



# To reach the individual, find the group

Not all audiences are created equal, and nobody's a category. To make a connection, consider how groups think about themselves.



Matthew Rothenberg

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*"If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends."* — *Spice Girls*, *"Wannabe"*

On the surface, the business of communication requires a message to deliver and an audience to receive it. The better the message fits the audience, the more successful it'll be.

But dig just a little deeper, and you'll uncover the question: What is an audience? Is it any collection of people who are in some sort of geographic or demographic proximity? Or does an audience require individuals to recognize themselves as part of a group?

For social animals like human beings, group membership is an intrinsic part of their identity. And unlike other social creatures like [wolves](#) and [naked mole rats](#), people commonly belong to more than one group.

The group is a powerful lever to encourage individuals to act, whether it's to hunt a gazelle, vote in an election or buy smartphones. Understanding group dynamics offers opportunities for engagement — including social transmission — that simply aren't available outside the group.

To deliver their messages effectively, then, smart and resourceful communicators must address groups who need to hear those messages — whether they find those groups or create them.

## Aggregates, categories and groups

To communicate to a group, first recognize what makes groups special.

What differentiates a **group** from any other collection of human beings? Sociologists distinguish groups from **aggregates**, people in proximity who don't interact or share a sense of identity (such as a high-rise condo or a crowd of pedestrians waiting to cross the street). They also separate groups from **categories**, in which individuals share characteristics (such as blonde hair or birthdays) but don't interact.

In other words, a group is any collection of two or more people who interact for some reason and who consider their identity somehow informed by that interaction. A group is usually defined by **social cohesion**, based on at least one common factor such as kinship, ethnicity, interests or values; and by **social identification**, based on a shared awareness by members that they're part of that group.

### In the market for an audience?



All the people who happen to be in this shop comprise an **aggregate**, any kids in the crowd are a **category**, and employees are a self-identified **group** engaged in running the shop.

Whether your marketing takes the demographic or psychographic route (or both), speaking to a group is much more effective than addressing aggregates or categories.

Aggregates are superficial and situational. You can communicate with pedestrians standing at a street corner by putting a sign at that corner, but the communication potential ends there.

Nobody is a category. Categories are abstractions — activating members of a category requires that they recognize some common interest, whether it's a matter of identity (something they are) or affinity (something they like).

Note that people within an aggregate or category can become a group organically. That aggregation of condo-dwellers may become a group if they join together to plan a holiday party or take some political action on behalf of their homes. People in the blonde category may form a group to exchange hair care or fashion tips. These newly hatched groups may last and even evolve into something completely different; consider how a professional guild of medieval cathedral builders became [a secretive worldwide fraternal order](#). Or they may recede back into categories or aggregates or dissipate completely. (The category of people who owned 8-track tapes sometimes formed groups to swap them, but the category and the groups it inspired have both largely disappeared. OK, Boomer!)

## How to talk so groups will listen

What do these definitions mean when you're trying to communicate with an audience?

Simple: To create a connection between yourself and an audience, you can

- Approach an existing group and convince them that you belong; or
- Approach an aggregate or category and convince them that they're actually a group based on something meaningful they have in common — preferably, something that involves you and your brand.

So how can marketers take the initiative to make an aggregate feel like a group or a group feel kinship with their brand?

Consider [REI](#), which has tapped a deep vein of collective ownership to build a co-op business model and lean into the overlap between outdoor enthusiasts and activism around environmental and social issues. The company recently doubled down on activating its community with a [content studio](#) focused on new stories about the outdoor experience.

In particular, "The studio's content will complement the company's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) activism by prioritizing stories by people that identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQ, women or members of other historically underrepresented communities. Content will also align with the company's commitment to climate action and focus on protecting the environment."

TL;DR: REI has grown a distinct group of supporters that intersects outdoors activities and social activism. Now it's acting with intent to ensure the group welcomes people who aren't always represented by outdoor brands.

## You talking to me?

Considered through a sociological lens, product market fit ultimately comes down to refining messaging for the right groups. The simplest route is to join a group by plugging into established areas of shared identity or affinity. *Building* a group — convincing a large number of individuals they share a hitherto unrecognized identity or affinity — is heavier work, but it can create a green field for your product that includes hard-to-reach stretches of the market.

We've created this handy decision tree to help you guide your message to an actionable group:



Whatever audience you start with, Job 1 is to weed out aggregate thinking and category thinking, then dig down to the group level.

That's where you're going to find the connections that prompt people to embrace a message and pass it on.




## Matthew Rothenberg

Matthew Rothenberg is a veteran tech journalist and strategist who's been slinging content since the dawn of the digital age.



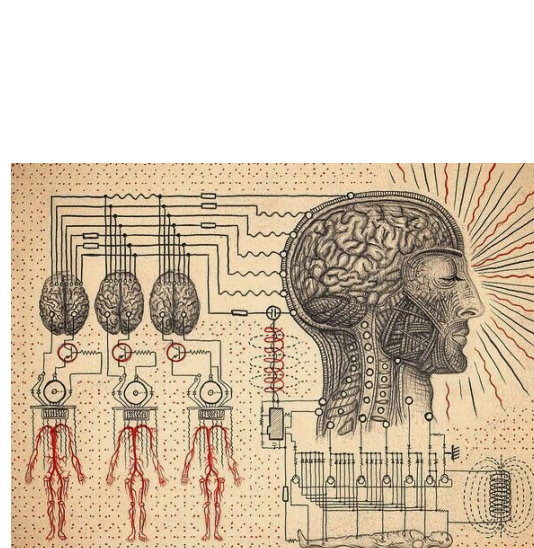
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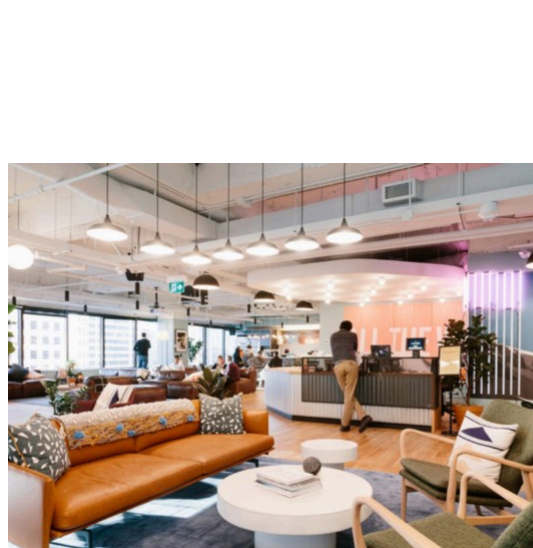
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