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## TRANSCRIPT – Community Conversations Episode #99

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

community, association, members, work, volunteers, organization, good, question, membership, conversations, love, great, people, bit, specifically, specific, higher, events, space, post

### SPEAKERS

Shannon Abram, Jim Storer, Catherine Hackney

#### **Jim Storer** 00:06

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

#### **Shannon Abram** 00:18

Hi, Jim, we are excited to be recording a another episode of community conversations for you. Today we're joined by longtime friend of the Community Roundtable, Catherine Hackney. Hi, Catherine.

#### **Catherine Hackney** 00:31

Hi, thanks for having me. We are so excited. You're going to join us today. I would love to get started by having you introduce yourself to our audience. And tell us a little bit about the kinds of communities you work with. Yeah, definitely. I'm based in Colorado, and I started confident communities consulting about seven years ago, after I realized how many organizations were out there who needed help with their online community. Before that, I was working on the membership team of a professional association. So that is a world I already knew. And it made sense to continue working in I love so much that as a consultant and contractor, I get to work with so many different associations, because each audience of each association is so different that I get to learn something new from each one. So since my clients are usually associations, and what their audience is brought together for is professional development, broadly speaking, I work with communities of practice, can you tell us a little bit more about your work with communities of practice, and if there are specific platforms, community platforms or other that you tend to work with more often I am i Higher Logic certified partner. So I specialize in helping Higher Logic customers, as some people know Higher Logic started with a focus in professional association. So that is a good chunk of their customer base, which is just a really good fit for me. So I also have expertise of the trade weighing platform that was built specifically for trade associations. And that's also a just a good option for smaller organizations. And that one is trade as in trade association, and weighing as an A bird's wing because I know a lot of people miss hear that name. So I just wanted to clarify, I've worked on a few other platforms as well. But those are the two big ones where my expertise

lies, and right communities of practice with associations, of course, their membership, really all have their profession or something professional about them they're working toward, or certifications, that's what they have in common that brings them together in the community, though it's a very professional space, very professional types of communities. But there's a lot of fun to work with. And with the Higher Logic, acquisition of vanilla and kind of the growth into the commercial space. Have you found yourself working with any of those clients as well? Or do you stick pretty squarely in the association space? Yeah, that's a good question. I have definitely branched out a little bit, but I just find that I so much more enjoy my time working with associations, you know, it kind of comes back to that I just feel like I'm doing something intrinsically good. And that feels good for me. So I have worked with a handful of for profit organizations, or, you know, there's kind of those organizations that are almost something in between, like, they're technically a for profit, but they kind of function like an association. And those can be really cool as well. So yes, right. Definitely, when Higher Logic did a lot of their acquisitions, things did change a bit there. So a lot of our listeners work with Association communities, or there's a lot of nonprofits that aren't associations, but operate with their memberships that way, what specific strategies do you use with working with an association community versus a maybe a b2c community, there is a good amount of overlap, right. But at the same time, I really do see associations or that kind of professional and not for profit sort of community, as certainly unique. So I have three things, actually, that I can think of that are things that I try to focus on, specifically with associations and their communities. So first, associations often already have a culture of volunteerism. So leveraging their existing volunteer pool to champion the community is a really great start members often prefer within the community to hear from their peers, rather than to hear from Association staff. So whenever I can engage a volunteer to share new posts and answer others posts, that's what we want to do. And community volunteer roles are a great first step into volunteering for those who don't have past volunteer experience. And for associations or organizations that have things like a volunteer board or committees. It's just kind of a good starting path and getting them into that full longer volunteer path with your association. Then second, I'm also big on defining your communities purpose. This is definitely applicable to all organizations, but it's interesting when you work with associations. Of course they all have their own mission and vision. For the association as a whole, but they often forget that they should also define those things, their mission, their vision and their purpose statements specifically for their online community as well. So this is a template I got from Carrie Melissa Jones of years ago, and I've been following it for a long time, but I just really love it. And I think it's a great starting place to get people to to find their purpose statement, which is your organization gathers, insert your specific audience, define your specific audience to an insert two to three verb statements. So that and like insert the value that members get from participating in the community. So having something like that that is very specifically one sentence about your community about the value that members are going to get out of the community based on what they specifically do in your community. That's huge. That's just a great starting point to be sure that then every tactic or every objective you're working toward with your community from there, you can always go back to that statement and just say, does this work toward this same goal? Is this achieving these values for our members that we have promised to the members, I do love to make the purpose statement visible to members put this like on the homepage of your community, put it in your onboarding emails, you know, make it visible, make this something that is public, and it's a little bit of a marketing tool, too. So you want to be sure you're as specific as possible in that purpose statement, right? I really hate it. When I see people will do their first draft of this when I'm working with them. And we'll kind of talk through it. And they'll say something like, well, we engage

and collaborate and build the future of the industry together. That's awesome. But that is not nearly specific enough to compel people to want to visit your community over and over. So right, you often just want a workshop that get as specific and unique to your organization and the value you bring for your members and what your members care about in that. So right for any community, that's super helpful, but I always find it so interesting, how many nonprofits haven't gone through that exercise yet, even if they've had a community for years, but it's never too late. So dive into that exercise. But and then last, the biggest issue, I really do find with increasing engagement, particularly with Association communities is actually awareness. And this is kind of a funny one. And it sort of gets to the fact of like associations have generally an aging membership. And that is one of the biggest issues that associations are facing today, right how to appeal to incoming generations into the industry, new people in the profession. So really two folds, that the younger generations just aren't really listening maybe or just don't really understand the more like traditional professional online community, while they're so aware and used to social media. And then you've got, you know, the older generations who sometimes still just won't even understand the concept of maybe a forum or haven't used something like that previously. So making 100% sure all of your members know what your community is, where to find it, and what benefits live within it. That's huge, right? Because when you say the word community, or our community or association, name, community, or whatever that is, or you have a fancy name for it, or it's called Connect or something, I still feel like just by saying the name of your community is not enough, right staff or people internally, that's so obvious, but to members that's kind of meaningless. Or they might just think, oh, yeah, you know, the membership like I'm in, I'm in the association. So therefore, that's just part of the quote unquote, community of the members, and they think of it not as something that's a solid, valuable benefit. So being really clear with what your community is, how people access it, and what they can find and what value they can get for using the community. Definitely huge right and kind of goes back to that purpose statement, making that clear. putting that out there in the world, as many places as you can super helps with this as well. Another thing that I'm very particular on when I'm working with an organization is to talk about the importance of training all of their staff on the community, so that any one of them can talk about it with their members on calls, on meetings. And at live events. You want to make sure everybody at the organization internally can definitely talk about your community as well. So those are my big things that I have found are potentially most important for the association community space.

**Jim Storer 09:43**

That was a lot and I'm going to try to loop back to something you said earlier about Karis template and we'll do what we can to link that up in the show notes so that folks that are listening along are able to easily access that and take a look at it and maybe use it themselves. That last point of about socializing the community and the value of the community and how people can engage in the community. One question that I think about in that area, specifically when I'm working with associations is the executives at associations are not necessarily seeing the value and community as readily as I think they should, it seems to me, and I would love your take on this, that an online community is such a natural extension to the work that associations do that it seems just like such a no brainer, but there is some resistance within associations to do what we've always done, quote, unquote. And I just wonder if you've come across that and specifically in thinking about executives, how you get them over the hurdle and get them really embracing the idea of online community, right,

**Catherine Hackney 10:48**

that is huge all the time with any community really need those higher ups, those execs bought in to the community. So that right when there's a bit of a downturn, that the community is not the first thing to be slashed in the budget, because with your membership, you don't want community to sort of come and go, that'll be really challenging to keep engagement and keep trust in your community over time. So you've definitely need that buy in. Unfortunately, like, I agree, I feel like it's such a no brainer, or it should be especially for Association spaces that when there is pushback, or just a not full understanding, I don't think there's any silver bullet, right, it's really challenging. But there are definitely resources online about things like kind of managing up or having those conversations so that you can defend your point with somebody above you, or start working with your most immediate supervisor and get them bought in and help them give them those talking points. So they can talk to their most immediate supervisor to just kind of goes up the chain a little bit that way. I would also try and lean on organizations like ASAE, a little bit you have access to that reach out to I know they have a thriving community, ask other organizations, can you share big wins from your community or after launching an online community for your membership? What benefits have you seen to the association is it increased member retention or that increased loyalty increased spending dollars on things like events or other publications are paid for resources that they offer anything where you can kind of lean on other organizations to help you out and give you some of that data that you can then say, hey, this other organization who runs like our organization is doing this, and it's going really well, and they're getting these specific benefits from it. That's why I want to do that at our organization, I really believe that we can also get these kinds of benefits out of it, and that it will just really with Association communities, it comes down to increasing that loyalty. And generally member retention, right ROI is always so difficult to kind of dig into. But when you have data or have access to the right data, and you can connect it, you'll see things like those people who are more active in a community are more likely to renew their membership with you, you're making them feel like they're really part of the organization. And that is worth their time. So they're less likely to forget to renew or drop their membership purposefully. So where you can kind of talk to other people who are doing it and doing it well and bring back those success stories. Hopefully, that would really help persuade your own executives

**Shannon Abram 13:31**

have a bit of a follow up. And as I like, I thought of the question, then you sort of started to answer it. But I would love to know, in compiling things like dashboards, specifically for Association clients, are there metrics that you found really pushed the needle for that, that help with renewals that help people hone in on programming that really speaks to Association people that

**Catherine Hackney 13:54**

also can be very difficult depends on what your platform is, if you can get a good data out of what's going on in your community. That's awesome. That is always something that I look at when I am shopping for a community platform or helping somebody research what's the right fit for them access to your communities, data is huge for me just a few that come to the top of my mind, right, really having staff and volunteers working together to make sure that virtually every post gets a response, right? Sometimes it's not perfectly possible to do 100%. But get as close as you can to at least some kind of response to every thread to at least make your members feel heard if they are putting something out there into the community. Sometimes it's just sort of like informational posts, but even like a thank you

follow up or things like that is helpful for the person not to feel like it's just them in this like empty void in a way nobody's seeing what they're putting out there. So making sure every post gets some kind of response is a big one that also kind of goes into the average number of replies per thread that I really liked to pay attention to, too, because an association community is not a customer support community. Most of the time when there's a question posted to an association communities discussions, there's not just one right answer, right? It's often about like, what would you do in this situation? Or I have this coming up at work, like, what is some advice? So it's great to really keep the encouragement, or full discussions in that space, right? So we want to see a higher than normal average number of replies per post rate with associations because it's much more about that like conversation and bringing in multiple perspectives into that discussion on each thread. Where that makes sense. Versus like a customer support community might be like, there's one right answer, and then you're done. And you've done your job, and you've done it well for that situation. But you know, with associations, we really want to see true dialogue happening. It's not just one response per post, either, especially for those more engaging things.

**Jim Storer** 15:57

It's interesting, I hadn't really thought about that distinction between customer support communities and association communities. But it's really fascinating to me, because if that's true, I believe it probably is, then Association communities may take more time to get to the comfort level where the actual dialogue happens, because the kinds of conversations that don't just have one answer or a higher order, community behavior, and it takes a lot more time for members typically to get comfortable to really engage in that kind of behavior. So I guess the where I'm netting out on this is, if you're running an association community, it might take you a little bit longer to get to the point where both you and your executive team are looking at the community and saying this is really an incredible engagement, it just might take more time to get to that level of behavior. Yes,

**Catherine Hackney** 16:49

that's totally fair. No community happens very quickly anyways. And then this is one of those areas where I do love kind of leaning on volunteers as much as possible, right, peer to peer, but also you're managing it from behind a little bit and making sure that your volunteers are doing responses and also training your volunteers so that they are really well versed in asking questions in the right way, as well. And sometimes even just having a volunteer kind of reframe of the original question that a member might post so that it's either more encouraging for people to want to respond to it, or whatever that might be, and have them model that behavior is really gonna help you. But yeah, it definitely does not happen overnight,

**Jim Storer** 17:32

I just want to highlight something that you just said, to make sure that our listeners hear it a second time, which is the managing from behind, which is such an important concept to internalize if you're a community manager, community builder, because what might work on social media kind of like to get out in front rah rah, like, really try to get people excited about something? Well, that can be important in community building, it's much more important to learn how to manage from behind learn how to push other folks, both in public and in private, to engage in the community. And so I just wanted to make sure



that folks heard that understood. You know why you said it when you said it, and that it's a critical point to community building. Yeah,

**Shannon Abram 18:15**

absolutely. So imagine you are in an elevator, and the other person who gets in is like, Oh, I work with Association communities to I'm brand new to this, one thing would you want to tell them about specifically working with Association communities.

**Catherine Hackney 18:30**

Always a fun conversation, when people are new, and I kind of hate to bring it down a little bit or kind of come at that from like, a almost feels a little bit negative, I think, but I find this to be so very important. That might scare a few people. But I'll try to explain. moderation is key. And don't let your organizational politics dictate how your community will run. So what I mean by that is don't let your more senior members, actual members, I don't mean staff members necessarily in this situation. So members who have been part of the Association for several several years, or even like your past volunteers, your past board members, do not let them be the ones who are running the show or becoming gatekeepers of your community, you really don't want that to happen. I do see that and hear that often. Where it's just like, Oh, it's a political decision. Like we're not able to do something or tell someone No, just because of whatever position they're in or who they are. No, I'm not okay with that. And associations community must feel open to all members and all of their levels of experience. So if a higher up is telling you something like we can't close that group for political reasons, or we can't moderate that person's posts, blah, blah. I would be pushing back on that pretty hard, because those decisions can seriously harm the entire community. No one person is so in Orton that their desires should tell you how to run the community. If communities and your job description of that should be what you are taking control of. Right? So and knowing how to manage these situations is a tough one, it's it's the hardest part, I think of community management with associations. If your organization is like that is a really hard situation to be in. But I kind of mentioned earlier a little bit about managing up but there are a lot of resources out there on how to manage up. So if you have somebody who's been on staff longer than you, or they are above you in the organization and telling you, you know, don't do this within the community, look up some of those resources, try to manage up a little bit have those conversations, learn how to communicate the why behind sound community decisions, and why it's not okay to just say, yeah, that's, that's a political situation, or it's a person we just can't censor, that can get you into really deep dark holes. And that's not good for community, do your research on things like that. So you can have those sorts of difficult conversations so that the community doesn't needlessly suffer, and you feel like you can't do your job to the best of your ability.

**Jim Storer 21:10**

That's good advice. It's always a challenge when you've got to manage up like that. But I think you've offered some good resources. And maybe Shannon will try to link up a couple of resources in the show notes as well. So I'd like to ask you a question about programs that you've developed within Association communities that have been effective and uh, specifically, I'm interested in kind of low effort, low lift high value programs, and they could be specific types of content, it could be events could be something that you've developed along with your clients that you feel like this is a home run. And if

most Association communities aren't doing this, it's a myth. So giving you an opportunity to share one of your tricks of the trade so to speak,

**Catherine Hackney** 21:54

it is a challenging one, because low effort, but high reward or high return, it's so challenging, because what always just comes back to my mind, I think is I really do love encouraging leveraging volunteers to the maximum, but that does take quite a bit of effort, right? So I definitely want to bring it up. Again, leveraging your volunteers as much as you can. And right doing that management from behind the scenes a bit is definitely going to be worth it. But you know, to start something that is low effort, and is really worth doing, I would say is cleaning up and simplifying your community. So if you're experiencing dips in engagement, go back to basics. Even if your community is 10 years old, if you're stumped, or at a point where things are only going just slightly, and continuously downhill, go back to basics, clean out anything that is not bringing high value to your members that might be extra links in your navigation or extra groups that aren't necessary to keep alive. This is one that I see all the time, especially with associations because you have so many things potentially like chapters and committees, or just different areas of an industry for your membership that you cover. And so you just create a new group within your community for each one of those. And I've seen communities with hundreds of individual groups that members are able to join on their own, but it just gets so messy and so confusing, and really intimidating. So cut the fat, get things simplified. And that's always a really great place to start. Use any data you can get your hands on, including member interviews and surveys to understand what members care about so that you can make those things front and center of your community now in the navigation and on the homepage. But also another low, hopefully low lift I would say is don't leave your community all on its own in a little silo where it's just the community and the only time your members hear about community is through their community digests or notifications, be sure that you're bringing community highlights into other channels like social posts, non community focused newsletters, mentioned continuing conversations in the community at the close of events, make sure your staff are all capable and intelligent with talking to members about the community and all it has to offer. Like I mentioned before, this all kind of goes back to that issue of awareness and a full understanding of what your community is, and why your members should care about it. If you need a place to start, that's where I feel like it always is auditing a community you need to do some of these things to get back to those basics. And then you can really launch into things like having networking events or community specific events where it's depending on your association and there are certainly ones right that offer certifications or accreditations and other things like that. And I've also found things like ask no organizations, name questions or open hours with our organization so that members from the community can come in and talk to your staff who are experts on like the certification process the accreditation process, the was a really cool ways to bring staff and members together for something of value within the community having things like live chats, and that that might happen literally in a discussion thread on the community platform. So it's not so much like a live event, or you can do it on Zoom, just set a timeframe for that and make sure it's a topic that's of interest to your member or, or hopefully timely in the industry that they're all working in and just continue to hold those kinds of community specific events that also helped to bring people back to the community over and over.

**Shannon Abram** 25:34

I think that's great advice. And I do think a lot of that repeated, and sometimes asynchronous stuff is especially great for an association audience that maybe doesn't always engage in the same way that the support community might engage. I would love to kick off our speed round, which to be fair, you are not prepared for and that is the point. It's very exciting. And we just want you to say whatever the first thing that comes to your mind is, are you ready? Yes. Question number one, are you Team dog, or Team Cat? Oh,

**Catherine Hackney** 26:07

it is both. I used to be such a cat person. But now I have a dog. So I'm such a dog person these days?

**Jim Storer** 26:12

Wow, do you have both or just a dog these days,

**Catherine Hackney** 26:15

I always grew up with both one cat and one dog. And then when I was younger and out of college, I had a cat. And then after I no longer had my cat spent a few years without a pet and then I got a dog once I became a consultant, I was not leaving my house very often. And a dog was a really good reason to force me to go on walks even before the pandemic, so I definitely couldn't live without her now sounds

**Jim Storer** 26:40

like we're living parallel lives. I grew up with dogs and cats. It was all living together. And then I had a cat early on. And now I have a dog. So we're living parallel lives. It sounds like

**Catherine Hackney** 26:51

Yeah, that's great.

**Jim Storer** 26:53

Second question is some of these some of these came about when we were podcasting during the pandemic? But what are you binging right now?

**Catherine Hackney** 27:02

I'm terrible. I don't watch TV.

**Shannon Abram** 27:04

It doesn't have to be TV. It

**Jim Storer** 27:06

doesn't have to be TV.

**Catherine Hackney** 27:07

Okay. I guess we'll say puzzles. Yeah, I mean, I'm a reader. But so just books in general, but then also puzzles these days, because, yeah, I'm much more of a movie person than a television person. So and it's even been a while I think since the TV has been on at all. Yeah, that's good.



**Shannon Abram** 27:28

What is your favorite work from home hack? For those people in our audience who might be continuing to work from home?

**Catherine Hackney** 27:34

This I feel like it's always a question and this is a cliché answer, have a separate space that is work only. Right. Like that's, that is the biggest thing for me. I feel like if I cannot see how stuff or you know, I'm not working in my kitchen, where it might be dirty, or I need to do dishes or I'm not seeing laundry and stuff like that. I don't get as distracted. Having a very, very work dedicated space is super important to me, but I don't know, it always kind of came naturally to me. And I just love working from home.

**Jim Storer** 28:04

It's funny, I subscribe to the having your own office, your own space for work. The other thing I've done for a long time is if I choose to log in and do work, after hours, I do it on battery so that I can't get sucked into doing too much work. The laptop will tell me when my work is over for the evening.

**Catherine Hackney** 28:24

Gym we have more in common than I thought we did. I'll do the same thing. Especially we tried to take like long weekend as vacations and things like that. And I will take my laptop but I will not take my charger. You

**Jim Storer** 28:37

are even more militant about it than I am. I have a charger but yeah, I like to let the computer tell me when I'm done. Yeah. So now if you tell us that, that you can't answer this one. Well, no, we really have a problem. What's your favorite dessert? Oh

**Catherine Hackney** 28:52

my gosh, anything chocolate chocolate lava cake brownies.

**Jim Storer** 28:56

I had chocolate ice cream that I actually liked for the first time like I was never a chocolate ice cream person. And then a couple of weekends ago I had a single origin chocolate chocolate ice cream that just blew my socks off.

**Catherine Hackney** 29:09

Again, that's hilarious. I also don't like chocolate ice cream. So you'll have to let me know what brand that was or where you found it because I'd like to try it out because, right have chocoholic for everything except for just flavored ice cream. It never seems to be right. Catherine,

**Shannon Abram** 29:26

what is your community superpower?

**Catherine Hackney** 29:29

Oh, I'm really good at working behind the scenes. And I like being able to do that. As a community manager. So much of the work is behind the scenes. I am an introvert so I don't always love it where there are the situations that I have to be like out front and center of the community or fully running the events and things like that. I don't love the spotlight on me. So I really love when I can be shining the spotlight on volunteers and on members who are just doing great job in the community and are super active being able to stay behind the scenes and champion everybody else. From the background is I think something that hopefully I'm pretty good at doing. Basically,

**Jim Storer** 30:09

we find that a lot of community builders are introverts. And it's just they, they love being able to be that the behind the scenes person who's pulling levers and, and figuring out where they can optimize. So our last question here is who or what is your community inspiration?

**Catherine Hackney** 30:26

Right now, I would have to say, Brian OWB. Linger is a big one. I actually just met him for the first time yesterday, we had lunch together, because who knew he's also in Colorado, and his free courses and free templates and how much he speaks are always so insightful and so helpful. And even though I've been consulting and contracting specifically on communities for about seven years, you always have something more to learn, or there's always something new coming along. So paying attention to those other folks who are out there speaking and sharing their expertise in the realm of communities so big. So that is definitely a big one. And just being inspired by the communities that I'm working for. And the volunteers that have for one specific client, we have a group of community champions and they are so dedicated and so willing that it makes the job a little too easy. Right, that's so unusual, but it's just so so great to get to work with volunteers who are really into it, love the community themselves are true evangelists of it, and that always inspires me. That's amazing.

**Jim Storer** 31:30

Well, Catherine, we've had a great time talking with you. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. Yeah, happy to amazing. We will put all the links up in the show notes and we look forward to seeing you in the community.

**Catherine Hackney** 31:43

That sounds great. Thank you.