TRANSCRIPT – Community Conversations Episode #98

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SPEAKERS

Melanie Binder, Shannon Abram, Jim Storer

Jim Storer 00:06
Hello, and welcome to another edition of community conversations. My name is Jim store. I'm the founder of the Community Roundtable. And I am joined today by my capable co host, Shannon Abram Shannon. Hey,

Shannon Abram 00:18
Jim, we are excited to have a longtime friend of the Community Roundtable on with us today. We are welcoming Melanie binder. Hi, Melanie.

Melanie Binder 00:26
Hi there. Thank you for having me today.

Shannon Abram 00:28
Oh, we're super excited, you're here with us. I would love if you could kick us off. Tell us a little bit about yourself where you work and the kind of community work with. Sure.

Melanie Binder 00:38
I have been working as a community manager for over 10 years now at two different associations. So I've always been in the nonprofit community management world. I currently work for healthcare Financial Management Association of they're based in Chicago, Illinois, and I work for them as their Senior Manager of Community and council engagement. So I've been with HFMA from us five years now. And I came to HFMA to help develop their online community and their programming their platform, which didn't exist. When I first got there, we initially HFMA initially used a couple of listservs that were subscription based. So when we develop the framework for our online community, we migrated the existing list of topics and members over to our new hybrid community platform. And then we made this available to all of our members. And that program allowed us to expand on our industry topics for the healthcare finance members. So our community is a community of practice where any current HFMA

member can join multiple topics of interest, post discussion questions, collaborate with fellow industry members to solve problems and share resources. And then we also have a pretty wide network of private community groups for our executive councils that we run and to support our network of chapter leaders.

Jim Storer 01:48
It sounds pretty diverse. I love hearing stories about communities that were originally on listservs and the transition to a community platform where that information is stored and accessible. And I'm just wondering, Did you face any challenges or resistance to moving from a listserv, which can be it can be really low overhead for people, they get used to that behavior and move into it, it can be a little bit more challenging for folks, did you get any resistance there? Or was it a kind of clean switch?

Melanie Binder 02:20
So fairly clean switch, I think, I think internally, we're really excited to be able to offer what was happening on our listservs to all of our members, instead of it being a subscription base, where you're paying per listserv that you are a member of. So I think in that dynamic, it just helped us connect our members to each other. So they had a way to stay in touch with each other, you know, in that virtual atmosphere instead of just, you know, being restricted to maybe one listserv, you know, here was a place where they could join multiple groups. So I think it was just a lot of education and training not only internally, but externally to our members about this benefit that we were building. And I think with any community that you launch, we're launching with limited people in there and limited resources that in there, so you're creating a lot of content, you're asking members of members to join, you're kind of marketing it in a different way. Because you know, as a community manager, you have your vision and your goal of what you know this community can be. But it does take a while to get there. And to build that dynamic interaction between your members. Because we were allowing with our concept we were allowing our members to join as they can now know, this is a member of benefit. So we have a lot of programs that are member benefits. And it's really upon the member to log in, join a group participate in a discussion. So a lot of what we did, we're just talking about the benefit of this community and encouraging our members to join and really building that dynamic kind of deep set of resources available to them. It's

Jim Storer 03:44
really interesting. I mean, I think that way a community can help connect members with one another is the real differentiator. It sounds like that's working for you. And it kind of brings us it's a natural segue into our next question. Our next next topic, which is at our Connect conference, you won our Community Leadership Award for Community pack leader, which recognizes your efforts to really start conversations and Connect community peers in the car networks. So thank you so much for doing that. And congratulations on winning that award.

Melanie Binder 04:14
Oh, well, thank you guys so much for recognizing me. I mean, I really appreciate it.

Jim Storer 04:20

Absolutely. And can you share, you know how you use the CRM network and how it helps you in your community efforts? Oh,

Melanie Binder 04:26
sure. Absolutely. You know, there's a couple of different Well, one of the ways I remember when I first got to HFMA. And we had we were launching our community on a beta platform, and we realized that we wanted to migrate to a more dynamic platform. I used a lot of the resources, I think there was a resource bundle on there. And that helped me develop an initial matrix of questions for vetting platform vendors, and the CRO connecting me with community managers who are currently using the platforms that we were considering because, you know, at that point, there were more platforms being developed that I hadn't even been aware of. So really kind of helped me narrow down what was going to be a good fit for us and then move forward with like our top three platforms. And then I was able to connect with people who were currently using it. And that way we can discuss, like, what are their experiences with development and migration and implementation, and the technical components of it, the support that the platform vendors were offering, and it gave me that safe space to connect with them and have those conversations. So I really felt like it helped me prepare for the selection process, as well as the process of migration and implementation. Because now I was working with a much larger community, you know, much larger membership. And, you know, we kind of had our vision of what we wanted the community to be in the future. So I think it's always important to choose the platform that's going to support those goals. And we weren't currently on that platform. So it really helped us with migration process and the selection process as well. So and also through the CR, I've been able to connect with a lot of community managers who work in the nonprofit sector really didn't have a network of that, when I started, nonprofit sector needs tend to be a little bit different than a business, business community or community that supports products. So it's been really nice to kind of build that network and watch that grow over the years, you know, and also with helping other community members solve their problems. You know, I just remember when I first became a community manager, you know, it was kind of a new industry, if you think back to like, where we were 11 years ago, even before that, I didn't find a lot of resources, I didn't have a lot of connections, I really wanted this as a career. And I saw it as a career. So I think just once I joined the CR, I found a lot of like minded community managers who were so willing to share their information. So I'm just always really happy to have the opportunity to just engage in the car and just pay it forward.

Shannon Abram 06:41
I love hearing that it can feel so isolating, right? If you're doing your job. Yeah,

Melanie Binder 06:46
it really did. I was coming from an account management career beforehand. So there's a lot of related skills that you use in account management and community management, instead of really managing accounts you're managing, you know, you're kind of managing industry topics and members and making those connections. So I don't think my comfort was ever really in the sales world, it was more in the engagement. So I kind of saw that as a natural kind of progression of where my career might be heading, which was great. I just didn't, I just didn't know anybody else doing this. And still, sometimes when people ask you, you know, what do you do for a living? And you start saying, Well, I'm a

community manager. And you know, there's an explanation that needs to go along with that, but maybe less so now than where we were 11 or 12 years ago,

Shannon Abram 07:27
it is very exciting to have seen that sort of evolution to something that people understand and recognize the need for.

Melanie Binder 07:35
Yeah, and I think it's been such an important component of so many organizations, is to have these online communities, especially when you look at product and service communities. And here we are running a community of practice. So I think there's just the more understanding of how helpful these communities can be. I totally

Shannon Abram 07:52
agree. I do want to go back. I love a migration story. I would love to hear like what your criteria were and what platform you ended up choosing?

Melanie Binder 08:01
Sure. Oh, that's a good question. Let me go back and think about this, the original platform that we launched on that was a platform that was actually selected before I came to HFMA. You know, I felt like this is where we were going to start. And I kind of had a vision for where I knew we could go. But being just new to our company has community, there was just a lot of kind of like level setting of what a really dynamic community platform can do for an organization. So we kind of have to take step back, rebuild that strategy, talk about what the goals were going to be, I came in kind of like, as a subject matter expert on community, because I had been managing communities before, which was great, but then we kind of really quickly decided that the initial community we launched on wasn't going to allow us to meet our goals, because there were no external messaging that was going out of that platform, it was just how that platform was developed. And it really was gonna help us meet our needs, because what's really important about the community is the people that are in it. But it's also the messages that are going out to let you know what's happening in the community. And it just didn't have that set up. It wasn't inherently built into that platform. So that was one of our major, we were talking like developing our initial matrix of questions for vatting was really critical to me is like what kind of external messaging is connected is inherent in this platform that allows our members to know what's happening. Is it in the form of email notifications? Do we have flexibility with daily and weekly digest? Can they manage their own notifications? So we're giving them the information, how they want it, and how often they want it? And what format can we have that in so that was really critical to the success of our community, because we were bringing people into the community, but we also wanted to communicate with them what was happening in the community without them having to go in and check every day because we just knew our members were not going to do that they needed it sent to their email, either in the form of instant notification, you know, real time as it happens, or in the form of a digest. So it was great to see how some of these community platforms were developing their technology and had that inherent in their systems. And

Jim Storer 10:06

as you went through the selection process, did you did you tell us about who you selected and how that process went?

Melanie Binder 10:12
So we were talking about, yeah, the communication was really critical to us the flexibility to develop as our community expanded where, you know, we wanted to be able to launch industry topical groups as we needed them, you know, we launched with an initial, so an initial selection of groups. So I think, you know, along with external communications, it was just kind of the flexibility of the platform itself. And we ended up selecting Verint because we still feel today, we've been with Verint going on four years now, the veteran has that flexibility that's very innate, once you are, you have your license with Verint, there's a lot of out of the box tools that are very easily accessible. I'm not someone with a computer science degree or engineering, but it's been pretty easy for me to manage the layout, you know, the out of the box layout, which is really what we use without some heavy customization. But at the same time, it's very developer friendly. So if you have developers on your team, there's so much that you can do with different software, if you need to, there's a lot of tools that come with the licensing fee with Vagrant, so whether you use them or not, they're always there for you to deploy as you need to. So what we've done is, you know, we know all these tools are available, and we launched our community very simply with discussions, Media Galleries, where we could store documentation and resources and membership directory. So there were a couple key areas that we launched our community with. Also, the email notifications were really important. But what we also know is, there's other tools available when we're ready to deploy them, such as badging articles, you know, blog posts, so there's the resources there are pretty deep, and they're always there for you to deploy as you need to which we really liked about how nimble it was. And it's pretty quick for me to set up a new group too, which is great.

Jim Storer 11:52
I think that combination of flexibility in the platform, and also ease of use for the community themselves is really important. And I've been impressed in evaluating platforms to see how flexible there really is, I know we've got a number of clients using them. And you can go from from one community platform one instance to another and it doesn't necessarily look identical, it's that you really can do a lot of customization. If you want to you can update the you know, the tools to behave in a certain way that may be different from one instance to another. But I also love the fact that you indicate that it's, you know, relatively easy to stand up a new group as a community builder and a non technical person, right?

Melanie Binder 12:32
Yes, I've become more technical than I ever thought I would be. But I'm still in the broader sense of it very non technical. And it is very easy for me to stand up a group as process we go through when we're vetting new groups to make sure that it warrants a group, when we get those requests. And if it does, it's very easy to stand them up. Plus, we also have the flexibility for that group to be completely private. So any members in those groups are not searchable, the contents not searchable name and groups not searchable. So we're able to give a level of privacy to our executive members and to our chapter leaders to use the community in a different function as our general broader membership are using it. So that's been really great to be able to have that combination of groups in one community and really be

able to offer our internal team options when they come to me and say, can we use the community to support this new initiative, and really using the community to kind of really enhance other programs that we're doing in our organization, it becomes a little bit of a richer experience for our members to just have that dynamic. I just find working with Telligent the support team is really great. It's a very stable platform. You know, we've had very few technical hiccups. I don't think that any platform is ever going to give us 100% of our wish list, which we developed on that matrix. But we did like the fact that you know, we had all these resources available under one licensing fee, and that if I chose to deploy it, it wasn't going to cost me anything. In addition to do that I might spend more money on we were gonna customize something which we understood. But there's still a lot of tools that I'm not currently using. But I know that they're there if I choose to deploy them at any time, which is really nice. And working on nonprofit, you know, we don't always have the biggest budget either. So that was a big benefit to us as well.

Jim Storer 14:11
That's amazing. I love hearing about how people are using their platforms. And a question that I always have people asking me is more about migrations. And so I wonder if you can share some of your top tips for someone who's thinking about migration, because you clearly did it. And it sounds like you did it quite well. So if you could share some ideas on how to save other people the pain in doing a migration, that'd be great. Sure,

Melanie Binder 14:36
I would say have a lot of patience. But I would say also start early when you're migrating to a new platform. The process can take a while because I think you can get very granular with your matrix. So questions depending on what type of community you have. So I think really thinking about not only where are your communities at now where you want it to be because you want to choose a computer, a community platform that's going to allow you to expand on your And so I think that's always something to keep in mind when you're vetting new platform vendors, I would look at stability, how large are the communities that it's supporting, talk to other community, definitely talk to other community managers, you want to look at the functionality, the support is really important, the technical support is really important and ease of use and implementation. You know, migrations can be really, really challenging, especially if you're migrating a community with tons of resources and information and connection points and customization and custom coding. So you just want to make sure you're choosing you're really kind of developing that list of questions. And I think also with the understanding, you're not going to necessarily get everything on your wish list. But the really important criteria should be covered.

Shannon Abram 15:41
That's great advice, thinking about in sort of an on the spot question. So if you don't know, that's okay. From the time you decided you wanted to change platforms to the time you actually had parent deployed about how long that was, I don't need like an, like six months a year for you? Yeah,

Melanie Binder 15:58
I'd say it was six months, we migrated at a point where we did not have we were a newer community. So it was a little bit easier for us to migrate. But we still wanted to make sure we kept those connections of members that join multiple groups. And they were connected to the discussions that they posted,

there were important connection points that we wanted to make sure we're not lost, we were newer to community. So we decided at that point, that was probably a really good time for us to migrate. Because I think the threat of losing those connections was not as challenging to overcome versus a community in existence for five to 10 years, because you really do have a lot of detail connections and resources in your community that you want to make sure aren't lost. So I think for us, it was more of a six month process between developing the matrix knowing that we were going to do this, we were moving forward with it getting you know, our internal approval and buy in selecting our vendor and then standing up the community. I do think it can take longer, just depending on how much customization you need to do I know we've talked like within the car network is do you do some data cleanup? When you're migrating a community? If you've had an existing community? Do you take everything over with you? Or do use sunset groups and some information as well, to make that transition easier? So I think for members or community managers who have an existing community, that's just one of the things to put on your matrix of questions is How do you handle that data that's coming over? Do you need to do some cleanup of that? What's your starting point with that as well?

Shannon Abram 17:27
I am a huge fan of the idea that sort of not everything needs to be around forever, and that some stuff is evergreen, and some is not. And that's okay. Right? It is.

Melanie Binder 17:39
I know we've had this conversation in the car with some community managers. I've also had this conversation internally, because now our community has been open for over four years now. So this is the time to go back and look at some of those groups. And do we need to archive and sunset some of the groups? Do we sunset, some of the resources? What are the key ones that really have that evergreen content, like you mentioned, because I do see members go back and they search for certain discussions because it's still relevant and learner ask a follow up question or a little post, you know, some more updated information on that resource to share with our members. So it's been really interesting, when somebody revives a conversation like, oh, yeah, I guess that's really good evergreen content that we shouldn't consider sunsetting. So we haven't done that yet. But we're really getting to that point of revisiting our initial strategy, and where we started, how things have developed, what resonates with our members, and where we're going, you know, with future groups that we develop.

Shannon Abram 18:32
So you just made the segue so easy for me, I am really interested in what's next for your community, do you have a roadmap up or any sort of highlights you could share for 2020? For sure,

Melanie Binder 18:45
I mean, I'd say we have more of an informal roadmap. But there's a couple of things we're doing. In fact, we recently just expanded our community team, which we're really excited about. So we added a Community Engagement Manager that happens have lots of health care, finance, industry knowledge that's been really great for our members and connecting them with resources. So we're really, really excited about that. And for me, personally, it's just nice to have a team based off of where we started when I was a solo practitioner and community for a really long time. So it's great that our community has developed to that point in our new team member is going to be working with our community and

with our councils as well. So it's just been nice to look at where we started five years ago on this path and where we are now that we can support this and just in general 2024, we're going to be developing new groups that are going to support our emerging healthcare finance industry topics, continue to create stronger connections with our members and you know, looking to find new avenues to highlight all these important really great reaching discussions that are taking place in our community. Because if you're not a member of a particular group, you really don't know what's happening. But it might be knowledge that we'd like our broader memberships have learned so we're going to be connecting it more to newsletters. We know we have a large audience on LinkedIn, so maybe promoting more what's happening in the community on LinkedIn to maybe bring more members into the group to collaborate With our members and share their knowledge, so we can all continue learning from each other. So it's just really positioning it as a very important tool for our members to take advantage of with their membership. Because for HFMA, our membership model is all in one, you sign up as a member of HFMA. And there's a whole bunch of programs and products that you can take advantage of and community just happens to be one of them. It's

Jim Storer 20:22
really exciting for me when one of our longtime clients goes from solo contributor to a team. And so congratulations on making that move. And it's just exciting to hear that you're going to be building that out even more in 2024,

Melanie Binder 20:36
we're really excited to be able to, you know, have a team build out that strategy more. And there's a bunch of programs that we could be doing with community that we just necessarily just haven't been able to do the bandwidth. So we're just really excited to be at that point to finally start putting some of those in motion.

Jim Storer 20:54
Absolutely. During this last segment, we call it the speed round. We love to ask questions that are maybe just a little bit off the beaten path. And speaking of team, are you Team dog or Team Cat?

Melanie Binder 21:07
Team dog? For sure.

Shannon Abram 21:08
Yeah, we know. But we have to ask, what are you binging right now?

Melanie Binder 21:13
Oh, my gosh, well, let's see. I just finished the crown. I'm not the biggest TV watcher.

Shannon Abram 21:18
So it's so funny. My husband who could not care less about Roy like he could not tell you like who the you know, the princesses name or any of those things started watching the crown for some reason without me for some reason I don't understand. Now obsessed with it. Like in the did you know this?

And then did you know? And I'm like, yes, a lot of that's common knowledge. He's living for the first time and it's very exciting for it.

Melanie Binder 21:41
Yeah, I mean, I'm just a big kind of like history buff. So anything that has to do with history will definitely intrigued me in definitely the Crown has it's got a lot of drama to it as well. And then you know, my kids come home from college, it's really, you know, moves with pick a series like my son and I are working our way through blacklists, we're at the last season finally. So usually, when they're home on their break, we try and catch up and binge some of these series that have been ongoing for a while

Jim Storer 22:05
amazing. And sometimes people tell us about what they're eating from a binge standpoint. So what's your favorite work from home hack?

Melanie Binder 22:14
Oh, my favorite work from home hack. You know, I just keep I try to keep a regular schedule. I've been working at home for a long time, either full time or just part time. But I've always kind of had a hybrid schedule for probably the last at least 1012 years, if not longer. And so I think just keeping that regular working day schedule is really helpful, because you can get sucked into the vortex of just sitting at your computer at night and doing work because it's there. But I treat it like this is my office. So when I walk out of it at night, I close the door, shut the lights off. And unless there's something really critical happening or my site is down, it can wait till the next day. So you know, I think just keeping that regular schedule is really helpful when you're working from home.

Jim Storer 23:00
Good advice.

Shannon Abram 23:03
What's your favorite dessert?

Melanie Binder 23:04
Oh, anything with chocolate?

Shannon Abram 23:07
Not discriminatory. Just any, y'all?

Melanie Binder 23:10
Yeah, yeah. And that's peanut butter with it. That's even better.

Jim Storer 23:13
All right, community superpower.

Melanie Binder 23:16

Oh, that's a good one. Huh? I think listening and sharing my knowledge for to newer community managers to help them in their role and see this as a real career path.

Shannon Abram 23:29
Who or what is your community inspiration?

Melanie Binder 23:32
Oh, that's a good one. You know, I think I've always been inspired by the community managers, not even if they've just been in the industry for a while. But how they've really developed this as a career and have really grown their individual communities are always really inspiring to me. Because that helps me think of my community in a different light and what the potential is,

Jim Storer 23:59
I love that response. And I think we've got a great group in the Sierra network to kind of learn from and grow with. So yep, I agree to have you be a part of that. Thank

Melanie Binder 24:09
you. Thank you. And it's been it's been so critical, I think, to the success of myself as having this as a career. You know, this is a career I transitioned into, after many years working in account management. And I think like your skills, Neil was so helpful. I use that a lot. There's there's just a lot of resources that I continue to use in my job. And I think that's really important, because I think we all start with a community of one point, and we have this vision of how it can be and it's in between how do you get there and what skills do you build on to do that?

Jim Storer 24:37
Absolutely. And Melanie, thank you so much for taking the time today. This has been a lot of fun.

Melanie Binder 24:41
Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate it. It's been great speaking with you.

Shannon Abram 24:57
Thanks for listening to another episode of community conversation with the Community Roundtable we'll see you next time