Get Together

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About the Authors

Bailey Richardson, Kevin Huynh, and Kai Elmer Sotto comprise People & Company, an agency that helps organizations build communities.

Preface: Why build a community?

True communities are simply groups of people who keep coming together over what they care about. The most vibrant communities offer members a chance to act on their passions with one another.

"Fires can't be made with dead embers, nor can enthusiasm be stirred by spiritless men." -Baldwin

Part 1: Spark the Flame
Chapter 1: Pinpoint Your People

If you want to spark your own community, you'll need to first pinpoint your people. Find your kindling - those early allies who care about what you care about enough to manifest your idea for a community into an actual gathering of human beings. Though there may not be many of them, the first people you involve are consequential. They will set the tone and direction for the future of your group.

To figure out who to focus on, start with two questions:
1. *Who* do I want to get together?
2. *Why* are we coming together?

It may take time to find your *who*

By 2011, the video gaming category had grown so quickly that Justin.tv's founders decided to launch a new gaming-focused platform called Twitch, which Emmett is now the CEO of.

Focus on two criteria:
1. Who brings the energy - who are the people who already engage, contribute, or attend? Don't try to conjure motivation out of thin air. Start with keen participants.
2. Assuming that the community flourishes, who will you stick with? Cultivating a community is a long-term play. Who does your organization's future rely on (e.g., power users, loyal customers, key donors, passionate employees)? Who do you want to invest in?

Only start this work when you and your organization are eager to collaborate with a specific group of people for the long haul. Like most relationships, communities don't form overnight; they take time to flourish. You'll need to stay invested in these people if you want to bring a community to life.

Defining your *why*

In order to make sure that your community's purpose is grounded in your people's needs, and that it expressed what you can accomplish, consider:
1. What do my people need more of?
2. What's the change we desire?
3. What's the problem only we can solve together?

Chapter 2: Do Something Together

Design your first activity

1. **Make it *purposeful***
   Tie the activity back to *why* your community teamed up in the first place. What goal or outcome becomes possible only when this specific group of people gets together? Make this purpose clear to participants so that they can own it, too.
2. **Make it *participatory*.**
   Don't just talk *at* people. You gathered them because they're passionate, just like you! Give them the chance to contribute to the purpose you share.
3. **Make it *repeatable.***
   One-offs are the enemy. Relationships need time to flourish, and it'll take a few cycles for some folks to warm up and begin actively contributing. Design the first activity with the intent to repeat it with your people over and over.

Make your purpose loud and clear

In 2004, Gavin Pretor-Pinney, a designer and writer with a love for clouds, was encouraged by a friend to speak about his obsession at a literary festival in Cornwall. In hopes of drawing a crowd, Gavin dreamt up an enticing title for his talk: "The Inaugural Lecture of the Cloud Appreciation Society." Why celebrate clouds? "I always felt that clouds are a beautiful part of nature that we can become blind to," Gavin tells us.

The title worked. Gavin's talk was chock-full of attendees. After entertaining the crowd with his passion for clouds, Gavin invited audience members to claim an official society pin. He was bombarded. People asked him for more information about his Cloud Appreciation Society, and Gavin had to tell them that the society didn't exist… yet.

Gavin went home and immediately set up a simple website. To encourage cloud-lovers to share their love for clouds, he included a gallery where people could submit their own photographs of the sky. In addition, Gavin made sure that the site put the group's purpose front and center. The society's manifesto reads, "We believe that clouds are unjustly maligned and that life would be immeasurably poorer without them." Gavin explains, "The fact that we appreciate an underappreciated part of nature gives the society a reason to exist."

Visitors to the site who connected with this purpose could fill out a form and pay a small fee in exchange for a welcome package (complete with a society pin) and official membership number. After just a few months, the society grew to 2,000 paying members. Member enthusiasm, playful merchandise, and press coverage helped spread the word. By 2016, membership had reached 40,000.

Be prepared to repeat

Every thriving community organizes essential, repeating activities for its members. If communities are about people coming together, one of the most important things you can do is create ways for them to keep coming together. Repeating activities set the stage for members to deepen their relationship and for the community to gain momentum.

As you make these early attempts to rally people, do so with purpose, enable participation, and be prepared to repeat the activity again, and soon.

Chapter 3: Get people talking

Introduce structure to keep conversations meaningful

Bogleheads is a community of investing enthusiasts who extol the low-cost, keep-it-simple finance philosophies of the late John C. Bogle, the founder of the Vanguard Group. The nexus of the Boglehead community is bogleheads.org, an online forum that Taylor Larimore, now in his 90s, helped start 20 years ago.

Part 2: Stoke the fire
Chapter 4: Attract new folks

Establish your origin story

Gans believes public narratives communicate three key concepts. When you refine your origin story, follow Ganz's lead:

1. **Tell the story of self.**
   Make it personal. Describe the moment that you started on the path to rally your community. What made you start caring? Bring it to life with personal details.
2. **Tell the story of us.**
   Show that it's bigger than you. What do you believe is made possible when this group comes together? This is also your community's purpose.
3. **Tell the story of now.**
   What's one small, immediate way someone can get involved (e.g., attend a meetup, sign up for a newsletter, sign a petition)? Why should they do so now? This urgency will make people feel the pull to get started right away.

Serve up your origin story

Nobu talked about their first event, how they'd evolved since the early days, and why he believes that we need generous, positive gatherings now more than ever. In that quick, engaging introduction, Nobu covered his stories of self, us, and now for a captive audience.

Building a culture of reciprocity

Shota Tsukamoto is the owner and photographer behind Darcy (@darcytheflyinghedgehog), a photogenic hedgehog in Tokyo.