Yammer≶ Product Manager Homework: LinkedIn Endorsements

LinkedIn

Location: Mountain View, CA
Industry: Social Networking
Users: 300 Million

In September 2012, LinkedIn introduced the endorsements feature, which gives its users the ability to give kudos with just one click. As the company notes, "With just one click, you can now endorse your connections for a skill they've listed on their profile or recommend one they haven't added yet."

PART 1

Q1: What do you think LinkedIn's hypothesis was for the endorsements feature and how do you think they measured results?

A1: I joined LinkedIn on September 7, 2006. My first recommendation was requested on August 2, 2007 and was received on August 6, 2007 (a 4 day gap). My most recent recommendation was requested on September 29, 2014 and was received on December 10, 2014 (a 72 day gap). As you can see, the lag time varies dramatically. LinkedIn wanted to give its users an elegant and meaningful way to show others that they do good work, and the KPI was a certain threshold of recommendations given and received, which was not being met. Users were just not using the recommendation feature as much as Linkedin hoped they would. This is because getting a recommendation on LinkedIn takes a number of steps, as it should. Not only do you need to be linked in with the recommender, but in almost all cases, the user has to request the recommendation (technically, they can be given proactively, without a request). Then there's follow up to ensure that the recommendation gets written. And a user can only get a recommendation from a person with whom he or she has a professional relationship.

Recommendations have always been a crucial part of advancing one's career. Whether it's getting into college and grad school, or applying for a job, recommendations should be treated with extreme care, consideration, and thoughtfulness, and should take time to craft. While the recommendation feature was obviously a key and necessary part of the LinkedIn ecosystem that could not be eliminated, the company realized that it needed a more immediate and easier way to enable its users to show viewers of their profile that they do good work. What else can we expect from a modern world which demands immediate satisfaction? Thus was born the endorsements feature, a one-click way to show support. Without any of the barriers to entry that come with requesting a recommendation (save being connected to the person), here was a simple way to allow users to easily attest to each others' skills. Seeing the astronomical number of endorsements given, LinkedIn knew it had a winner-feature.

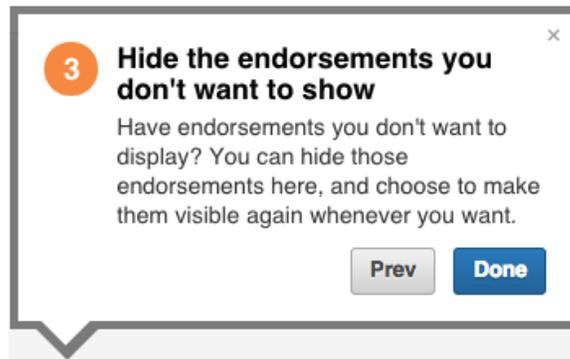**Q2:** How do you think they defined success before they shipped the feature?

A2: My hope is that in 2012, before the endorsements feature was shipped, LinkedIn first called on its 2,100+ employees at the time to review the new feature. After gaining valuable insights from this group, and making necessary improvements to the "look and feel" and functionality, it probably started rolling out the feature to a beta group of super users to get more feedback. Additionally, the company surely measured the number of endorsements being given by these two groups and saw that the rates of adoption and use far surpassed and exceeded those seen with the recommendations feature. The new endorsements feature gave LinkedIn users a way to easily interact with each other, taking a page from Facebook's "Like" feature.

PART 2

Q1: Design an additional change to LinkedIn that builds on the successful outcome of the endorsements feature (include rough mocks if possible). Why build this change?

A1: While the newly implemented endorsements feature was clearly a hit, as evidenced by the millions of LinkedIn users adopting and embracing it with open arms, the value of these endorsements needs to be questioned. Just today (January 21, 2015), I received an endorsement for the "Strategy" skill from a colleague I worked with back in 2000. I appreciate his vote of confidence, but I doubt he remembers my work well enough for his endorsement to have any real meaning. In fact, many of the endorsements I receive are from individuals with whom I've never worked. My original answer to this question was to design a feature that enables users to remove or hide endorsements. After investigating, however, I discovered that LinkedIn has recently shipped this feature:

3 Hide the endorsements you don't want to show

Have endorsements you don't want to display? You can hide those endorsements here, and choose to make them visible again whenever you want.

Prev   Done

Look at the impact this feature has on my endorsements:

| Before hiding	After hiding
15 E-commerce	7 Program Management
11 Program Management	7 Project Management
10 Project Management	5 Web Design
8 Product Management	5 Information Architecture
7 Web Design	5 E-commerce
6 Information Architecture	4 Product Management
4 Website Development	3 Website Development
4 Agile Methodologies	3 Agile Methodologies
3 SEO	2 Integration
3 Integration	2 Strategy

I hid all the endorsers I haven't worked with. As you can see from the E-commerce skill, there were many (red boxes). I feel this treatment gives more value and worth to the skills for which I've been endorsed. How can someone endorse a work skill when s/he hasn't seen me use the skill? The downside of doing this is that when viewers of my profile (like perspective employers) now come to my page, their immediate impression of me may change. I can only hope that these viewers understand that they need to take endorsements with a large grain of salt. And if they really want to delve into the intended purpose of the endorsements feature, they will spend the extra time to see that I've actually worked with those that have endorsed me. If only there was a way to qualify these endorsements...

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PART 2 (CONT)

Introducing: Certified Endorsements

Now visitors to your LinkedIn profile can see whether or not the connection that endorsed you actually worked with you. Endorsers with whom you have (or had) a professional relationship will be indicated with a small check mark on their profile picture:
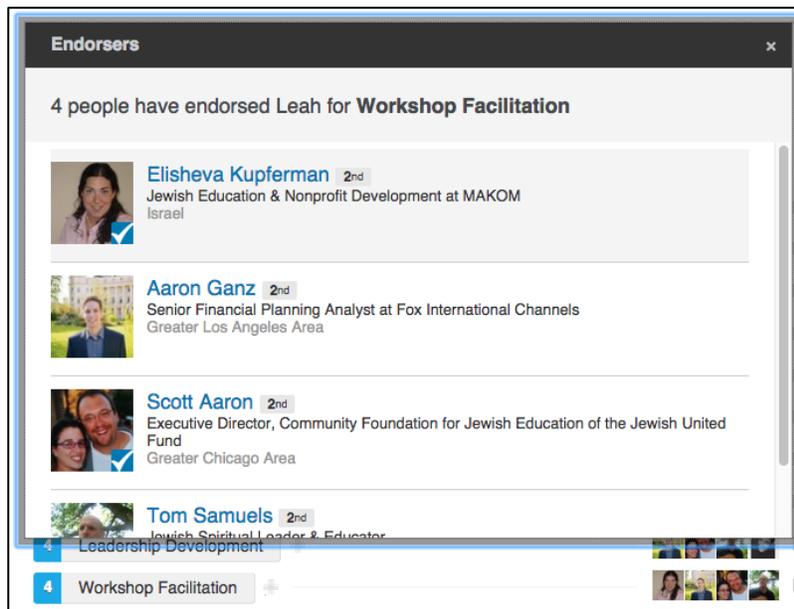
Like before, they will still have the option to give the standard one-click endorsement:

PART 2 (CONT)

However, now endorsers can also choose to give a Certified Endorsement, which will only require a few more steps:

Certified Endorsements will give endorsers the ability to give a "lite recommendation" that holds more weight than a basic endorsement, yet doesn't require the involved steps needed to write and submit a recommendation. The extra steps will already be familiar to them, since they're taken from the process in place for recommendations, which should reduce the "barrier to use". Additionally, the concern that

PART 2 (CONT)

profile visitors might think less of the individual's abilities, due to the low number of endorsements (caused by hiding some of them), will be mitigated, as both basic and Certified Endorsements can be shown together.

PART 3

Q1: Based on your hypothesis and metrics from the first question, let's assume the endorsements feature had failed. What would that tell you?

A1: It would tell me that the majority of LinkedIn users are very savvy, and have recognized that there is a price to pay for this easy-to-use feature: Meaningless endorsements. Anyone and everyone can submit an endorsement, even if that person has not seen the profile owner use the skill (thereby rendering the endorsement meaningless). Which is why my Certified Endorsements feature would be a great compromise between the recommendation and endorsement features, as it would be easier than giving a recommendation and more valuable than a basic endorsement. The failed endorsement feature would also tell me that there is something wrong with LinkedIn's user testing protocols. Ostensibly, they decided to launch the feature based on user testing and user feedback, which indicates that they should have surveyed a group of users that more accurately represented the typical LinkedIn user. A red flag should also be raised regarding the internal testing that was done with staffers. Did they understand the feature? Was enough time put into answering the questions put forward to them? Were any incentives given for providing quality feedback? Had the endorsements feature failed, LinkedIn would have had to revisit the way it manages the product feedback it receives.

Q2: What would you do next?

A2: I would immediately survey the user-base, and give them an enticement to complete the questionnaire, such as a two month free Premium subscription. Survey questions would include: What do/don't you like about the endorsements feature? What would make it better? Did you understand how to use it? Have you ever given an endorsement? Have you received endorsements? Were the endorsements you received from people with whom you worked? How would you like to show support for another user? I would also take the opportunity to ask broader questions, such as: What features do you wish LinkedIn had? What current features do you think should be removed?

Postscript

What's so interesting to me about the LinkedIn endorsement feature as it exists today is that, as mentioned before, because anyone can endorse you for a skill, the value of the feature is reduced. If my college biology teacher endorses me for product management, does that really mean anything to a prospective employer? I hope not. Yet the endorsements feature has obviously been such a big hit with users. I believe that this is a great lesson for product professionals, as it teaches us that listening to the customer is of paramount importance. Users speak with action: If they're not using a feature, that means that the feature needs to be improved, redesigned, augmented, or retired. In the case of endorsements, LinkedIn had to keep the recommendations feature, as it was crucial to the vision of the product as a whole, and its product roadmap. But it also needed to listen to its users, and if the users wanted a similar feature that was easier to use and more immediate, then LinkedIn needed to build it, or it risked losing customers. Maybe one day I'll give an endorsement, but for now, I'll spend the extra time and give my colleagues the recommendations they deserve.

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