



NURTURING THE MINNESOTA TECH COMMUNITY

SYNOPSIS:

Throughout the year in the Minneapolis – Saint Paul area, technology professionals come together for a variety of events and activities to share their knowledge, experiences and skills with others. The result is a more collaborative culture across the Minnesota tech community, one that is already recognized for innovation and entrepreneurship.

This episode explores some of those events, in particular those hosted by local non-profit organization Minnestar and those in which SPS Commerce participates. Often the two organizations join forces to host events together.

ON THIS EPISODE:



Host: Sam Olson, Account Executive, SPS Commerce

An alumni from Luther College in Iowa, Sam helps customers work better and grow together with their trading partners. He specializes in working with suppliers in Quebec after more than 15 years studying French and seven years in international business and sales.



Guest: Maria Ploessl, Executive Director, Minnestar

Maria Ploessl was named as the Executive Director of Minnestar in 2017, working to promote the overall growth and sustainability of the organization. She has more than 10 years of program management and community engagement experience in the nonprofit and education sector, including as an educator in the Minneapolis Public Schools.



Guest: Jamie Thingelstad, Chief Technology Officer, SPS Commerce

Jamie Thingelstad is the Chief Technology Officer and Senior Vice President of SPS Commerce. Jamie has an impressive track record with growing technology platforms and a remarkable breadth and depth of technology expertise.



Sam Olson (SO): Welcome to Mastering the Retail Game podcast from SPS Commerce, where we explore new rules of retail and provide real world advice on how to win by learning from your peers and industry experts.

I'm your host Sam Olson, and in this episode we'll be exploring the ways technology professionals are coming together in the Twin Cities to share their insights, enthusiasm and knowledge with others in our community. The result is a more collaborative culture across our region, one that is already recognized for innovation and entrepreneurship. Today we'll be speaking with Maria Ploessl, Executive Director of Minnestar and Jamie Thingelstad, Chief Technology Officer for SPS Commerce. Both SPS and Minnestar have undertaken efforts to nurture Minnesota's local technology community and these two organizations often join forces to host events together here in the Twin Cities.

Today we'll be speaking with Maria Ploessl, Executive Director of Minnestar and Jamie Thingelstad, Chief Technology Officer for SPS Commerce. Both SPS and Minnestar have undertaken efforts to nurture Minnesota's local technology community and these two organizations often join forces to host events together here in the Twin Cities.

Welcome to the program, Jamie and Maria.

Maria Ploessl (MP): Thanks for having us.

Jamie Thingelstad (JT): Thank you.

SO: Of course. Gotta tell me, what makes the Twin Cities such a great place for technologists to live and work?

MP: I guess I could start with that. The Twin Cities tech community has grown so much in the last five years, and I think we're starting to get a lot of the attention of being such a hub in the North and in the Midwest. Some reasons for that being a really smart and strong educated workforce here. One thing that is unique for the Twin Cities is that we have a big diversity of industry, meaning we have med tech, we have agtech, we have retail, we have a whole bunch of different industries that we're strong in and we also have a diversity of size. So we have one of the largest, if not the largest, concentration of Fortune 500 companies per capita in the US and we also have a growing and thriving startup community here. So I think the ecosystem really speaks to it. It's really growing. We've a great quality of life too. I don't know. Is there anything you want to add to that?

"The Twin Cities tech community has grown so much in the last five years."

JT: Yeah. I think that in addition... I completely agree with the items that Maria brought up. We've also had a growing technology scene going back decades, going back to some of the early generations of technology that started here with some of the foundational tech companies that are around, Unisys, Honeywell, etc. still laying that groundwork.



JT: But then, we have had a very passionate community that has kept that ecosystem thriving over many years. Whether that's your startups, established companies, your great organizations like Minnestar that keep that community together. And it shows and you look at the number of meetup groups that we have, the number of conferences that we have, the Twin Cities Metro has been an area that just consistently has a longstanding tech population.

SO: Well, and Maria, building off of that Minnestar's played a big role in developing this dynamic community. Can you tell me more about it and why it's unique?

MP: Definitely. So, Minnestar's mission, we exist to build, nurture, and engage those interested in technology through meaningful connection. So, we've been around since 2006, we're a nonprofit. We're focused on people and community. Actually, Jamie was one of our very first board members. You were our first a –

"You see a whole bunch of different things all coming together for this massive knowledge share."

JT: Yep. First chairman.

MP: First chairman of the board. So, when we talk about building meaningful connection in the community, and we've been doing this since 2006, a big way that we do that is through events. Two of our big ones that we run, is we have Minnedemo and Minnebar. So Minnedemo, if you're not familiar, it is a demo and showcase of Minnesota made technology. So, we have this kind of saying in there, no slides. People are going to go up there and they're going to plug in, they're going to show what they built.

SO: Love that.

MP: It's awesome. And so, it's really a showcase to connect and to get inspired. It's tech show and tell. We have one actually coming up this week at the Riverview Theater on Thursday the 10th. We do that roughly three, four times a year. And then we also run Minnebar. And if you've never heard of Minnebar, you should definitely come out and check it out. It is one of the largest and longest running tech unconferences worldwide. So if you're not familiar with an unconference, it's a participant led community generated conference, so anyone can submit a session. And because of that, every year we're seeing different sessions. We see stuff from AI to entrepreneurship, security, marketing, drone racing. You see a whole bunch of different things all coming together for this massive knowledge share. Last year Jamie, I think we had 1,400 people?

JT: Yeah, yeah.

MP: And about 150 different sessions throughout the day.



JT: 1,400 people who are passionate about technology taking a Saturday, usually a really delightfully pleasant Saturday in April in Minnesota to just spend time learning about technology.

MP: It's awesome.

SO: It sounds awesome to me.

MP: Yeah. The next one is April 25th and we always have that all day. All of our events are free and open to the public, to anyone with an interest in technology.

SO: That's awesome. That's really cool. Who typically attends the Minnedemo events and how have they inspired your members to share their passion of technology?

MP: So Minnedemo is, we always say it's for everyone, right? A lot of the folks that come, it could be a developer, an entrepreneur, investors, designers. My sister is a nurse and she is at every single Minnedemo because she just like seeing what people are building and it's inspiring, seeing people have this thought and this idea and this dream and then build it and the community really rallies around them. And we also see sometimes folks are attending these events and it inspires them to go out and build their thing. And we've seen folks who have been longtime attendees then present that thing that they got inspired to build.

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SO: So, the passion of one becomes passion of many, just right then and there.

MP: Yeah!

SO: I love that. Jamie, why have you chosen to directly participate and

promote these local tech communities?

JT: The answer is pretty simple. I'm part of the technology community and I want to see it continue to grow and thrive and get bigger. I want to be able to, 10, 15, 20 years down the road still see amazing innovation happening in the technology space here in our local community.

SO: I love that. I think so do we all, and you've been a supporter of Minnestar for several years. What about this organization particularly, personally inspires you, as well as your teams?



JT: So, the thing that I have always been drawn to with Minnestar is that I often refer to the organization as the flywheel underneath a lot of what happens inside of the Minneapolis and the Twin Cities tech scene. We're not specifically focused on only startups. We're not specifically focused on any type of technology.

We're really operating at a level lower and connecting people who are passionate about technology. I can tell you from that has derived a lot of startup activity, a lot of projects inside of established companies and a lot of just having fun. And so I like the fact that Minnestar, it looks at its success in a very broad way. Not looking at a single metric or a single industry, but a very broad way. Just saying, "Are we catalyzing that kind of activity here in this community?"

SO: And I like the idea that I could tell one of my friends personally, even if they don't have the biggest tech background in the world, "Hey, you need to go attend this Minnestar event." And that sounds like they could get a lot out of it if not become personally inspired.

JT: I'm routinely asked by people that just moved to the region and they'll say, "How do I get introduced to what's happening?" And it's like, "Well, number one, go to Minnedemo. That's the very first thing you should do."

SO: Absolutely. And Maria, then, why did you choose to get involved with Minnestar?

MP: When I was very first new to the Twin Cities tech community... I'm kind of a boomerang. I grew up in St. Paul, moved away for a number of years and moved back. And when I was kind of reentering the community, actually, the first community event I went to was a Minnedemo and it was during Twin Cities Startup Week at Riverview. And I remember pulling up and the line's down the block and I'm like, "What is going on? This is incredible." And I was really new, I didn't know a whole lot of people and I was standing in line and there is this one guy who saw me, who I knew and he was kind of VP level at a company in town and he saw me, he knew that I was by myself and that I was brand new to the community.

And so he took upon himself, he's like, "All right, you're going to sit with me, I'm going to introduce you to all these people." And that feeling of inclusion and that feeling of welcoming and really that extending that hand into a community was something that I had not experienced before. And it really, really stuck with me.

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MP: So, throughout that previous role I had Minnedemos, Minnebar, all the Minnestar events were something where I felt like that was really unique and I felt really lucky to have that experience and I really wanted that to be replicated and we always, myself and the board, really want to cement that feeling for folks that are coming to the community, that they have a network of folks who are there ready to welcome them and help them get plugged in.

SO: Makes sense. Jamie, why does SPS participate in or put on these kind of activities?

JT: We have a corporate value of giving back and we want to give back to our communities that we're part of and we're part of a number of communities. And one of those that we look at is our local community where, this week we're hosting two events that are part of Twin Cities Startup Week. We have long been one of the hosting partners for the DevOps meetup group in the Twin Cities area. We also hosted one of the cloud meetups for a number of years. We've even made our space open to organizations that are running events. Like there's a group that runs a hackathon for high school students and we've hosted that, where they come in and spend 24 hours in a row building solutions and we hosted that as well as had our team members involved in that.

And then the last one I call out, we have a Women in SPS Technology team that also engages with the outside community. This weekend I was at Hack the Gap and we had a very strong presence there. We're both helping mentor teams that were building solutions and just making sure that we're part of helping solve that diversity gap that we have in technology as well. So, it's part of our give back value. And we also think, by the way, we get a lot out of that because our team loves to do it and things that make our local community stronger, make us stronger.

SO: How does participation in these communities impact the customers that we serve?

JT: In a number of different ways. I think for us, first of all, sometimes we have customers that are in those communities and it's a way to actually connect with them directly, but I think we also take away a lot of best practices, a lot of innovative ideas. When our team gets involved in these organizations or in these events, they get to see some of what's happening outside of our four walls and those ideas come back into our organization and make for better solutions as well. And then it's rewarding and engaging for the team, which helps them bring their full self to the solutions that they're building.

SO: Absolutely. I know I had a couple fellow SPSers that attended the Hack the Gap event and had a great time and got a ton out of it. So I really love that we continue to participate in and host these kinds of events. Are there any last messages, Jamie and Maria that you'd like to include that we haven't already discussed?

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MP: I think just, I always encourage people to get involved in their local community. If that community is the Twin Cities, do a talk at Minnebar, show up to a Minnedemo. support and mentor junior devs and young entrepreneurs when we do Minnedemo back to campus. There's a ton of ways to give back in the community and it always makes our community stronger.

JT: Yeah. And I think, as you build out capability, as you build out your team in a community, really being thoughtful about how you bring value back to that community is important. And so I would say that, get engaged, give a talk and that's a great way to get out there. And if you don't feel like doing that, just be active in the meetup circle, and share your ideas with the broader community. You'll get a lot out of it, at any level that you participate.

SO: **And of course, as you said earlier, both of you extend a hand, right?**

JT: Absolutely. Yeah.

SO: **Absolutely. Jamie. Maria, thanks for your time. Thank you so much. Appreciate it.**

JT: Thank you.

SO: **Thanks for listening to this episode of Mastering the Retail Game. You can read the transcripts of this podcast, review show notes and listen to other episodes by visiting spscommerce.com/podcast or by subscribing through most major podcast streaming services. Join us on the next episode of Mastering the Retail Game for more tips on how to win in the new retail environment.**

This is your host, Sam Olsom, signing off.

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