Book Trust Agents

Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust

Chris Brogan and Julien Smith
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Recommendation

Archimedes, the Greek mathematician and inventor, once said, "With a lever large enough, I can move the world." Today, the internet can be that potent lever "for increasing the power of what you do," according to social media gurus Chris Brogan and Julien Smith. The most effective way to use the web to improve your brand's "influence, reputation and profits" is to become a "trust agent" online. That requires developing strong, sustaining relationships with consumers who believe in you, respect you and see you as a helpful resource, credible expert and honest person. In this illuminating, witty guide, the authors explain who trust agents are, what makes them special and – most important – how you can become one. *BooksInShort* recommends Brogan and Smith's tales of what individual trust agents have been able to accomplish in cyberspace. You'll realize all over again that the internet is a remarkably interactive, powerful medium – a lever indeed capable of helping you move the world.

Take-Aways

- People today are less trusting than ever before, but companies can use the internet to win consumers' confidence, thus enhancing the power and reputation of their brands.
- "Trust agents" are genuine, technologically savvy people who "humanize" their firms.
- To emulate these highly influential individuals, act on six interrelated principles:
- First, "make your own game" by breaking free from your industry's traditions and differentiating yourself from your competitors.
- Second, relate to people authentically, so web communities accept you as an insider.
- Understand that "credibility, reliability and intimacy" increase your trustworthiness in business, and "self-orientation" diminishes it.
- Third, leverage the power of the internet, your relationships, your reputation and your resources to reach your business goals.
- Fourth, be a "connector" among your networks. Build and nurture them so you can potentially become the "Agent Zero" at their core.
- Fifth, develop your "interpersonal" or "soft" skills, so you can become a "human artist."
- Sixth, organize your contacts into an "army" that can accomplish far-reaching goals.

Summary

"Trust, Social Capital and Media"

People are no longer as trusting as they once were. In fact, "the general public's level of mistrust is at an all-time high." But savvy companies can use the internet to build trust among consumers, thus enhancing the power and reputation of their corporate brands. Rather than trying to conceal information about their operations, these firms embrace the web's connectivity and transparency and even use these properties to advance their business objectives. By establishing or harnessing "trust agents," or "non-sales-oriented, non-high-pressure marketers," they develop a genuine, credible presence online.

> "The whole web is one gigantic lever, and you can use it to accomplish pretty much anything more easily than before."

Why are trust agents so influential? They are "power users" of the internet's latest, most potent tools. These champions of online connectivity don't aggressively promote their companies. Nor are they "infiltrators," or spies who join online communities for ulterior motives. Instead, trust agents are honest, straightforward people

who "humanize" their firms. They recognize that online communities want to be "cared for," not "managed."

> "We're asking you to balance being genuinely part of an online community with being aware of business opportunities, and how executing the trust agent's strategy can realize business goals."

To understand how web communities currently perceive your company and its competitors, and why they might trust or distrust your firm, create a "listening station" using several free or low-cost internet tools. Start by setting up a Gmail account, so you can use the wide range of Google applications. Then sign up for Google Reader (google.com/reader), a web-based aggregator. Next, visit the Technorati website and insert your company's name into the search field. When the results appear, right-click on the RSS button and choose "copy link location." Then return to Google Reader, click on the plus button and paste in the information you copied. [*Editor's note*: This enables you to view results from Technorati in Google Reader.] Follow the same process for any other terms you want to research, such as the names of your specific products or services.

> "Seeing life as a game allows you to see the map, to see where you're going."

Online, you can connect with and influence others through blogs, videos, podcasts and other tools. The content you publish exists permanently on the web, so it continues to reach new audiences long after you post it. You don't have to be physically present to continue sharing your message. Thus, responding to people's most common questions and concerns on your blog or through another public venue often has far more impact than answering them in private emails. By publishing this type of information on the web, you create a useful resource and build your reputation as an expert in your field. Being helpful to others enables you to accrue social capital, which is crucial to your success online.

> "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

So how do you become a trust agent? All trust agents act on six interrelated principles:

First Principle: "Make Your Own Game"

The internet is a great place to innovate and break free from your industry's traditions. Online, you can set your own rules. Take, for example, the Arctic Monkeys, an English music group that creatively used MySpace to promote a new album, which soon became the "fastest-selling" ever in the U.K. Another group, Radiohead, made its album available on the web with a unique "pay-what-you-want" pricing option. It sold three million digital copies. In effect, these bands jumped the gate. They found a way to differentiate themselves by bucking long-standing systems.

> "Building any kind of following online...requires solid leadership skills, the ability to create a sense of belonging, a gracious attitude, transparency about who you are and empowering the community to feel important."

Writing your own rules helps you build a reputation as an expert in your field, thereby earning people's trust. But to succeed, you must be able to view "life as a game." According to BoingBoing.net blogger Douglas Rushkoff, children interact with games in three ways, using methods that parallel and describe how people relate to culture, both online and offline:

1. **"Playing"** – With any new game, you first learn to play it "as it was intended." In a trial-and-error process, you discover the mechanisms of the game, how to have fun playing it, the traditional and "house" rules, the objectives, the role of competition, and so on. The feedback you get about your choices along the way continually reshapes your strategy. These principles also apply to building an online presence. On the web, you may receive feedback in the form of "links, comments, revenue, friends and followers," and even "sentiment," which you can measure in "positive and negative mentions."
2. **"Cheating"** – Once you learn a game's rules, you become an efficient, competent player. Eventually, you begin to look for nontraditional ways to play the game. Though Rushkoff calls this process "cheating," a more apt word for it may be "hacking," because it relies on alternative thinking, not dishonest strategizing. For example, your firm might find a new, innovative way to sell an existing product.
3. **"Programming"** – Sometimes you can gain greater rewards by starting from scratch, rather than modifying an existing game. This requires ongoing experimentation as you define a new game and discover its rules. Take a risk, whether it's launching a "content marketing blog" about a topic you know well or creating an entirely new internet community. Explore ideas that are "so crazy" they "just might work."

Second Principle: "One of Us"

In 2004, Microsoft employee Robert Scoble began to blog about his company, often roasting its products. Because of his honesty and courage, Scoble gained credibility with online communities, becoming one of the web's first trust agents. People who read his blog regarded him as a technically competent, highly knowledgeable contributor. They accepted him as a trusted member of their online groups. To earn the confidence of online communities, as Scoble did, you must "be human" in all your interactions. That means sharing your true opinions and speaking like a real, live person, not an advertisement. You must also understand the "trust equation," which David Maister, Charles H. Green and Robert M. Galford identified in their 2001 book, *The Trusted Advisor*. According to the authors, "credibility, reliability and intimacy" increase your trustworthiness in business, and "self-orientation" diminishes it. This trust formula also holds true for the online world, though some of "the signals have changed":

- **Credibility** – In the past, people strengthened their credibility by demonstrating authenticity and competence. On the internet today, what others think and write about you matters more.
- **Reliability** – Once, individuals proved their reliability through their actions. For instance, if someone arrived on time for a project or meeting, people believed that person would be prompt in the future. Today, what others say about you – for example, in their online reviews – has greater influence than what you yourself do.
- **Intimacy** – Whether people are comfortable with you, and how they feel about you emotionally, indicates the level of intimacy you share. On the web, an absence of "nonverbal social cues" has made "verbal intimacy" increasingly powerful.
- **Self-orientation** – The more you exhibit high self-orientation by putting your own needs first, the less trustworthy you will seem to others. But if you, say,

recommend a competitor's superior offerings over your own, people will be more likely to trust you.

> "Everyone is not your customer, and everyone isn't the audience you want to influence, which is the difference between a trust agent and a 'brand evangelist'."

Many of these changes point toward a clear trend: On the internet, groups, not individuals, play a major role in establishing trust. Indeed, trust is linked to "a sense of belonging," to acceptance in a web community.

Third Principle: "Archimedes Effect"

Archimedes was a Greek mathematician and inventor from the third century B.C. who once claimed, "With a lever large enough, I can move the world." Like Archimedes' lever, the web can help you attain far better results than "normal human effort" could achieve. It enables you to supercharge your professional or commercial activities. Online, your time, your reputation and your relationships can also provide leverage for reaching your business objectives. However, never "sell to your audience." Rather, serve as the "gatekeeper" for your community.

> "The key to developing a solid network is first to build a presence online, then meet in person and then sustain the relationship with several more online touches over time."

Understanding what leverage is and how to use it requires some knowledge of "multicapitalism," the ability to perceive "multiple, varying forms of value and to know how to exchange one type of capital freely for another." Consider Donald Trump, the real estate mogul. He leveraged his wealth to develop his TV show, *The Apprentice*; then he leveraged his high profile on the program to develop Trump University.

Fourth Principle: "Agent Zero"

Trust agents are natural relationship builders. These individuals often exist at the hub of various online networks, constantly bringing together different groups and disseminating ideas. Their central position in their networks has earned them the moniker "Agent Zero." Because they serve as the human links in their communities, they often have access to powerful, important people, and they are "quick to share" these connections. Agent Zeroes create, expand and strengthen their networks by being helpful. For instance, they might use their networks to solve problems. They go out of their way to post positive comments on blogs and to respond quickly to Twitter messages, and they call attention to others' achievements. As they follow their natural inclinations to do good and assist others, they increase their social capital and influence. Their communities' trust in them grows, enabling them to accomplish even greater feats online. Such agents perform their beneficial acts selflessly, always staying out of the spotlight. But count on it: People know they are there.

Fifth Principle: "Human Artist"

Trust agents have superior "interpersonal" or "soft" skills. Naturally social, they tend to read people well and be empathetic. They are, in effect, human artists, a capability that makes them immensely valuable to their employers. To become a human artist online, learn who your target communities are. Interact with them on their own terms, not yours. Get inside people's heads. Find out what matters to them. You can hurt your online reputation if you wittingly or unwittingly violate social norms, so honor unspoken community standards and protocols on the web. This requires good listening and observation skills. For example, before posting comments about online content, examine what types of comments others post. Whatever you do, don't market to new online friends. They will likely remove you from their "friends" lists and may even write negative blog posts about you. Follow the Golden Rule, which "ports nicely to the web."

Sixth Principle: "Build an Army"

Internet tools, programs and applications, including wikis, Yelp, Facebook and Twitter, enable trust agents to get in touch with a vast number of people online. They can use their influence to point large crowds toward the same worthwhile purpose. Because of the internet's amazing connectivity, individuals and groups can now collaborate together on complex projects in ways unimaginable in the past. Wikipedia, the immense online encyclopedia that developed through crowdsourcing, is a terrific example of this remarkable internet capability.

> "Trust agents build networks almost reflexively by being helpful, by promoting the good work that others do, by sharing even their best stuff without hesitation and by finding ways to deliver even more value on top of all that without asking for anything in return."

By building an army on the web, trust agents accomplish great things. Consider General Motors' GMNext.com program, wherein GM made a customer-friendly wiki available, along with other "user-editable areas." Droves of GM customers used these online tools to tell stories about the GM cars they own and love. The program succeeded because GM didn't try to sell anyone anything. Instead, it gave its customers the opportunity to demonstrate their deep appreciation for their GM vehicles. That's great – and credible – marketing.

Techniques for Getting Started Online

Follow a few strategies to advance your online (and offline) goals: Join Facebook and any other relevant social networks. Develop a "friends" base and expand from there. Don't be afraid to "friend" people you do not know. Use Twitter to learn what you can about others online. Frequently communicate by posting comments all over the web – on people's blogs, on forums and on other internet venues – and regularly "check in" with members of your online community. Make being "the best communicator the web has ever seen" your primary goal.

About the Authors

Chris Brogan is co-founder of PodCamp, which sponsors "UnConferences" for social media enthusiasts and professionals, including bloggers, podcasters and social

networkers. **Julien Smith**, a trend analyst, has directed web communities for more than 10 years.