

It's time to think about events, brands and companies as communities

#RemoteAgainstCoronavirus

Introduction

As Coronavirus continues to spread around the world, governments have been forced to impose strict social distancing measures, even limiting gatherings to a maximum of 2 people in the UK and Germany.

Events have been cancelled all around the world, from SXSW to Glastonbury, and even the most reluctant organisation of all, the IOC, has been forced to postpone the Olympics, an unprecedented peace time move.

Just as organisations have had to rapidly move their workforces out of the office and learn how to make remote working work overnight – so now [a staggering number](#) of workshops, promotional events and conferences are either being cancelled or becoming online only events.

At Hoxby we're concerned by this.

As we [said last week](#) – rather than simply adopting traditional working methods virtually, organisations need to learn and embrace **effective remote working methods**. So rather than simply translating physical events online, organisations need to think about the overall objective of the event and then consider what the most effective virtual solution is.

There are parallels with how many traditional organisations approached the digital revolution.

For instance, many newspapers initially simply put their traditional content online, perhaps on a kindle app or behind a paywall. They didn't think much about what digital could mean for their business – such as individuals curating and personalising their newsfeed, or becoming contributors through sharing photos, opinion pieces or local research.

Only when The Guardian for example, realised that becoming 'digital' wasn't the same as having a digital distribution channel and adapted it's business model, with a £3 a month supporter subscription and open journalism model did it finally [start turning a profit](#).

The same principles applied when digital hit the music industry. Rather than competing with HMV to sell music albums online, Spotify's platform enables a whole new range of services, such as introducing you to new bands you might like, letting you know what gigs are taking place in your city, and curating and sharing playlists and podcasts with friends.

The same principles apply to events. ***We believe the value of an event is its people and that the answer is not to do an in-person event online, but to create a virtual community instead.***

When building a virtual community, there are three key considerations to address (which helpfully align with our [Futureproofing model of work](#)) - **Purpose, Culture** and **Structure**.

Understand the Authentic Purpose

The first thing you should think of is 'What is the **purpose** of this event?'

When considering how to develop a virtual community in place of your event, there has to be a clear purpose or meaning which people can connect to. If it is just a networking event, whilst you might be able to bring people together on a one-off occasion, this usually won't be enough to build a following over a period of time.

From the clients we've worked with, we've identified 5 key purposes to events. Often events have more than one purpose, but we believe that whichever of these purposes are involved, there are benefits to curating an online community instead.

Let's consider each of these in turn:

- 1. Sharing or broadcasting information**
- 2. Bringing key customers or influencers together**
- 3. Social bonding or facilitating connections between people**
- 4. Learning and development**
- 5. Input or alignment on a project**

1. Sharing or broadcasting information

One of the most common purposes of an event is to broadcast information. Perhaps we think people can't be trusted to read an email, or the information is too detailed or complex. Perhaps people will need to ask questions, or we think they need to take a drink of the company Kool-aid.

The key benefit of a virtual community is that rather than broadcasting to an ambivalent audience, who research shows are likely to only be paying, at best, [continuous partial attention](#), you can consolidate information into content people can access when they need it.

The principle of #self-serve is a core principle in Hoxby and is relevant here. By increasing autonomy by working remotely, you decrease synchronicity but not at the expense of engagement. In fact, what happens is that people consume information when they're ready to give it their full attention. By adopting this principle, you can still broadcast to a large number of people but increase the impact of the message. Furthermore, you invite the audience to ask questions and to participate in conversation that deepens their understanding and engagement.

2. Bringing key customers or influencers together on a product or agenda

Another key reason for hosting an event might be to bring some influential clients, customers or key decision makers together and use this as a chance to drive a certain agenda, topic or message.

Whilst in-person events bring these people together on a one-off occasion (with great cost and effort), a virtual community provides the opportunity to do so on an on-going basis.

This tactic has been used to great effect by a number of successful unicorn businesses. For instance Monzo (a digital bank born in the UK now with over 2 million customers) [share their product backlog online](#) and then facilitate an online community forum of their most active users, which acts as a first point of contact for customer issues, reducing customer service costs. Monzo also harness their crowdfunding investors to create a community of active users who are empowered and incentivised to generate further word of mouth referrals (with bespoke bank cards, invites to online and in person meet ups etc.), reducing customer acquisition costs and marketing spend.

Of course, when it's possible, in person meet ups still have a place. At Hoxby, we have both #HoxbyHome meet-ups, and a yearly #HoxbyRefresh festival to get together in person.

However, the physical event isn't the currency of events any longer. Making people feel part of a virtual community is.

3. Social bonding, Networking and facilitating connections

A third reason for organising events is the dreaded N word. Facilitating connections between people is important though, and evidence suggests that we create social bonds [most effectively when we do this in person](#).

Whilst building strong friendship bonds 'of the kind we might turn to in a crisis' may be more effective face to face, for working relationships we can be much more efficient at creating and developing these online.

One of the biggest issues with networking events is getting stuck in a conversation with someone whom we have nothing in common with, and no mutually beneficial connections from knowing, but because of social graces we don't feel we can leave until the conversation comes to a natural ending point.

In a virtual community however, this problem never arises. We can do our research, single out those we want to talk to and skip some of the basic pleasantries to get straight to the good stuff. We can connect with lots of people at the same time, initiate lots of productive, useful conversations, and end those that aren't.

It might sound a bit Darwinian, but it's far more effective than drinking lukewarm coffee whilst trying to corner someone near the loo's just before the next presentation starts.

4. Learning and Development

Another key reason to organise events is training and development for employees.

It certainly looks good to say that you send all your potential leaders on a training course – but the reality is that [most of the reported benefits from training courses are down to the people they meet](#) during the training course, rather than any tangible learnings they take away from the training itself.

When learning is the core purpose of a virtual community, content can be personalised to the individual and we also open up the chance to learn from the knowledge, experience and connections of everyone in the community. Large scale events for training and development purposes tend to be less effective, particularly as [we learn best in small groups](#).

5. Input or alignment on a project or strategy

Another key reason we bring people together physically is often to make everyone feel bought into a project, or to generate some new ideas. The best ideas don't always come from those in the most powerful positions, so we might want their the team's input on a project we are kicking off, or feedback on some initial project ideas.

These are typically smaller workshops rather than large scale gatherings and are more collaborative and participatory. Here in particular, virtual events struggle to match the same levels of engagement as in person workshops.

Instead, virtual communities can enable diverse teams to come together and work in asynchronous ways. At Hoxby we often use crowdsourcing and crowdstorming techniques to draw on the collective brainpower of our community. This process can be incredibly powerful when seeking to gather diverse perspectives and new thinking quickly. It's also a great way to involve every member of the community in creating and shaping the work of the group as a whole.

Set a Familial Culture

As well as understanding and clearly defining the authentic purpose of the event or virtual community you are creating, the second key element is to build culture. As Edgar Schein, a leading professor at MIT quipped, 'if you don't manage culture, it manages you'.

We believe there are four key tangible and intangible elements to consider when shaping the virtual community culture.

Unique Practices

This usually manifests as members of the group saying 'this is how things are done around here'. To build this, start with thinking about what makes the community or event you are creating unique?

From O2 priority moments for their customers, to Brewdog's 'Annual General Mayhem' event for their investors, the unique things that make people feel part of the community are crucial to generating a following and making people feel they are a meaningful part of the community. These don't always have to be big things. At Hoxby, it's often just sending a welcome pack or a birthday card to our associates.

The importance of unique practices in shaping the culture was demonstrated recently by Southampton football club. After a period of poor results and appointing a new manager, they attempted to go further in changing the cultural feeling around the club in their next match – the [manager bought all the supporters a free pint before the game](#). Something in this must have worked – they went on to beat Arsenal 3-2.

Whether these unique practices are small or large, physical or virtual doesn't really matter. Whether they actually help to shape the culture and the way people feel about being part of the community does.

Model behaviours

Culture manifests itself by how people react to challenges, to boundaries imposed and to each other. It's the reaction of the community when someone says something controversial – does everyone else agree or stay silent?

We have discussed in detail the important role of virtual leaders [before](#) – and it is just as important here to model the right behaviours. It requires a conscious effort to reward and reinforce - and it can help to identify early on some cultural architects within the community to help. At Hoxby, we did this ourselves, and invited a small team of associates in the early days to participate in shaping the culture in their own image.

These things ultimately define your community, and are critical to helping everyone understand the culture, and the behaviours that are expected within it.

Owned symbols

Physical reminders of the culture, such as artifacts, objects and symbols, also play an important role in cultural reinforcement.

In the army, this might be ceremonial flag waving rituals, medals of honour, uniforms and polished boots. At Bolt, the Eastern European taxi company rivalling Uber, the most common sight in the office is that of a stuffed Honey Badger – an animal famous for fighting animals much bigger than it in the wild. It acts as a constant reminder that rather

than running away from challenges from its larger competitors, Bolt is intent on picking a fight with them.

In a virtual community, these symbols can often be more subtle, but it is equally important to have a number of ownable elements which help to shape the cultural experience people have in the community.

At Hoxby, as well as the 'refresher' symbol, which acts as a constant reminder that we are 'refreshing work', we also created a number of symbols and emojis for various uses as symbols of the brand. We even use the term 'Hoxbies' to refer to each other, a practice which many of the big tech firms seem to have picked up on.

Shared beliefs

Ultimately, a familial culture is about feeling comfortable about how the community operates and ensuring that everyone feels like they have a set of beliefs in common which are well understood.

In the context of an event turned virtual community, part of the forming stage will likely be going on a journey to create these shared beliefs, and this culture together as a community, through the decisions made and the way people engage and choose to act.

Create a Super-Agile Structure

The third critical element in creating a successful virtual community is putting in place the right structure.

Technology is more than an enabler - reimagine the physical event as a digital platform

Whilst technology is often referred to as an 'enabler', this terminology can be misleading and downplays the role of something which is actually transformative. Not only has technology radically reshaped business models, but from our experience at Hoxby, it also shapes our attitudes and behaviours in everything we do.

At Hoxby, all of our technology systems are chosen with one of our core values in mind - **#lovewhatyoudo**. Whether it is software for accounting (Xero), project management (Basecamp) or communication (Slack), we believe that these technologies impact how we experience work, and therefore we make decisions on which to use based on whether we will enjoy working with them, rather than primarily on cost or features.

The transformative nature of technology is clear just by taking a look at the most valuable companies in the world. The majority – Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Alibaba, Uber - all were enabled by digital technology and have some form of platform business model. Rather than making things, they create value by facilitating exchanges between groups,

between sellers and buyers (Amazon), between drivers and riders (Uber) or content producers and cat-video watchers (Google).

When thinking about a virtual community rather than an event, the same thinking should apply. Rather than, what are we providing at the event, we should ask **how do you best facilitate a value exchange between the exhibitors and the audience?**

There are three key questions to focus on here, **matchmaking, tools & services**, and **rules and standards**.

Match making

Once you have members in your community, you need to figure out how best to connect them. In effect, what is the digital version of the floorplan? What is the user journey we expect the members of the community to take? If you were going to have exhibitors, what is the interface between them and the audience?

Facilitating match making effectively is where the value of data comes in. Understanding what is important to each user group in your virtual community – and quantifying this – enables you to find ways to connect users as efficiently as possible. On product platforms, this is Amazon's 'recommended for you' algorithm. In a virtual recruitment platform (such as LinkedIn), its recruiters being suggested potential candidates by skills, experience or previous roles they have searched for. For YouTube, connecting viewers to content was greatly improved by switching from promoting recommendations based on number of views, to promoting videos which had a longer average viewing time.

What this means for your virtual community will depend on the purpose of the event. In a virtual learning environment, it might mean promoting recommendations for which training course to take next, or which coaches you might be a good personality match with. A word of warning though - don't expect any plaudits for matchmaking – because when it's done well, we hardly notice it's being done at all.

At Hoxby, we use Donut for random match making and Elfster for random matching at Secret Santa time - and we also structure our channels to make sure that everyone with similar skillsets and interests can find each other quickly.

Tools and services

Linked to matchmaking, the tools and services you provide on the platform require a good understanding of what is of value to the community, and then providing the services or surfacing the experience that they most need.

Tools are self-service and decentralised – anyone can use them, and they don't require ongoing involvement or assistance from the platform – such as photo filters on Instagram, or calendar scheduling on Airbnb. At Hoxby we try to keep our tools as 'self-serve' as

possible – by keeping all of our documentation, branding, templates and training materials in shared drives.

Services on the other hand are centralised and require constant involvement. Customer support is the most common example, or technology support where people are struggling with something.

Getting the balance right between self-service ‘tools’ and services is important – services can provide a buffer when things go wrong and keep community users happy – but where possibly try not to over centralise. Hoxby’s wellbeing week for example is curated and provided by the community and provides a far broader range of activities for everyone to get involved in than if it had been organised by the central team. On the other hand, if new joiners have some issues with the platform, we have a channel on Slack dedicated to on-boarding issues which provides human support.

It is also critical to keep these tools and services in constant evolution depending on how they are being used and the wider context of the changing marketplace. At Hoxby we realise there are often better ways of doing things out there and try to continuously trial new things that might be beneficial to the community.

Rules and standards

Finally, it’s really important to set clear rules and standards for virtual communities. Virtual communities that stall after early growth – such as MySpace or Friendster – have typically done a poor job of governing communities.

In the same way as at events where you might have rules about sharing on social media or the use of mobile phones, in virtual communities you need to let people know what the guardrails are, and what behaviours are expected of them. As Ryan Sarver, the Head of Platform at Twitter puts it, “Our job is to create incentives and disincentives to produce the best behaviour, the best outcome, from a bunch of people you’ll never meet”.

In addition to basic rules of engagement and behaviour, transparency is crucial as the downside of a remote community is a lack of visibility and passive listening. Over-communication and high degrees of transparency are key for ensuring people aren’t left feeling in the dark.

This is what enables communities to come together from anywhere, at any time, not just to arrive in person at a given day and location.

At Hoxby, we aren’t just talking about this – we actively build virtual communities ourselves

As well as being a virtual community of 1,000 Hoxbies for the last five years, we’ve also recently launched RemoteWorkmates.com as a platform to help employees working remotely for the first time get support from seasoned remote workers in a virtual

buddying system, as well as through a collective exercise challenge and an open-to-everyone wellbeing week.

So rather than re-arranging your events to simply move online, **think about how to build a virtual community instead** and create valuable connections for the long-term.

If there is any further information that you would find useful in implementing the Hoxby Futureproofing model, or creating communities to replace events during the Coronavirus pandemic, or if we can help your organisation directly in setting up the right working practices, please do contact us directly at enquiries@hoxby.com or use the hashtag #remoteagainstcoronavirus - we are keen to do whatever we can to provide the right tools and support businesses who need it during the Coronavirus pandemic.

If you found this document useful, please do forward it on to any other contacts you have who you think may find interesting.

Spread the word. Stop the spread.

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