

Belonging to the Brand with Mark Schaefer

Brainfluence

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Intro [00:00:00]:

Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley shares powerful but practical ideas from world class experts and sometimes a few of his own. To learn more about Roger's books, brain fluence and friction, and to find links to his latest articles and videos, the best place to start is Rogerdulie.com. Roger's keynotes will keep your audience entertained and engaged. At the same time, he will change the way they think about customer and employee experience. To check availability for an in person or virtual keynote or workshop, visit rogerdulie.com.

Roger Dooley [00:00:37]:

Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest is a prolific author and original thinker. My friend Mark Schaefer has written ten books, including Known Marketing Rebellion and Cumulative Advantage. He also writes a top five marketing blog and hosts a top 1% podcast. Each of Mark's books explores a new area and his newest title, Belonging to the Brand, is particularly interesting. To me, it's all about community. Mark, welcome to the show.

Mark Schaefer [00:01:02]:

It's so nice to see you, Roger. It's always a delight to have a conversation with you, Mark.

Roger Dooley [00:01:09]:

I was super excited to see the topic of your new book belonging to the brand. And the reason was, I've been a community builder since the

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earliest days of Internet communities. I remember the copy serve days when you had copy serve groups that you could be part of. And I was and I was actually part of a very early digital marketing community where I, for a time period of years, managed the community building forum as the subset of this big, much bigger digital marketing community. I built a business college Confidential, around a community. In fact, the business was the community, more or less. To me, this was...

Mark Schaefer [00:01:54]:

I should have interviewed you for the book! What was I thinking?

Roger Dooley [00:01:56]:

Right? Well, hey, when the second edition comes out, Mark, which I'm sure will be very soon, we can do that. But no, to me, community has always been really exciting. But I have to admit, when I look at the troubles that Twitter and Facebook are having, I just sort of shake my head and say, man, I am glad I am not managing a community today because these guys have a very difficult task. People are so divided and whatnot. And maybe we can get into that a little bit later, but I think that the sort of ability to control and moderate and avoid the nastiness that is pervasive online is an important topic, but we can get to that in a little bit. So, Mark, how do you define community for the purpose of your book in this conversation?

Mark Schaefer [00:02:42]:

Thanks for asking. It's an important question because the word community is thrown out a lot when it's actually like a list of customers

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or a number of blog readers. And I think there's three things that really make community different. Number one is that there's actual communion. I mean, people commune with each other. They know each other. So I think immediately that distinguishes it from something like a podcast audience. And an audience is great, by the way, because it is a strong emotional bond to the author of a blog or someone at a podcast or someone who creates videos. But it's not a community. So number one, people actually know each other and connect to each other. Number two, it's driven by a unifying purpose, and that's sometimes hard for a business. And it's the number one reason why brand oriented communities fail, because there's pressure to sell stuff. The goal of the community is to meet a quarterly sales goal instead of some purpose. There's got to be a reason for people to gather. I mean, let's face it, if you want to create a community, you're still competing for attention. You're competing with the Mandalorian, you're competing with baby pictures on Facebook, right? So there's got to be a unifying purpose strong enough that people want to gather around this on a regular basis. The third property is that it is changeable, that it does evolve over time because people evolve, issues evolve, interests evolve. And that's a good thing because it keeps the community relevant. If you do this right, it can help keep the brand relevant. So it's not like connected. It's not bolted to the center of the earth with a mission statement. It's allowed to move and grow and evolve as the community grows and evolves.

Roger Dooley [00:04:50]:

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Mark, you identify community as the last great marketing strategy. Even if it's the next great one, maybe there will be something someday after community.

Mark Schaefer [00:05:00]:

Well, it is a rather bold and provocative statement.

Roger Dooley [00:05:03]:

No, it got my attention. But you say there are three key drivers or megatrends that are creating this need for community, and the first two seem, if not obvious, at least very understandable. The fact that you've got traditional marketing declining in effectiveness, most everybody would agree with that. And the fact that we've got much higher bandwidth today and going forward, we've got this kind of nebulous right now, metaverse virtual reality, which has the potential at least to make interacting with other people a lot more realistic and human. But the third one talks about mental health issues, which was kind of unexpected. Explain what you mean there.

Mark Schaefer [00:05:42]:

The genesis of this book really came out of a book I wrote in 2018, published in 2019, called Marketing Rebellion. Marketing Rebellion was a wake up call to say, look, get out of your trench. This year we're doing a little bit better on our Facebook ads, and we're doing a little bit better on our SEO. And if you look at what's going on in the world, once our customers have the accumulated knowledge of the human race in the palm of their hand, they don't need to be manipulated anymore. They have a higher expectation of our companies, our organizations, and our

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marketing. And so this book says, what are the needs of our customers that aren't changing. And one of those chapters was about belonging and community. When I finished that book, I reflected and thought, that is the most important chapter of the book. That really is the future. Because as a lot of this other traditional marketing sort of fades into the shadows, this idea of community is more important than ever. Then one year later, boom, pandemic. And people start telling me, mark, the ideas in this book, they're coming true now. We're like locked out of relationships. We're locked down. We're isolated. 85% of adults said they turned to online communities as their primary source of emotional connection during the pandemic. But here's, I think anybody today that just watches the news knows mental health is in the headlines every day. But here's the headline that shook me to my core. There's an article in the New York Times several years ago, and the headline was The Loneliest Generation and documented with a lot of research and a lot of studies. It showed how our teenagers, our children today are just lost, they're isolated, they're lonely, record levels of depression and suicide. And there's complicated reasons for this. It's not just the pandemic. This has been creeping up on us for a long time. It's not just social media. The pressures of performing on social media, I think that's a role. But that's not all of it. And this is a study that just came out a few weeks ago after the book was out, actually, that 51% of young adults aged 18 to 24, 51% have sought medical treatment for mental health concerns. The average for every other generation, including millennials, including you and me, 4% 51%. Now, one of the big reasons behind this is the loss of traditional communities. Where did we get that connection? Where did we get belonging? It might have been a

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community group, might have been a church, might have been organized sports, which almost completely went out the window during the pandemic, and organized sports went away. And kids turn to esports, which means they're spending more time on a screen locked in their bedroom. And so this has been a contributor to this decline. Now, I'm not being Pollyannash here saying, hey, start a community and change the world. This is a business book. I think I articulate here a cut and dry, compelling and profound business case why community should be considered part of the brand marketing strategy, which is almost completely overlooked today. But I also give a case to show when you look at the psychology and sociology of community, it's really intertwined. If we can bring people together, which helps them feel connected, helps them feel belong, it really makes an impact on their psychological well being. There are also benefits that transfer to the brand. I mean, it's absolutely amazing to me how this is being overlooked.

Roger Dooley [00:10:02]:

How do you make that a positive as opposed to negative experience? Because certainly the answer for people spending too much time on their screen, you might say, isn't more screen time in this time a community? And some communities can actually be pretty damaging to people. I know being again a community builder for years and years, there can be a lot of negativity where people feel excluded and so on. People feel, well, I'm not as good as that other person because they're more attractive, they're smarter, they're more accomplished or something. How as a community manager, particularly around a brand,

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how do you manage that? How do you do that to keep it something that actually improves the mental health of the people involved as opposed to causing even more deterioration?

Mark Schaefer [00:10:45]:

It's an excellent question, and it's a very multilayered question, so let me kind of break down the layers. First of all, when we talk about community, it doesn't necessarily mean online. I think a live in, real life community can have a digital component to keep people connected when they're not meeting. But almost every digital community I studied when researching this book also has a live component. Arguably, the biggest community in the world is Twitch, and they have an annual conference or multiple conferences in different regions of the world so these friends can come together and meet in real life. Now, let's talk about toxicity and mental health. I do believe that increase in screen time can actually deteriorate, can jeopardize mental health, but that's when it's empty social calories. That's the big problem, is that when people, or especially children are spending time with online activities, that makes them more disoriented, disconnected and lonely. A community are fulfilling social calories. This is where you can go into a place and be recognized and be heard, be nurtured, be validated. And that gets to the third part of your question, which is the responsibility of the community manager. I suppose there are communities where maybe they're known. Part of the fun is being toxic. That's not me, that's not you, and that's not what I think most communities should be, especially if they're associated with a brand. I think somewhere that's one of those lines you can't cross with a brand. Don't be associated

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with something that's toxic. Creating a successful community takes a mindset that says leadership means creating a culture, giving people freedom to move and operate and express opinions, but creating a culture that's validating and nurturing a community. One of the engines of community that's overlooked that I highlight in this book is the importance of status. The importance if there's an opportunity to be validated, then people will return. People, they just want to be heard. They want to go to a place where people recognize them and acknowledge them. And I lead a community, and that's one of the most important things I do, is number 10 tolerance for toxicity because this is going to be a safe place. And number two, dispense hope and reward people and acknowledge people dispense status. They don't really teach you about that in leadership classes in the university. Leading a community sort of turns all that upside down, but it's also it's challenging, it's disorienting, but it's also I find it a lot of fun.

Roger Dooley [00:13:59]:

I think my community building principles kind of echo years. Mark when I was running my own community, we had very clear rules about things like courtesy, about promotion, self promotion, and so on. And people who violated them would get, at first, a friendly warning, because often people come in from other communities where they can say anything, do anything, and they don't know that. So give them one or maybe two friendly warnings after that, make it clear. And then I was really without mercy. After multiple violations where there was no change in behavior, they were gone. And some people didn't like that. It's like, well, hey, you're violating my right to free speech. No, you don't have a

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right to free speech in my community. You had the rules. You didn't follow them. But that's really what community managers have to do. And I can understand how if you're Twitter or Facebook, it's a little bit tougher to be dictatorial like that. But if you're managing a special purpose community of some kind, you really can be, and you have to be. And one thing too, Mark, I found that's kind of interesting. Often the people who came in and were initially doing something bad, maybe they promoted their own stuff or they were rude. Sometimes they turned out to be the best long term members. They were stuck around for years, accrued thousands of posts, and eventually even became moderators. I think there's some judgment involved in being a dictator, but if somebody is just disrupting time after time, you just can't tolerate it because it poisons the entire community and people won't come back.

Mark Schaefer [00:15:35]:

I've seen that without exception. Actually, in my community, when someone sort of crosses a line, maybe it's not even toxic. They were disrespectful, I'll nip it in the bud, and they end up being a better community member in the end. In every case so far.

Roger Dooley [00:15:54]:

One thing that I do, if I'm evaluating, say, a new piece of software, I would have to make an investment in both in time and money. I will go to their online community and see what's going on there. Do questions get answered promptly, or is there a big backlog of people who are in the middle of some kind of a problem with their software? They're all

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working on a project they need help with, and they don't get a response for days. Or sometimes worse. Even a new person comes into a forum, and the first thing they do is post a question to the old timers, oh, man, we've answered this ten times before. And that person ends up getting flamed. They end up being insulted, being told to RTFF, read the freaking forum. One of my rules is always, especially for new people. Be welcoming. Maybe they've answered that question has been answered 100 times before. So point them to one of the best answers for that question and welcome them. Don't make them feel like they're an idiot because they ask something. Because for them, it's all brand new stuff. In my college form, there were a lot of students and parents. They were all going through this for the very first time themselves. They had no past experience. They had newbie questions. And if everybody who asked a newbie question gets flamed, you're never going to build a community, right?

Mark Schaefer [00:17:16]:

Certainly not in the style that I propose in my book.

Roger Dooley [00:17:21]:

Right. I can see building communities around special interests, but what if you're a product manager or a company owner or something and say, well, my products are pretty prosaic. I make toothpaste or sell industrial nuts and bolts or stuff like that? How would you address those kinds of issues from a community standpoint? Those kinds of products or services?

Mark Schaefer [00:17:45]:

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Yeah, I think it's a fascinating question, Roger. It kind of gets down to can you create community for anything? I don't really know the answer to that, but I do have a thesis, and the thesis is one word, yeti. So seven, eight years ago, I started noticing people wearing shirts that said Yeti, or wearing hats or putting a bumper sticker on their car or on their computer that says Yeti. And I was thinking, Wait a minute, isn't that an Ice cooler? Why are people promoting an Ice cooler? Why do they feel like they belong to that brand? I mean, what if it's the most boring thing in the world? And I haven't followed them recently, but I know for sure, in the first five years of that company, when it just took off as a mega brand, they did no advertising. That brand was built 100% by community and word of mouth marketing. I was at an event a couple of years ago in Wichita, and there was a group of students there, and they wanted to take their picture with me. I was the speaker. And so this young woman raised her camera to take this picture, and on the back of the camera, the whole camera was filled with a sticker that said Yeti. She's probably 19. Could she really afford yeti? So I asked her, I said, I'm so interested that you believe so strongly in this brand that you're showing it to everybody. I mean, that's almost like a tattoo, right, when you decorate your precious digital components with a brand name. She went on to tell me how she believes in this community. She believes in what they stand for. She's involved in this community. I belong to this brand, and I don't have that much money, but every Christmas, the presents I buy for my family, they're Yeti, because I want to support this brand now. So it's a weird way to answer your question. But I'm just thinking, if you can capture the passion of a 19 year old college student with an ice cooler, come on, maybe you can do it for nuts and bolts and

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it all gets down. It's not about the cooler. It's about the purpose. It's about the lifestyle. It's about an ideal. So nuts and bolts. Is there an ideal around do it yourself? Is there an ideal about self sufficiency to create a successful community? It's not about enhancing your quarterly revenue goals. It's about sharing this intersection. It's this purpose of what is your company about? What do they stand for? What do they believe? And can you achieve this vision for your future better with your customers at your back, aligned with you, working together on this? So it really gets down to this belief, this value, this purpose. I spent a lot of time in the book talking about that, but, I mean, it just kind of gives me some intellectual curiosity around if Yeti can do it. Gosh, I'm thinking almost anybody can do it, right?

Roger Dooley [00:21:11]:

That's a great example, Mark. And really what you're talking about there is making a brand part of your social identity. I think the classic example is Apple during its early years, where they drew a very sharp distinction between their computers and everybody else, which at that point was IBM and PC compatibles. And you weren't just an Apple user, you were an Apple person. And people did get Apple tattoos, and people would it was almost religious. If you ever, during those years, posted something, well, you know, this new PC is actually pretty good. Might be better than Apple in this regard. You'd immediately get a million replies that were based more on an emotional belief than irrational facts. It's tough to do, but boy, if you can pull that off the way yeti has wow, that's fantastic.

Mark Schaefer [00:22:01]:

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I think there's something in the DNA of most companies that can be expressed as a belief or a purpose. I think as marketers, consider this, it's something beyond your value proposition. It's something beyond your point of differentiation. In the book, I talk about this in a playful way, where your point of differentiation might be. We have the biggest selection of deli meats in the city. Well, that's great. I might want to visit your store, but I don't want to gather for that reason. I might want to gather about because I want to learn how to cook healthful meals for children or how to create meals on a budget or new types of recipes using new ingredients you're bringing into your store. So those are reasons that I think would captivate your attention, because let's face it, I mean, you're still competing for attention. A community. I can spend time with your community, or I can go watch the mandalorian, or I can go see baby pictures on Facebook or something. So it's work, and it has to be something compelling and you have to give people a reason to connect in an emotional way so they want to gather.

Roger Dooley [00:23:28]:

It seems like maybe one strategy, Mark, might be to do an adjacent community. For example, if you're selling office supplies, most people are not all that emotional about office supplies. But what if you said, well, gee, admin people are the primary purchaser or a major group of purchasers of these products? What if we start admins anonymous or something where people can exchange ideas about the problems they face every day at the job and so on? That might work.

Mark Schaefer [00:23:56]:

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Here's a very compelling example of that. I was interviewing a woman named Alice Ferris for the book. She's a brilliant, visionary person who's applying these principles of community to the nonprofit world. Nonprofit fundraising specifically, and offhand. She mentioned that her number one community that supports her as a professional businesswoman is Mm Lefler. I didn't know what that was. I'd never heard of that. And what it is, it's a clothing brand. It's a retail brand. Perfect example, right, where you're talking about office supplies and admins anonymous. So I actually went into this community. They don't have that many men in there because it's like women's clothing, but the women are in there and it's like a support group and they're asking questions just about it might be how to give better presentations or how do I handle this situation at work. Now, they also talk about clothes and they also sort of critique maybe the latest lines coming out of Mm LaFleur. But I mean, for Mm Fleur LaFleur to thrive, their community has to thrive and to create this emotional connection to this brand. I mean, there's so much competition in the retail space, but Mm LaFlure has created a layer of emotional switching costs because if you don't buy that brand, if you're not part of that community, you lose your friends. Pretty powerful.

Roger Dooley [00:25:32]:

Mark, you talk about competition. Is there going to be a sort of natural limit on how many communities somebody can participate in, whether they're in person or virtual? I mean, if every brand suddenly said, okay, I'm going to go out and build a community, every small business said, I'm going to build a community, and so on, people are already coping

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with overwhelm in the post COVID era. Are we going to hit the wall here where only a few communities actually survive?

Mark Schaefer [00:26:00]:

Well, I think this is a real and present problem when every single business in the world buys my book.

Roger Dooley [00:26:09]:

Right.

Mark Schaefer [00:26:09]:

Well, we are in real trouble then, baby. Here's the fact of the matter. This is the most overlooked opportunity in the history of overlooked opportunities. It is staring us in the face and you and I I remember it was a cherished and wonderful day. I'll never forget meeting you at a marketing event. And you've been to a lot of events. I've been to a lot of events and I don't know about you, my friend. I have never been to a marketing event where the subject of community was a track at the event, or even a topic, and yet it is this profound opportunity. So at the moment, I'm not too worried about this being overrun. Obviously, there is a point where it's saturation. It's the same as content saturation, like content shock, we get to the point where there's too much content and we have to make choices. But the average person on Facebook belongs to five groups, and increasingly, there's a lot of people not even on Facebook anymore. So if you create value, I just think there's a huge untapped potential, specifically in the business world and in the nonprofit world, to create true community. And I do believe there's a first mover advantage. If you look at my example with

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Mm LaFleur, they're creating this great value. And here's a little hidden idea in that case study. This emotional switching cost is created by the friendships, the emotional bonds people have with each other more than the emotional connection they have with the brand. This suggests the marketing strategy within a community is to find ways for people to create these friendly bonds, to collaborate, co, create, do things together, become friends. That's more important than the creating the emotional attachment to the brand. And if you can do that, if you can create that kind of value in a community, I think you're onto something that's profound, long lasting, and it's going to be perhaps your greatest point of brand differentiation.

Roger Dooley [00:28:37]:

Mark, I've covered about a quarter of the topics that I was hoping to talk to you about, but this is probably...

Mark Schaefer [00:28:44]:

I just get on a rant sometimes.

Roger Dooley [00:28:46]:

No, seriously, I mean, it was me too. It's so much fun talking. We could have probably done a podcast episode on each one of the topics we discussed already. But in any case, Mark, how can our audience members find you and your ideas online?

Mark Schaefer [00:29:00]:

Well, thanks for asking. And Roger, thanks again for having me. And I so appreciate how you're always so well prepared and engaging in these

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interviews. My site is businesses grow. Pretty easy to remember. If you can remember Businesses Grow, you can find my blog, my podcast, all my social connections, and my books. We've talked today about marketing rebellion. We've talked about belonging to the brand, which is actually my 10th book. And it's available in paper, Kindle, Hardback and an audiobook narrated by me all wherever books are sold.

Roger Dooley [00:29:38]:

Great. Mark, thanks so much for being on the show. It is always a pleasure.

Outro [00:29:42]:

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