lot out of it now. And that's kind of where I want to have next is to ask you about the hybrid platform, and the features that are in there that really support your use case, because it sounds like connecting rural entrepreneurs with one another, but also making sure that they have the resources they need when they need them is really important to you. And I just wonder how high right addresses that and helps you guys solve those challenges.

Margaret Hedderman 12:25

The two biggest features that we're using the most right now is the live feed, which is your kind of your standard news feed. But then also the people search and the profile data. So we do a lot of need to solution matching based upon the information that people are putting into their profile. So for example, whenever people join our network, we ask, what do you need help with? And what can you help with. And what we'll do is when we're coming up with different engagement activities for the live feed, is we'll look at the profile data and see, oh, we've got 70% of people say they need help with marketing. Well, we're going to create a post that's all about marketing, and then tag the people who have stated they are experts in marketing. And so we've seen this actually play out in the live feed, one entrepreneur asked a question about brand marketing for her sustainable apparel business. And from that one question, she got eight responses and had several phone calls set up after that one little question that she asked in the live feed. So for us trying to one understand what people's needs are, and get them to ask a question, and then pairing them with people who can potentially answer it. And a lot of that is all just through the data that we're collecting with with high price functionality. The other features that we're using a lot, we use the news, I'm sorry, I call it stories. It's called news in hive, right? And we run a entrepreneur news site in which we're writing stories about different entrepreneurs around the state. And so I'm using a lot of the data that we're gathering from the network in order to source story ideas for our blog, which is then in turn driving traffic to the website and hopefully, garnering new membership.

Shannon Abram 14:35

I love hearing about that part of your onboarding process. A setting the expectation right up front that this is a quid pro quo is not maybe the best way to say it, but that you get out of this, what you put into it sort of in that it is an actual community, not just sort of a knowledge base. So I think that's super important. Did you launch with that sort of built in member onboarding, or was that something that sort of of evolved it It is amazing.

Margaret Hedderman 15:01

I think we had a version of that when we first launched, but we definitely refined it. And part of that, I mean, the philosophy was there that we wanted people to be asking questions and providing answers, like we wanted it to be a collaborative and supportive environment. And, you know, we wrote our community engagement guidelines stating that right up front, I think that we evolved our onboarding

questionnaire over time, more as a result of us fully understanding the functionality of how the profile data works in hive, right? Because we didn't, we didn't totally get it right off the bat, or we didn't totally understand the power of it. In in making these types of connections.

Shannon Abram 15:52
I think that's amazing. I think a lot of people aren't intentional enough about that the way you guys were, and saying, like, this is the behavior we want to see. And this is how we can support that, but literally from minute one. And I think that has probably contributed a lot to your success. Which leads me to my next question, which is, how do you measure success at startup Colorado, specifically around the community.

Margaret Hedderman 16:16
And a lot of ways this is qualitative metrics. And so we're trying to get better at how we track success within the network, because we don't have a lot of hard numbers behind the value that somebody gets out of an engagement that takes place in an online network and how that translates into business success, maybe 10 years later. That's kind of hard to track right now. So what we're doing is looking at the different, like the number of questions that people ask in the network, and then looking at the number of responses that they're receiving to those questions. And we always make sure that somebody if they if they are brave to ask a question, we want to make sure that they get a response, our Community Engagement Manager, Vanessa will email people, if nobody's responding on the network, she'll start emailing people that we just know, to get in there and answer that question. So that's, that's one level. The other side of it is putting out intentional surveys and questionnaires on a regular basis in which we're tracking the success of an action that took place in the network and how that translated in real life. So right now we're getting testimonials of we saw that you asked a question, what was the benefit that you received from that? And we've been surprised a lot of times, and these are results that they might not have shared with us if we hadn't directly asked. So measuring what we can see happening in the network in terms of engagement, we do get some metric from high fright regarding community engagement, but then also putting out surveys said so that we're learning what happens in the real world where we can't track, you know, the success of a particular action that took place in the live feed.

Shannon Abram 18:14
Yes, no, that's perfect. I mean, obviously, everyone's success metrics are different. And it's really, honestly, sometimes platform dependent on what you can sort of see. But I think anything that you're looking at tracking, and then being able to make incremental changes based on that is exactly what's right for your community.

Margaret Hedderman 18:31
Yeah, for us, a lot of it is really trying to understand how we can make qualitative metrics quantitative and an easily digestible way. And we're, I would say that we're still working on it. But for us, you know, a win is somebody that comes to the network has a need, and gets it addressed, whether that's through a one to one connection, or they find a article in the resource center, or they go to our funding database, and they find the perfect funding opportunity for their business. That's what we define as

success. And right now, we're trying to figure out the best way of really tracking it and telling the story around it. I think

Jim Storer 19:14
one of the areas that we see a lot of community managers struggle, frankly, with communities that have both an online and an offline component is how do you value the offline piece? Like if they're engaged offline? How do you value that and tie that back into your engagement in the online community? Like, they've got to have a 365 degree profile right?

Margaret Hedderman 19:41
For us just big picture success outside of the network is to see entrepreneurs building businesses in the place that they find home that they call home. And we believe that you don't have to live in a major urban center to be able to start a tech enterprise or a Coffee Shop, you know, we're industry agnostic, and we don't care what type of business you're starting. Because a start startup is a verb. It's something that you do. And we want to be able to see these businesses succeeding in these different communities around the state. And so the community is one tool that we use to help achieve that broader goal. So whatever success is taking place in the network, it has to feed the big picture, which is entrepreneurs building successful businesses.

Jim Storer 20:36
That makes sense. That makes sense. I'm always amazed, by the way folks answer this one, but consistently, they have good answers. So what surprised you the most since you launched the online environment about, you know, either the way the members are interacting or, you know, is there something that really jumps out to you?

Margaret Hedderman 20:55
Yeah, I think it was the hands on approach that we had to take very early on, in getting people to use the network, you know, we definitely had the belief that if we build it, they will come. And that's not the case, you know, you have to create a reason for them to be there. So that whenever they join the network, they see activity, they see things happening, and they see the value so that they jump in and join. And I never would have thought it would have taken a year or more to be able to create that type of engagement, where people can just join and immediately know what they're supposed to do when they get there. And I think a part of it is training, because people are so used to being on Facebook, they're so used to be on LinkedIn, like that's just their default, they go to those places, and use it and coming to our community, I think at first was kind of an afterthought. And we're starting to see people think of it quicker whenever they need help. They're like, Oh, I'll go to the sort of Colorado network. To ask this question. I don't need to do it on, you know, a random Facebook group. And that that took longer than I was expecting.

Shannon Abram 22:14
So it's been about three years from like, this was a twinkle in your eye. And now what is this real amazing thing? What if you can tell us what's next? Like, what are you guys thinking about for 2023?

Margaret Hedderman 22:26

We just launched as a nonprofit. And that is a big focus for us is becoming our own startup, in a sense. So we are actively fundraising right now. And we're using, you know, the network is a big product offering for us. And so we're really focusing on driving more engagement and more types of events that are tied into the network and translate into into real life, both as part of our broader organizational initiatives, but also to help us show the ROI for funders.

Jim Storer 23:07
So it's been an amazing conversation, but we're not ready to end just yet. We have a speed round that we like to do at the very end. And Shannon, I'm going to kick it off if it's okay with you. So are you teen dog, are you Team Cat?

Margaret Hedderman 23:23
I have a lovely little cat, but I would love to have a dog someday.

Jim Storer 23:27
Oh, there you go.

Shannon Abram 23:28
Very diplomatic answer. Yes. Name,

Margaret Hedderman 23:34
Roxy.

Shannon Abram 23:35
Oh, we have a dog named Roxy at my house. Oh, that's a great name. Question number two, what are you binging right now?

Margaret Hedderman 23:42
My mom and I just finished the third season of Emily and Paris. Which I have to admit it was my second time watching the third season. So

Shannon Abram 23:51
you're not gonna find any judgment here. judgment free zone. I love that for you. That's

Jim Storer 23:58
and we started asking this during the pandemic but I love to hear because it seems like folks are still working from home. So what's your favorite work from home hack?

Margaret Hedderman 24:07
Oh, standing desk all the way I got I've got to be able to move around and feel like I'm not just glued to my computer. 24/7

Shannon Abram 24:18
We are both standing desk converts. We I completely agree with you.

Margaret Hedderman 24:22
I say that standing desk is my hack and yet I have my standing desk lowered to sitting. I just.

Shannon Abram 24:31
I do too often when I'm on a call because I am a very fidgety person and if I'm standing up I could be like, moving around and we're recording I it's very possible that I would stand up and then I would trip and then we just don't need

Margaret Hedderman 24:47
an extra round of excitement for your speed round. Right.

Shannon Abram 24:51
Margaret? What is your favorite dessert?

Margaret Hedderman 24:52
Oh, Kimberly. It's a great choice. Right now

Jim Storer 25:01
And do you have a community superpower that you'd like to share?

Margaret Hedderman 25:05
My role at start, Colorado is storytelling. So 25% of our mission is storytelling. So I produce a narrative podcasts all about rural entrepreneurs and produce our entrepreneur news society. So I'm a firm believer that content is key to driving engagement.

Shannon Abram 25:22
So can you send us the link to that? I would love to share it out there for anyone listening, more podcasts or just sort of interested in your startup? It's so interesting.

Margaret Hedderman 25:33
Yeah, it's a ton of fun to produce. And it's one of one of my only opportunities to get out on the road and see the entrepreneurs in their in their natural environment.

Shannon Abram 25:43
So this is a last question no pressure, who or what is your community inspiration?

Margaret Hedderman 25:49
I have to say, Rei, and as far as I know, they don't have a community in the sense that we're talking about. But they have done such a phenomenal job through content and their events, and just overall branding of really building a sense of community for their customers and welcoming people of all backgrounds into the outdoors and showing that it's a safe space. And I just love seeing how they've done that.

Jim Storer 26:22

I love that answer. I'm a I'm a well known Rei member, first of all, but I I can see that I love offline examples of community inspiration because I think we derive a lot of our our key insights and there's a lot of ways that you build community that really depends on what folks developed his tried and true principles in the offline world. So awesome. I love that. And Margaret, it was great talking with you today.

Margaret Hedderman 26:46

Yeah, this is super fun. Thanks so much for having me. Thank you.