

CARRIE MELISSA JONES and CHARLES H. VOGL

# BUILDING BRAND COMMUNITIES

A decorative border composed of numerous hexagons in various colors (blue, green, yellow, orange, red, pink) arranged in a honeycomb pattern, framing the central text.

**HOW  
ORGANIZATIONS  
SUCCEED  
BY CREATING  
BELONGING**

# BUILDING BRAND COMMUNITIES

ALSO BY CHARLES H. VOGL

*The Art of Community: 7 Principles for Belonging*

*Storytelling for Leadership: Creating Authentic Connection*

# **BUILDING BRAND COMMUNITIES**

**HOW ORGANIZATIONS  
SUCCEED BY CREATING  
BELONGING**

**CARRIE MELISSA JONES  
CHARLES H. VOGL**



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# Building Brand Communities

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**From Charles to Kep.  
In whatever way is yours,  
may you bind others with purpose  
in ways that both inspire and heal them.**

**From Carrie to Marcella.  
Your mother taught me everything  
about connection. Follow her  
and you will always remain near to hugs,  
a table full of friends,  
and a community to guide you.**

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We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

—**Dorothy Day**

The most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

—**Kurt Vonnegut**

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# PREFACE

## A Note from Charles

Readers of my book *The Art of Community* know that my journey toward community expertise began with my own lonely years wondering if I'd ever create the friendships that I wanted or find a place where I knew that I belonged. It took many years and travel through several time zones in Africa and Asia to get to a place where those thoughts no longer distract me. On the journey, the miles were less important than the wise words from mentors, examples from my now heroes, and too many embarrassing experiments to remember.

The journey never ends. It's a daily practice to remain connected to the people I love, reach out to the people I want to know better, and ensure that I'm supporting people important to me. My personal community is a dynamic creature that needs attention, feeding, hugs, and occasionally a shoulder to cry on. This of course is normal and the best-case scenario.

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to learn that the principles distilled in *The Art of Community* have inspired dinners, rituals, retreats, family reunions, heartfelt speeches, and long deep conversations across continents. Thank God for you who gather people you care about.

When starting this book, we aspired to write a guide that would speak equally to and embolden leaders in nonprofits, businesses, civic agencies, faith organizations, and political movements. Indeed, we believe nearly every principle discussed will serve all of these leaders equally.

We educate and encourage leaders to invest in authentic brand communities that both serve organizational goals and also enrich, support, and even heal participants. In our aspiration, this will replace misguided, shortsighted, and exploitative efforts.

As we developed this book, it grew apparent that the language of business and nonprofit leadership is different enough from that of social, cultural, faith, and political movements that we could not write a single book that speaks to both audiences equally well. This is disappointing.

This book speaks directly to businesses and nonprofit leadership in applicable language because they will continue to invest astounding resources to both connect to and gather people for the foreseeable future. In fact, we personally consult with organizations that collectively touch far more than one billion people, and their influence grows daily. Such investments will accelerate as organizations adapt to our growing “experience economy”<sup>1</sup> in which customers seek appealing experiences that connect them with brands.

For those considering this resource to support movements making our era safer, more welcome, honest, and connected, please take what serves you. It’s here for you, and our hearts go with you.

This little book is an offering to help everyone working toward more connection, healing, generosity, love, safety, and joy in a time that really needs it. We promise it is the best we could do at the time.

May all of us who pick up these ideas teach the next generation to conquer the loneliness and disconnection of our time.

Go get them and Godspeed.

Charles Vogl, M.Div.  
Beautiful Oakland, CA

## A Note from Carrie

When I was ten years old, a teacher asked my mom if I was mute, and my hand shook when I raised it in class. Speaking up was painful.

Yet my silence hid a deep hunger for connection. I wanted someone to ask me, “How are you?” and then wait the five minutes I needed to offer an answer. I both wished for and feared what might happen if others knew my inner world, so I kept my mouth shut.

But when I turned fourteen years old, my father set up a hand-me-down computer in my bedroom. Little did he know that plugging in those cables sparked a career that would lead me to one day connect people around the world—employees, customers, and innovators—and would eventually lead to this book.

At that time, emo (emotional) music—filled with screaming about unrequited love—offered me a safe container for my angst and loneliness. At first, I listened alone in my room. With that “new” computer, I discovered that I could listen with others. I found forums sponsored by my favorite musicians. They felt magical to me: a place where I could find my voice. We talked about music, but more often, we talked about our lives. I dropped my emotional armor online and, for the first time, felt confident that I could speak up and be known.

The forums helped me connect to both my favorite musicians and others around the world. My online friends lived in the Philippines, Florida, England, and New York. We chatted until the wee hours and made phone calls when tragedy struck. These friends taught me how to accept and be accepted. But only from a distance, online.

One night, my childhood friend Samantha called. I listened to her cry before a word came out. Gasping, she asked to meet outside my house. This was the first time someone asked for me in a crisis. Outside, she fell into my arms and then, on my street curb, she shared the painful and vulnerable hurt inside. Just as I shared with others online. I knew to sit and listen.

She then asked if I was OK. For the first time in my life, I answered honestly. I shared feeling alone and broken, forgotten and invisible. I hadn’t yet processed personal family tragedies or my own loneliness with anyone face-to-face. Then I too cried. And she too remained and held me.

Our friendship, cemented that night, got me through high school safely.

Only as an adult do I now recognize my teenage depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress. Then, I saw only a dark pit of loneliness before experiencing being held and accepted. Those musicians, those fans, those concerts, and those forums connected us as lifelong enthusiasts. They taught me how to create community online and then to extend it into my neighborhood and school. I now recognize that we made a life-changing brand community.

So, with hard-won lessons, I now choose to be in connection. Even when (especially when) it hurts. I recognize the importance of a place, online or physical, where fans, friends, colleagues, neighbors, classmates, or anyone else can discover that someone cares. That someone will remain.

Now I help others create this within organizations around the world. There is no cause too small to gather around. Playing with makeup, mobilizing a social movement, and resurrecting a rural school are all great reasons to join together.

Many mistakenly assume that strong community always looks “touchy-feely,” like emotional blathering and directionless wandering. In real-world practice, community is a key to unlocking many critical outcomes, such as innovation, crisis response, and policy change.

Measurable outcomes and relationship building are not opposite ends of a spectrum. They’re connected. Most people just don’t know how to connect them. I hope that through this book you will discover what many are missing.

Welcome.

Carrie Melissa Jones  
Seattle, WA

# INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this now, it's likely that you want to bring people together in a new or more powerful way. Kudos to you. The world needs more people like you. We wrote this book to make you more effective, become a stronger community leader, and help you avoid bad and potentially hurtful mistakes.

Over years, miles, and time zones, many people have approached us seeking help to build communities for their organizations. This includes numerous schools, political advocacy groups, professional collectives, religious organizations, and, of course, for-profit companies spanning the globe. All want to invest in bringing together the people important to them. These include employees, customers, colleagues, political and artistic collaborators, and volunteers. These leaders all aspire to build a community that serves both their organization and the envisioned members. Doing this in a way that honestly enriches members and delivers organizational benefits looks like mystical enchantment to many.

Many professional community managers have also shared their longing for something that articulates what they already do and for wisdom to make them better.

Both the words *community* and *brand* lack singular definitions in leadership writing. Although several definitions may be useful in differing contexts,



the discrepancies create much confusion. We use our own working definitions in this book.

We define a **community** as a group of people who share mutual concern for one another. A **brand** is any identifiable organization that promises value, no matter its size or mission. A brand can serve for-profit, nonprofit, political, social, artistic, faith-based (or any other) purposes.

It follows that a **brand community** is any (real) community that aspires to serve both members and (at least one) organizational goal.<sup>1</sup> They're often started by, inspired by, or managed by an established organization, but not necessarily so.

Although brand communities will (1) look and feel very different from one another, (2) work toward different goals, and (3) address different maturity stages, *many core principles remain the same* no matter where or who makes them, or what their purpose. You will recognize these principles by the end of this book.

Many aspiring leaders don't even know how to articulate the ways imagined communities will serve their organization. They often assume that community is (probably) better than no community. It's also often hard for them to articulate how their community will enrich members within it.

We'll discuss the most common ways authentic communities serve organizational goals and thus warrant meaningful investment:

- *Innovation*: creating *new* value for stakeholders
- *Customer and stakeholder retention*: keeping customers and stakeholders involved with the organization and providing value to the brand
- *Marketing*: informing the market of offered value
- *Customer service*: helping customers/users with the brand service or products
- *Talent recruitment and retention*: attracting and retaining the people your organization needs for success
- *Advancing movements*: creating a fundamental shift in the culture or business
- *Community forum*: making the brand a destination for a specific community

## Building Community (versus Promotion and Mobilizing)

We use the term **building community** to mean *facilitating, accelerating, and supporting the individual relationships that together form a community*. Authentic community building is a pointillistic endeavor. A community exists as a network of relationships made up of participant pairs feeling trust and appreciation between them. Each relationship is like a “point” in our bigger view of community. If we facilitate enough authentic interconnected relationships and nurture them over time, we create a community. We think of this metaphorically as growing relationship threads that knit together into community. (See figure I.1.)

Some resources use the term *building community* to refer to promoting events or mobilizing groups. This includes instructing organizations in what social media platforms to leverage, posts to write, and photos to share (promotion), and how to leverage established connections to coordinate action (mobilize). Although both promotion and mobilization can be compatible with community building, and are often important, we make a distinction between each activity, for several reasons.

First, tools and strategies for promoting are well known and accessible. Please use the best honest tools to promote your events and community programs.

Second, you can both promote many events and mobilize thousands of people while building little or no community. Film screenings, park concerts, and trash pickup days do this all the time, with no criticism from us. For

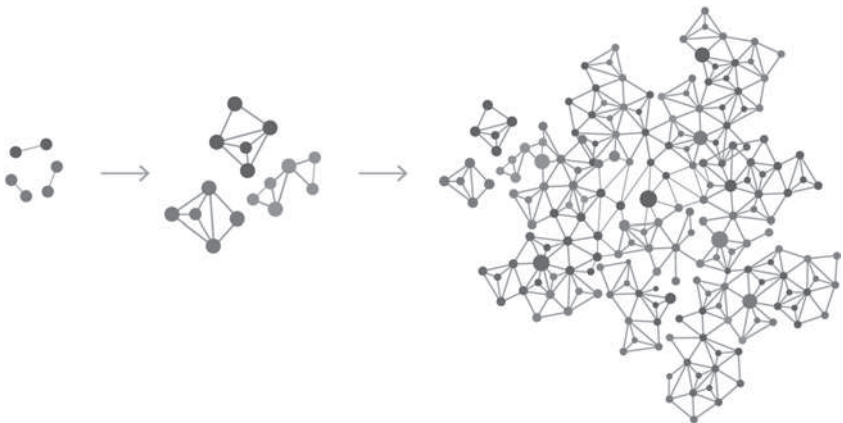


FIGURE I.1. The Network of Connections

community builders, focusing too much on promotion or calls to action can mean overlooking the principles that grow connections when and where people show up.

Third, believe it or not, public promotion isn't always necessary for a successful brand community. Many robust communities don't need to promote or even grow membership. We know of brand communities that remain invitation-only and keep the admission process secret. They know that size and intimacy are inversely related, and they want a tight-knit, effective, dare we say "elite" membership.

Unfortunately, many mistakenly believe that if you just bring people together (e.g., at a concert or bar), enduring relationships naturally form. Although you may get lucky, this rarely happens without proper supporting principles at play.

## Our Lonely Era

Research indicates that you (and everyone you know) live in the loneliest era in American history. Nearly *half* of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone. One in four Americans *rarely or never* feel as though there are people who understand them. And two in five Americans sometimes or always feel that *their relationships are not meaningful* and that they're isolated from others.<sup>2</sup>

This isolation trend has been getting worse.<sup>3</sup> Teens in the US today are now "less likely to get together with friends in person, go to parties, go out with friends, date, ride in cars for fun, go to shopping malls, or go to the movies" than the generations before them. To be clear, teens do gather differently, but they are more isolated overall than seemingly ever before.<sup>4</sup>

The trend is sharply affecting mortality rates. When we look at large populations, there is a positive relationship between loneliness (disconnection) and suicide.<sup>5</sup> Said bluntly, the more loneliness, the more suicide. Teenage suicides are at an all-time high.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the number-two cause of teenage death in the US is suicide. The number-one cause is accidents, which includes all car, firearm, drowning, and poisoning events combined.<sup>7</sup> The rising rate of suicide, although affecting certain groups and intersections of groups more than others, is occurring across gender, class, and ethnic categories. We live in a time when the wealthy city of Palo Alto, California, must create a Track Watch program to hire patrolling security guards to prevent teenage suicides along rail lines.<sup>8</sup>

## Loneliness at Work

The growing loneliness trend doesn't apply just to our teenagers. We Americans spend more time at work than with our families. Yet loneliness at work is such a crisis that the *Harvard Business Review* has published a front-page article with the unsubtle title "Work and the Loneliness Epidemic: Reducing Isolation at Work Is Good for Business," by former US surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy. Research indicates that "strong social connections at work make employees more likely to be engaged with their jobs and produce higher-quality work, and less likely to fall sick or be injured. Without strong social connections, these gains become losses."<sup>9</sup>

Research also indicates that there is a link between loneliness and low organizational commitment among professionals in fields as diverse as hospitality, education, and medicine.<sup>10</sup> Lonely people disengage, and such disengagement costs organizations of all types in many ways, including "almost 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents, 16% lower profitability, and a 65% lower share price over time."<sup>11</sup>

Our work-based communities are disintegrating. Among non-self-employed Americans, the number of those who regularly work at home has more than doubled since 2005, and these workers frequently state loneliness is a major concern.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, loneliness has profound health effects. Loneliness is as bad for your body as smoking as many as fifteen cigarettes a day.<sup>13</sup> It causes stress and thus elevation of the stress hormone cortisol, which at high levels is connected to inflammation, heart disease, digestive problems, and sleep regulation problems, among many others. Loneliness can erode our thinking, including our analytical ability, concentration, memory, decision-making skills, and emotional regulation.<sup>14</sup> So if you care about the people you work with (socially, professionally, politically, philanthropically) remaining emotionally, mentally, and physically capable, then attending to how connected your teams grow is important to you too.

## Technical and Digital Context

Despite this reality, when we speak to Americans, most mistakenly think that we're in a more connected era because of the new digital tools for reaching others. The truth is, we're all far less connected and way more distracted. Distraction caused by digital devices is so powerful that just putting our digital devices in our view distracts us from full enjoyment in social interactions.<sup>15</sup>