

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE THIRTY-FIVE
A FRONTLINE DATA REVOLUTION**

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Shawn: Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Where bold leaders combine with big ideas to create game-changing disruption.

I'm Shawn Nason, your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future.

We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*, we are really excited to have Ville Levaniemi, founder of HappyOrNot Inc., the company behind the globally recognized smiley feedback system which empowers companies to develop their business by improving experiences.

Ville is an entrepreneur with a background in software and gaming businesses in Europe and the U.S., with 15 plus years in international marketing and sales, and 17 plus years in B2B sales and marketing of software services and products. Ville has held board member roles in several technology and services companies, and strengthened HappyOrNot's position in the U.S. market by leading the launch of HappyOrNot Americans Inc. And I'm really excited, welcome Ville.

Ville: Thank you very much Shawn. Thank you for having me.

Shawn: Yes, and for people that are not familiar with HappyOrNot, how did it get started and what was the premises of starting it?

Ville: Yeah sure. Like you mentioned being doing the software and gaming business before HappyOrNot so actually my co-founder, colleague Heikki Väänänen who I've been working for 30 years, almost, not 30 years, 25 years or so. He was actually originally 15 years old when he came up with the idea of this anonymous easy feedback terminal. So, he was living in a small town in Finland and he was a computer geek. So, he went to the local computer store to buy floppy disks for his computer quite often. Every time he went in, he was kind of receiving really nasty kind of bullying customer service from the guy that was working there for some reason.

So Heikki got that this doesn't feel right so why is this guy, I'm bringing my money in the business, this guy is not apparently doing a good thing their business. So, he just kind of came

up with this idea that what if he had some sort of easy anonymous feedback button that he could press and tell about the service of this guy to his managers and to the headquarters of the company that would be the in-house analysts.

You know, the idea came from the consumer we take, it was back then, and, you know, it has been haunting his mind for many, many years. 2008, we were running this mobile gaming business that was growing quite rapidly. Heikki was the CEO of the company, and he felt like that he doesn't hear about people, about employees enough anymore. So, he kind of revisited the idea of this feedback button and he told me about it and he kind of thought that maybe this could be a good business.

So basically, we started to think about it, and we did some feasibility studies on how it could work and then after that we went to meet a couple of retail companies in Finland, banking companies, some large organizations. They kind of encouraged us that, yeah why not do it? So, we did it, and here we are.

Shawn: Well, awesome. And I was introduced to HappyOrNot, I believe, in the early like 2010 or 2011 when I had done some international travel and I was with you and the team earlier in 2020 in New York City before the pandemic hit and I remember sitting on the panel in a session with some of your customers and the consumers and I made a statement around, I think that NPS, so Net Promoter Score is bullshit and everyone needs to use HappyOrNot because it actually gives real time feedback that you can do something with.

And I still stand pretty firm on that. I'm not a huge fan of NPS, I think it looks in the rear-view mirror, so what is HappyOrNot looking to disrupt next?

Ville: You know, when we started doing it, we had our first great customers who kind of... You know, me and Heikki were thinking about collecting and, maybe, using feedback as a safety net and be able to kind of predict the future how we are doing to have some kind of index that, are we going up or down? Of course, it's that, you know, the great first customer pioneer school told us that what actually is the value of the service. We kind of it's interesting quote from Jack Welch who is kind of some sort of leadership guru. He has said that, the three most important things you need to measure in business are customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and cash flow. He said this quite many decades ago, I believe.

So, in the beginning, when we were, you know, starting things with Heikki, it's quite weird that Jack Welch has told this cash flow is being measured continuously. Employee satisfaction is measured once a year. But, you know, like mentioned, so customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction surveys, in the past they are really long. You know, there's multiple questions, the businesses are doing it once a year, they wait for the results for a couple of months and so on. So, I'd like to claim that we really disrupted the quality of the CX, customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction data. We took it entirely to the next level. We made it actionable in real time. We democratize it, you know, we made it transparent.

We give the access to the people who are actually working in the frontline, to their own data. We digitalize the analysis so no more weeks of waiting, you know, it's in your hand immediately. If you are a hardworking person in the frontline who actually is being measured how, what kind of service are you providing to your customer, you should be the one to own the data as well.

We automatized the distribution of the data, you know, based on the user persona and so on. So, it's, of course, we'd like to claim that we have disrupted a lot in the business or in the world of customer experience measurement and customer experience.

Shawn: I will tell you as a person who's worked in the experience field, you know, for 10 plus years that you truly have disrupted it in my opinion. Where do you see this going? Because you guys have really, again, in my opinion, disrupted this a lot.

Ville: Yeah. Yeah, I think it's kind of, you know, from the viewpoint of untapped potential in the world, we have not even scratched the surface. It's, you know their customers, the first customers who encouraged us to do this, they are still on board, and that's almost 10 years of time. So, it's ongoing program for them. There's quite a lot you need to do to make sure that your customers are engaged in this operation, in this program. Your employees are engaged with this program. Not afraid of it. You know, they need to be fans of it, and that's when it starts to work.

So, I would say that there is so much more to do for not just us but, you know, for the experts like you that there's so much kind of unlocked potential in that real people who are working in the real locations providing services whether they are a salesperson, whether they are serving food, or providing whatever. You know, it just seems to be that the companies who jumped to do this, and to actually disrupt their business, give the power or responsibility to the frontline people in the form of the data and insights so that they can actually learn from their own doing,

become better in what they are doing, become prouder of what they are doing, instead of just working there. It's just awesome to see the results it can bring to the companies. Yeah, I always get excited when I think about what has not been done yet.

Shawn: I love what you talk about, that your first customers of HappyOrNot, your first pioneers are still your customers today and they have provided you with your best feedback to shape the company. What I love about you and the team at HappyOrNot is that you take this real feedback, and you move fast. And you're not afraid to potentially fail and then change and continue to try it. And that leads me into the next question today of, what's been your biggest challenge on your journey at HappyOrNot and why?

Ville: Yeah. That's a really good question, it relates to what we have been discussing already. You know, I think it's the whole idea of HappyOrNot is to, make that customer experience data transparent and give it to the people who it belongs to instead of the biggest bosses are kind of looking at the papers and doing conclusions based on that. That's not the way to get people engaged with the program.

So, I think still the biggest challenge has been always the fear of the companies who are afraid of doing it. You know, knowledge, the data that's power. In many cases the top management, maybe, it used to be the holder of that power. Some of them are against the idea to give the power to the middle management, to the teams who are working in the frontline. You know, it's always the most debated topic that should the frontline people have the access to their own data? We, of course, are persistently feeling that yes, they should.

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We have our most successful customer cases are from the companies who actually did it the way that engaged and there was a throughout commitment from the organization. And, of course, nowadays we are fortunate to have plenty of these, you know, long-term clients and they are happy to encourage and explain to the people in doubt that what actually they have achieved, what is the big reward, and why you must get the whole team and also consumer engaged. And that requires transparency. Otherwise, it's not interesting to everybody, if someone is kind of sitting on the data just using it for their own benefit.

Shawn: I still love how you stand true to the transparency piece, and how you guys at HappyOrNot have said let's push this down to the frontline worker, the person that is most engaged and in contact with the customer. And that sounds so simple, but you know this Ville, that companies really struggle with that.

We work with a partner in Las Vegas as, you know, Cure 4 the Kids, Ville, that we put these terminals throughout the whole clinic. And we've had such tremendous insights with their director of patient experience Kat that we can pinpoint exactly where something's going wrong immediately along the journey. We've talked about this, you know, failure and biggest challenge, what still keeps you up at night when you think about this industry and the work you guys want to do at HappyOrNot?

Ville: I think it's an overwhelming challenge to do the big changes. Try to achieve the big changes, you know, in the organizations. You know, because that's so easy to do this wrong as well. You know, because technically this is a really easy product and solution to deploy in the organization. That's one of the strengths, of course, of HappyOrNot but also that could be one of the pitfalls to the customers if they actually think that it is so easy that it will work itself out automatically. "I don't need to engage people in the front line. I don't need to inform store managers that they are actually receiving the HappyOrNot feedback terminal" and everything like that.

So that easiness makes it too easy to fail as well, if the customer really doesn't have the mindset of, long-term mindset to achieve, do the big change with it, to equip their people, to engage their people. I think that's what keeps me up mostly in the night that it is actually possible to utilize this service so many ways. And necessarily all of those ways are not the right one.

Shawn: I appreciate you sharing that with us. Let's talk about success. So, what does success look like to you and to HappyOrNot in the next five years?

Ville: Yeah, it's quite simple for us. We are after long-term customer relationships, like, you mentioned. We are developing this solution in cooperation with our customers so our customers have a big role in helping us to decide what will be the items in the future roadmap in the one year, two year, or five years from now on? So that is really important. So basically, our success is based on that.

One important KPI for us is the customer retention, customer growth. And we know from the 10 years of experience that successful deployment includes a plan with the customer, with the client how they would engage their people, their customers. It includes the mutual success plan, which we follow mutually. It's quite simple. If we manage to support our clients to empower their organization with the power of transparent real time CX or EX data, the outcome is always positive, and we retain the business. The idea is that technology enables us

to help our clients to be on the top of their game to improve their business, to improve their performance, to retain their customers and retain their employees as well.

So, we always like to think that we are among the good guys who are actually helping everyone, every stakeholder in the business. You know, we are helping management. We are helping customers. Especially, we are helping employees. Sometimes it's, you know, a bit neglected part of the business, especially, the frontline employees. And like you said, they are actually doing the hard work and they are the artists of the customer experience. So, we want to focus them. We want to help our clients to focus on them, and there so much to do on that front still.

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Shawn: Thank you. Yeah. So, the first year we've lived globally in this pandemic around COVID-19. How have you guys dealt with the disruption that's globally happened within HappyOrNot to still be successful and move forward during this pandemic?

Ville: First thing that we did is that we reacted the way that would actually change the HappyOrNot terminal to be touchless which basically meant that we implemented a system that could swap the touch screen terminal from the one that requires touch into touchless and that would happen through the QR code. So that was the first thing that we did.

Of course, ongoingly, we have been developing our digital product suite as well. So, we have been emerging the development of that part of the business a bit more. So basically, already today it is possible to include HappyOrNot feedback survey to, let's say if you are doing a payment with your mobile phone, we together with the payment service provider, actually can put it in your personal mobile phone and so on.

Of course, it's only a question of, you know, technology enables everything. We like to build new partnerships with different kind of companies who are having important role in the lives of the retailers in the service companies, in the healthcare companies. And we partner with them. We enable new kind of use cases for HappyOrNot and so on. So, it has always been in our thinking, in our road map. And, of course, now that so many businesses has actually closed their doors, it kinda forced us and it enabled us to jump a bit forward and disrupt our own road map as well.

Of course, HappyOrNot terminals have come back in the most of the businesses which are open. So, of course, scientifically HappyOrNot doesn't spread the pandemic and, of course, we

have helped our customer to do little additions, you know, to have a hand sanitizer stand within the HappyOrNot device, to have information posters next with them that, "Please, be thoughtful," and things like that. So that business is not going away, but also during this situation, we have been taking some leaps on the field of the digital solutions as well.

Shawn: Awesome. So, Ville, one of the things that we really wanna do is to give a call to action to all of our listeners on the podcast. So, what is the one thing you would want our listeners to take away from your story, and the HappyOrNot story, and what you've shared with us today?

Ville: I would say that one take away I would like everyone to get from this is that don't be afraid to be transparent and think about your people, the hardworking frontline people, as assets. They are not a burden. They poses a huge, unlocked potential. You know, we see this over, and over, and over, and over again that when the companies are brave and they actually dare to give more power and more responsibility to the people in the frontline and equip them to success, most of them will, you know, step forward, and actually they will improve their productivity.

We see that the companies improve their employee retention as well. Because something like this, you know, daily appreciation from that real customers you are serving, that's just, you know, it makes your workday more fulfilling and so on. You mentioned the health care companies, related to the pandemic. What we have seen, we did plenty of phone calls with the customers including the American health care organizations.

And one thing that was highlighted by them during the really difficult pandemic situation was that actually it's really, it's maybe almost the best moment of the day to have a look at the HappyOrNot feedback, because then you actually, in the middle of the craziness, you remember that, at least, you know, the patients they really do appreciate. And their families, they really do appreciate what we do here. And that's really important that, you know, human aspect to this all.

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Shawn: Great. Love the call to action there. Well, Ville, it has come to that point at the end where we do this thing called the "Combustion Questions". Where I'm gonna ask you three randomly selected questions. And you don't get a lot of time to think about them, and you just need to give us your gut answer on them. So here we go. We're gonna jump into combustion question number one. So, if a world-famous bar was to name a drink after you, what would be in that drink?

Ville: That would be totally transparent drink. I think, there will be...gin and tonic has been invented already. Some sort of version of gin and tonic I think.

Shawn: Okay. So you are a gin drinker?

Ville: Yes.

Shawn: I might have a new gin that I might have to send to you that we've come into contact with. So...

Ville: Awesome.

Shawn: All right. Question number two, are you more of a cat person or a dog person?

Ville: Very easy, a dog person.

Shawn: And what type of dog?

Ville: We have a rescue dog. Yeah, I mentioned to you, we lived two years in America, so we actually adopted a new family member from that trip.

Shawn: Awesome, awesome. All right, your last combustion question, Ville. What do you think about T-shirts?

Ville: I like them.

Shawn: Yes. And I actually think I have a HappyOrNot T-shirt. And before we did this, you were wearing yours, I saw. So, well, thank you Ville. Thank you for sharing a little bit of your journey and the HappyOrNot journey. We love the whole organization. We partner with you guys on several things. Until we can see each other again, in person, Ville, thank you again, and be safe and be well.

Ville: Thank you very much. And same words to you, and all the listeners. It's always great to have a chat with you, I enjoy a lot.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*.

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