

Cricket Wireless Sales Training Goes Tribal

**OR, HOW A SMALL TEAM DEALT
WITH QUADRUPLING ITS NUMBER OF
CORPORATE LEARNERS**

BY LINDA GALLOWAY

AT&T closed on its acquisition of Leap Wireless, the parent of the Cricket Wireless, on March 13, 2014. The company's intent was to merge Aio Wireless, AT&T's prepaid wireless subsidiary, with Cricket Wireless, which at the time of acquisition had approximately 5 million customers.

A few days later, Randall Stephenson, AT&T chairman and CEO, stated that he wanted the acquisition to be "the fastest and most successful acquisition AT&T has ever done." He set the goal of operating as one company within 60 days.

This story is about how a small team of training and communication professionals pulled off a massive merger training initiative that touched approximately 20,000 employees, contractors and third-party support personnel in less than two months.

The initiative was built around many of the latest learning trends — social learning,

collaboration, performance support tools and ongoing reinforcements — as well as a solid understanding of the needs and interests of diverse learning audiences and a commitment to reflect and reinforce the legacy Aio business culture.

DAVID MERGES WITH GOLIATH

"The news of the potential Cricket acquisition was a bit overwhelming, given that the company was many times bigger than Aio," says Michelle Randolph, director of processes, training and communication for Aio Wireless and now Cricket Wireless. "The first thing we did was to sit down together as a team and look at our best practices. We talked about what could scale — and what couldn't. We also spent a lot of time thinking about what we might want to do differently and better."

The Aio team came at the project with a very modern mindset, one that was fostered by AT&T. "When AT&T spun off Aio Wireless, it encouraged us to create a culture that was based on mobile access, emphasized self-serve learning, and supported ongoing business change. AT&T

viewed Aio almost as a test lab, where new technologies and practices could be tried out," says Randolph.

Consequently, according to Randolph, the Aio culture also accepted well-intentioned mistakes as a part of "selling fast."

"We know that being wrong is part of the process. When we make a mistake, we quickly pivot," she says.

Prior to the acquisition's official close, the team had limited information about Cricket Wireless for planning. In any merger or acquisition transaction involving public companies, the SEC prohibits the sharing of operational details until the deal is final. "In order to get started on planning as soon as possible, we made many assumptions. It turned out that many of them were wrong, so of course, that set us back a little."

Aside from the aggressive timeline, the team's training and communication plan for the merger was influenced by these primary factors:

>> Most Cricket employees work out of small stores with only one or two co-workers at a time. Therefore, store reps have to be highly self-sufficient.

cricket



(Left to right) Chip Ramsey, CEO, Intellum; Michelle Randolph, Director of Processes, Training and Communication, Cricket Wireless; Tad Kozak, Sales Training Strategy Manager, Cricket Wireless; David Dayton, Customer Support Training Strategy Manager, Cricket Wireless



Cheryl Milejczak, Communications Manager, Cricket Wireless

- >> Cricket employees didn't have corporate email addresses; in the store, most had access only to mobile phones.
- >> Cricket store reps would be the merger's primary "customer ambassadors." Therefore, it was critical that they could positively present the acquisition's benefits to customers, answer their questions fully, and handle required transactions smoothly.
- >> Training had to be cost efficient. Cricket dealers would not be charged for any merger-related training.
- >> Training also had to encompass approx-

imately 1,500 Cricket customer support representatives employed by multiple call center providers.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

Since the subsidiary's inception in 2013, Aio's culture had always emphasized the importance of mobile technology as part of day-to-day business. Cheryl Milejczak, communications manager for Aio Wireless and now Cricket Wireless, knew early on that she wanted to introduce a two-way communication channel into the company,

a channel that would allow people to offer feedback, ask questions, and directly help co-workers.

Milejczak and the Aio team evaluated several networking options. Critical requirements included Android compatibility, excellent support, cost efficiency and an easy-to-use, familiar interface. Employees also wouldn't need an email address in order to use the tool.

In November 2013, the Aio team launched a pilot of Shout!, a social networking tool based on Intellum's Tribe offering. Shout! was launched enterprise-wide in January 2014. The team used it for a variety of field-related communications, from breaking news on network outages to product updates and sales promotions. Employees were encouraged to use it to ask questions and to share helpful hints and resources that colleagues would find helpful.

Milejczak admits she was a little nervous prior to the network's launch: "I was pretty sure our employees would use the network in a professional way while still having fun. But, we didn't know for sure. Also, I wasn't sure my team would be able to support the volume of traffic."

As it turned out, the adoption of Shout! went very smoothly.

The positive Aio rollout gave the team confidence to make Shout! an integral part of the Cricket merger initiative. Cricket employees and other personnel involved in the merger were given access to it almost immediately after the acquisition.

"Because Cricket dealer employees had no way to receive direct company communications before, Shout! was immediately seen as a positive resource," says Milejczak.

"Usage exploded. Shout! lets us push out important communications and materials to all employees in the field. It's immediate; there's no delay and no risk of the information being filtered or perhaps not delivered at all," Milejczak continues. "Plus, it gives employees a way to ask questions and provide feedback, which is especially important for remote workers." When the team has an important message that needs to be highlighted for a period of time, a "sticky note" can be pinned to the top of conversation for as long as needed.

As part of the merger initiative, Shout! tribes were set up for Cricket store reps, third-party customer support personnel,

training contractors, managers and other groups in order to customize communications and encourage collaborations among different audiences. Most of these remain active and widely used for ongoing communications, information sharing and team collaboration.

Some tribes were global and open to anyone involved in the merger. For instance, the “Launch Q&A” tribe was created to specifically address questions and answers related to the launch of the “New Cricket.” This tribe was monitored from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. ET for approximately 60 days following the acquisition close. While the Aio team members had overall responsibility to ensure questions were answered, very often Cricket and Aio employees would jump into conversations to help their colleagues. In fact, Milejczak says that this tribe largely became self-sufficient within a few weeks.

Today, approximately 20,000 people are members of various tribes on Cricket’s Shout! social network. It has emerged to be an essential communication and collaboration tool for Cricket’s diverse and distributed workforce.

TRAINING FOR QUICK SUCCESS

The Aio team identified five primary audiences for merger-related training: employees of company-owned stores, employees of dealer-owned stores, Cricket customer support reps, Aio customer support reps, and other Aio employees. Tad Kozak, sales training strategy manager, and David Dayton, customer support training strategy manager, recognized immediately that the only way to approach the training initiative was by developing core content, tools, and resources that could then be easily customized to meet the needs and interests of these diverse audiences.

The merger’s success largely rested on the shoulders of employees (the face of the new company) to present the benefits of the business change to millions of customers. Therefore, the merger training had to help employees quickly get up to speed on the differences between the AT&T and Cricket networks, learn how to migrate customers from one network to the other, and handle all associated transactions. But, just as importantly, the training had to address questions

‘We took lessons learned ... and combined them with new, mobile technologies.’

—Tad Kozak

and concerns regarding the merger and introduce employees to the new company culture, inherited from Aio Wireless.

“Everyone on our team had been through multiple AT&T mergers before,” says Kozak. “We took lessons learned from each and combined them with new, mobile technologies to tackle this training challenge.”

The team designed an aggressive, three-stage training strategy, which was presented to the Aio executive team prior to the acquisition close and to the Cricket executive team immediately after. After fine-tuning the content, the team tested the training with pilot audiences in early April. The merger training components, all of which were tailored to different audiences, included:

>> One day of instructor-led training fo-

cusing on the new Cricket brand and culture. To supplement its small internal instructor staff, Aio worked with an outside vendor to hire 38 contract instructors, many of whom were associated with Wounded Warriors. “We wanted instructors who would really connect with our audiences and had the personal experience to present this change in a positive light,” says Qioni Green, associate director of training. To provide ongoing support to contract trainers, the team scheduled conference calls, set up a telephone help line, and created a Shout! tribe to reinforce key points, answer questions, and share best practices and successes.

>> A mobile performance support tool designed primarily for employees to use on the sales floor to rapidly access (within three clicks) the information and guidance needed to handle real-time customer questions and issues. The tool provided high-level product and network information and step-by-step guidance for all major system transactions. Since the merger, this tool has been modified and enhanced for use as an onboarding support tool.

>> A library of WBTs, simulations, and detailed documentation covering compliance and privacy issues, network and device training, point of sale system guidance, and customer support. All of these detailed training resources are housed and managed in Cricket’s Knowledge Base (built on Intellum’s Exceed LMS technology). All content

MORE ABOUT THE MERGER

Besides involving a brand change — Aio Wireless would take on the Cricket name — the merger of Aio and Cricket would bring other major changes. Legacy Cricket customers would transition to AT&T’s nationwide wireless network, which is built on international GSM standards. This meant that Cricket stores would stop offering CDMA devices shortly after the acquisition and begin selling GSM devices. Store reps would also help customers convert to the AT&T network. Therefore, Cricket store reps, as well as customer support personnel, had to quickly acquire significant product, network, conversion and transaction knowledge to support customers and answer their questions. Additionally, Aio employees needed to learn how to handle potential questions and requests from Cricket customers that might come their way.

Prior to the acquisition, Aio Wireless, which AT&T launched in May 2013, operated approximately 600 retail stores with approximately 5,000 employees. Today, the combined Cricket Wireless operates approximately 4,000 stores with 15,000 to 21,000 employees. (Most Cricket stores are dealer operated; store workers are employed by the dealers, not AT&T.)



Qioni Green, Associate Director of Training, Cricket Wireless

is also optimized for mobile access. During the merger initiative, employees were directed to these resources through postings in Shout!, which is seamlessly integrated with the Cricket LMS. Employees could simply click on a link and they would be automatically directed to the appropriate resource in the Cricket Knowledge Base.

As the merger training rolled out, Aio team members closely monitored Shout! to see where training reinforcement might be needed. “The postings and questions on social media gave us valuable insights. For instance, if we saw recurring questions regarding a particular topic or issue, we could jump in and schedule an ad hoc webinar to provide more guidance,” says Dayton. “In my world, it’s common to look at metrics such as call durations, first-call resolution, and overall satisfaction and indicators of training success. But Shout! was an excellent, real-time indicator of how the merger training was working.”

COLLABORATION STARTS AT THE TOP

Randolph is quick to praise the teamwork of all involved in the merger train-

ing. “We’re a small but mighty team,” she says. “Because we work so closely together, we’ve never developed silos and we naturally keep each other informed and aligned.”

Interviews for this article surfaced many specific examples of teamwork: taking turns monitoring Shout! during off hours

‘You can’t expect employees to collaborate and support each other if you don’t set an example.’

—Michelle Randolph

for urgent problems; proactively working together to ensure a product update is accurately reflected in all training resources; collaborating to create content and tools that could be easily and efficiently customized for sales or customer support.

“Collaboration has to start at the top,” Randolph says. “You can’t expect employees to collaborate and support each other if you don’t set an example for them. We’re proud of contributing to the building camaraderie we’ve seen throughout Cricket nationwide over the last few months.”

—Linda Galloway is president of insidHR Communications.

TRIBE: SCALING TO MEET THE MERGER CHALLENGE

In the fall of 2013, Aio selected Intellum’s Tribe to use as a networking, information sharing and communication tool for the enterprise. Tribe was rolled out in January 2014, just a few short months before the announcement of the pending acquisition of Cricket Wireless.

With several months of experience under their belts, Randolph’s team had the confidence to make Tribe (branded internally as Shout!) a critical component of the merger training initiative.

Unlike other social tools, Tribe is built around activity streams, which capture posts as well as documents, Web pages, videos, and other materials that Tribe members want to share. A Pinterest-like view of all shared information, coupled with easy-to-use search filters, makes searching for resources efficient.

Tribe members are invited to participate in a tribe; there are no following or ranking features which prevents participation from turning into a popularity contest. Additionally, detailed analytics that show trending topics, most active users, peak activity times and more provide actionable insights. For instance, during the merger, the merger team monitored questions and topics to identify ad hoc training needs that were covered in webinars.

Today, approximately 21,000 Cricket Wireless personnel — from in-store sales reps to support reps to various management teams — use Tribe for ongoing collaboration and communication.