

Sugar rush at the Knowledge Café

How conversation is bringing KM back to the people

David Gurteen's Knowledge Café, hosted by chocolate manufacturer Cadbury at its headquarters in Bournville, England, brought together people to discuss the role of conversation in business.

By Joanna Goodman

What brought me to the UK's most famous chocolate manufacturer?

I have been experimenting with microblogging on Twitter. My growing list of connections is broadening my reading on IT and KM, I am inspired by the quotation tweets and I've also discovered a couple of good restaurants.

Recently, I decided to explore further. Anyone interested in technology will be aware of the webinars, seminars, white papers and other resources promoting social networking as a way of

David Gurteen was organizing a Knowledge Café to discuss: *What is the business role of conversation and how do we encourage more productive conversations within our organization?*

He used Twitter to invite people to participate in face-to-face conversations about conversation.

The tweets in advance of the event promised a lively debate as tweeters bandied jokes around the names of popular Cadbury chocolate bars "Will we have to Wispa?" asked one. "Will the presenter give us a Twirl?" quipped another.

Nearly 50 people met at the Cadbury headquarters, which reflect the company's origins and its expansion into a global brand with Victorian buildings surrounded by a huge hi-tech campus. You can immediately see why it

What is a Knowledge Café?

According to David Gurteen, "A Knowledge Café is designed to engage people with a subject or theme. We start with a short talk and focus on one or two open ended questions.

Participants break into groups to discuss the theme and questions and then reconvene into one large group for a final discussion. The Café is not about making decisions, but about gaining a better mutual understanding of a topic or issue."

The idea is to replicate the atmosphere of casual, but productive discussions between friends and acquaintances in a café or around someone's kitchen table.

It's about using informal engagement to promote empathy and understanding, thereby building productive (working) relationships and avoiding and addressing (potential or actual) problems.

Cadbury KM: using science and technology to create magic

Louise Tirre, from Cadbury's global knowledge management technology and engagement team, explained how Cadbury uses science and technology to create magic.

Louise travels around the world supporting Cadbury's communities of practice, which among other things, discover tastes and preferences of consumers in different regions and use this information to develop brands of chocolate, candy and gum.



boosting your business – and your knowledge base.

So it's interesting – and a little ironic – that I discovered on Twitter a KM event designed to promote face-to-face communication, both in its own format and in its subject matter.

inspired the Roald Dahl novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

After a short networking session, where samples of Cadbury chocolate lifted the mood, we sat down at tables of six for a brief introduction to the Knowledge Café.

KM at Cadbury has developed a variety of resources helping and encouraging people to share information and expertise across the business to develop, share and reuse ideas.

Communities of practice around different specialisms share knowledge and drive innovation.

Cadbury looks outside the business and the industry too. Its Open Innovation Team focuses on collaborating with people outside Cadbury through Web sites that seek input on developing recipes, processes and products.

Cadbury is not just about new ideas. Some of its traditional products are its most successful brands.

The KM team leverages 200 years of inventing chocolate and the company's origins as a family business, reflected in its values and culture and representing a significant part of the brand.

The conversation

Each table discussed the topic and after a few minutes, one or two people moved to another table and discuss the same topic in a different group. Finally, the whole group discussed key themes and issues. For example:

- Internal competition between individuals and teams represents a significant obstacle to productive conversation in business. Potential solutions include recognizing and rewarding collaboration and giving people credit for their ideas. It is useful to set the ground rules at the start of the conversation.

- The right working environment facilitates casual interaction. The dilemma in terms of workplace design is that although it is important to encourage collaboration, people need to be able to work without distractions
- Having separate meetings for discussion and decision-making is a useful way of stimulating open, trusting conversation.
- Productive conversations are not necessarily face-to-face. Virtual teams can work too; success depends on buy-in. For example at Cadbury, people put themselves out to join community of practice teleconferences, notwithstanding the time difference between participants.

Bringing KM back to the people

Knowledge Cafés are a fantastic networking opportunity, whether they are public or within organizations.

In business, they are particularly useful for bringing people together during and after mergers, to build relationships between individuals and teams and transfer tacit or experiential knowledge.

They also benefit educational establishments and communities of practice and interest. Open Knowledge Cafés like the one at Cadbury promote inter-organizational and inter-personal knowledge transfer, helping people in different roles, organizations and sectors learn from each other, offering fascinating insights into different approaches to internal communication.

Knowledge Cafés bring KM back to the people. KM experts, scientists, engineers, civil servants, educators, charity workers and creatives were drawn to the Cadbury event by our interest

in learning and sharing knowledge, by the Internet and even by Twitter!

We discussed how in the world of email, social networking, instant messaging and texting, we can bring the art of conversation back to the workplace – not just having conversations, but having conversations that add value.

The value may or may not be in terms of ROI, making money or saving time. Conversations add value in ways that are difficult to measure: by avoiding misunderstanding, creating synergy between people and making their lives easier, reducing hassle and helping to create a great place to work.

Nor is it just about organizations. Knowledge Cafés can work for just about any special interest group.

“The outcome for participants is what they take away as individuals that they can act on and do differently,” explains David.

The World Café is a case in point, www.theworldcafe.com, having developed a process where people get together to discuss social issues like sustainability – the object of the exercise being making our world a great place to live.

To find out more about Gurteen Knowledge Cafés, visit www.gurteen.com 



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