Connecting With Your Customers By Understanding The Tribes They Belong To

How to create a deep, lasting relationship with the people who keep you in business.

A Publication of BRODEUR PARTNERS
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*How to create a deep, lasting relationship with the people who keep you in business*

We are going to explain why if you understand the tribes people belong to—not only the customary ones like family, social group, common ancestor, community and traditions but also affinity groups, friends and shared experiences—you’ll have a significant advantage when it comes to marketing to your customers and potential customers.

To do that, we need to put the importance of tribes in context.

So, let’s start here. It doesn’t matter what you do for a living. You can be the CEO of a *Fortune 100* company; a senior marketer; someone working at a start-up; or a leader at a non-profit. Your position doesn’t matter. Here’s what does. We all want to connect with our customers.

On one level, of course, that’s just Marketing 101. You can’t get people to buy your product or service, or to adopt your point of view, if they don’t know you exist. And they won’t know you exist unless you interact with them somehow. Without that engagement, there is no chance you are ever going to create the connection you need to influence someone’s thoughts and/or actions. The best medical clinic in the world is of absolutely no value if those in need don’t go there because they have never heard of it. And a product, service, or point of view that could make someone’s life better won’t, if the people who could benefit from it don’t know about it.

But again they won’t know about what you have unless there is a connection—unless your offering, message, or idea resonates with the people you are trying to reach.
What could keep your message from getting through? You know the two factors as well as we do: The number of messages each of us—including the people we are trying to reach—receives every day and the time pressure we all are under.

Let’s deal with the sheer volume of messages first. There are the commercial ones—television commercials, radio spots, print ads and the various ways people try to grab our attention online through pop-up ads and those that follow us around as we cruise the Internet—but there are also tweets, IMs, texts and the like. And that’s just in our limited spare. (More on that in a minute.) At work we get communications from all directions—emails, memos, voice mails, company publications and reports, sales updates, industry trade publications ... the list seems endless there as well—because it is.

The total number of messages we receive is enormous and there is no way we can pay attention to each one.

And the reason we can’t is because of the time pressure we are all under.

Know anyone who has said recently, “I just don’t know what I am going to do with myself today,” or “I have a couple of hours to kill.” We don’t either. When you feel you don’t have any time to waste—because you don’t—you are only going to pay attention to the messages that are most important to you.

**WHAT THIS MEANS**

We as leaders, marketers and communicators talk all the time about how our messages need to break through the clutter in order to reach our overwhelmed (and over-messaged) customers and potential customers.

Well guess what? Those consumers and potential customers have beaten us to the proverbial punch. They already have figurative—and in some cases, literal—mental filters in place to determine what they will pay attention to and what they won’t. (And this is over and above the spam-type filters that people have in place on their computers, tablets and phones.)

What this means is the problem of reaching them is even more difficult than we thought.

Not only are they getting bombarded with far more communications than they could possibly pay attention to—the accepted wisdom is people receive north of 5,000
messages a day—but they have figured out a way to filter out automatically just about all but the ones that are important to them.

More specifically, these mental filters perform two functions. If you think about how they work for you, as you go about your day-to-day life, you will understand how they work for the people you are trying to reach.

The filters:

1. Block out unwanted messages, of course. Without those filters, our heads would explode trying to process not only the commercial messages we see, but all the emails we receive, text messages and IMs people send us, the “alerts” that come in through our smart phones, etc.

2. Select what communications we are going to pay attention to, the ones that are most relevant to our lives.

What this means is you have to tailor your message so that it passes through these filters.

FILTERS, WHAT FILTERS?

What are these filters that we are talking about? Well, there are a lot of them. Let’s start with the ones you’d expect. Ads for supplemental Medicare insurance don’t register with teenagers, and people in their 60s typically are not paying attention to the latest soft drink and video game commercial messages aimed at teens.

But those sorts of filters have always been in place. That’s also true about the ones that people use to describe themselves: “risk taker,” “politically conservative/liberal/independent,” “spiritual (or not),” “idealistic,” “happy,” “compassionate,” whatever. And those familiar types of labels can be externally directed as well. (For example, “I am someone who cares for family and friends” and/or “I am in a loving relationship.”)

But what you may not have known is that the people you are trying to reach have filters for dealing with commercial messages and brands.

There are eight filters that naturally fall into four categories. For your messages to get through, the recipients must feel that those communications meet one of the following four requirements:
THE RATIONAL

The appeal here is to our logic and reasoning abilities. This is the filter that covers most of what goes on in the “left” (or logical) part of your brain. It is functional. It’s concerned with the specifications of the product, such as where you can find it, its price, and the features it has. “I am looking for an inexpensive dependable car. Hmmm. The ads for the Nissan Versa and Honda Civic seem interesting. Let me pay attention to what they are telling me.”

To get through the filter, your potential client/customer must conclude, after hearing what you have to say:

- It helps me meet my needs
- It makes my life easier

SOCIAL

Here it’s all about the relationships your audience has, and the ones they would like to have. Part and parcel of that is how your target is perceived by the world and how they would like to be perceived. It includes such things as the groups people belong to, and who they hang out with at work and outside of it.

To get through the filter, your potential client/customer must conclude, after hearing what you have to say:

- Being associated with it makes me feel better about myself
- I want people to know I am associated with it

VALUES

Here you are appealing to what someone stands for; what they believe. These are the ethical, moral, and faith-based elements that connect you with ideas outside of yourself. This may include your place of worship, the way you see the world (whether you believe people are basically good or evil, and whether they deserve the lives they get or have their lives determined by factors outside their control). It can be as simple as a statement of what you believe—“I am pro-choice;” “I am pro-life”—to as complex as the
way you view humankind’s destiny. (As this last one shows, the values category can be extremely far ranging.)

To get through the filter, your potential client/customer must conclude, after hearing what you have to say:

- I associate the message/idea with values important to me
- It stands for the same things I do

**SENSORY**

This category includes everything you see, touch, smell, and hear as part of an interaction. Think of what music is playing as you enter a hotel lobby or how the merchandise is displayed in your favorite boutique. That new car smell is the classic example of effective sensory appeal. How an iPhone feels in your hand is part of it as well. Sensory appeal also includes such things as comfort, safety, and routine.

To get through the filter, your potential client/customer must conclude, after hearing your message:

- I like the feeling when I’m around it
- It inspires me

It is rare to find a marketer who understands these filters and uses them effectively all the time. Why? They simply don’t think about their customers this way. They continue to look for a woman 18-49, or someone over 65 who has a certain household income. That approach can work to some extent, because it has always worked to some extent. But it is remarkably inefficient if you don’t tailor it more specifically.

Suppose your target audience is women 18 to 34 who have a household income of less than $50,000 a year. Within that demo, you have female college and graduate students, women who stopped their formal education after senior year in high school and married early and have two or more children that they are raising at home, young women—some of whom are college graduates, some who are not—just getting their careers underway, women who have decided to leave the workforce for a while to have their first child. You get the idea. It is hard to find a common denominator, especially once you factor in that some of the women live on farms and rural areas, others in big
cities like Chicago, Los Angeles or New York and the rest in the suburbs. The fact is that two 26-year-old women—the mid-point of your demo—can be extremely different, and a one-size fits all approach is not going to work if you are trying to get them to pay attention to what you have to say or sell. The message that resonates with one may not resonate with the other.

**WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO**

After everything we just talked about, the obvious question to ask is: how do you connect to people today?

You need to be relevant.

Webster’s defines relevance as *being practically and especially socially applicable.* And we think that’s right, although we have found most people misread the definition and put the emphasis on the practical. It is certainly true that what you are offering must solve a customer need and do it well.

But increasingly, that is not enough. Customers are becoming progressively fickle, as well as spoiled. If you ask them if they want high quality or a good price they will answer “yes” every time. They expect superior execution on your part. That is the price of entry, no matter what your organization does, and (unfortunately) it does not guarantee a long-term relationship. A slip, or an encounter with someone who does what you do slightly better or in a different way, or just as well at a lower price, and the relationship could be over.

And that is where the emotional part of relevance comes in. If your product/service/idea resonates with a customer, if it means something to them—in addition to being utilitarian—then the relationship will be deeper, longer lasting and more profitable. You will have formed the connection we talked about.

That connection also explains why they will stay with you. It is easy to switch to another brand, company, product or service, unless people feel some sort of personal connection to your offering.

> Everything is personal.
That’s why relevance is so important. It has the power to change not only people’s minds but their actions as well.

Your starting point in creating relevance is understanding what is important to the people you are trying to reach so you can engage with them through the lens in which they view the world. This is an extremely important point. You need to start from the place where they already are.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Let’s pause here and underscore something about what this means for organizations in general, and your marketing/communication efforts in particular, and we will begin with the biggest point—where you must begin your marketing efforts.

You need to go where the consumer already is and reach them on their terms—not yours—to get through their filters.

Both parts of that sentence are extremely important. You can’t wait for potential customers to find you, because they have too many choices, and their filters are locked in place. You may never pop up on their internal radar unless you try to reach them on their own terms, engaging with them by stressing the things (features, attributes and feelings) of your product or service that is going to get through their (rational, sensory, social and values) filters.

That last point is what’s new. You probably already knew that you need to reach consumers where they are. But finding them is not enough. You need to understand the filters they have in place, in order to forge a connection.

What this means is every part of your communication efforts must contain at least one of the factors we talked about before, it must engage with people on a thinking, sensory, values or social basis.

If you don’t understand the filters your customers have in place, you are leaving whether your message got through to chance. Hoping to get lucky doesn’t strike us as a sound marketing and communication strategy.
TRIBES: INCREASE YOUR COMPANY’S RELEVANCE BY FINDING, CREATING SHARED EXPERIENCES

“For millions of years, human beings have been part of one tribe or another. A group needs only two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate.”

--Seth Godin in his book Tribes

So understanding tribes will help you find customers where they are, reach them on their terms and sail through their filters. In other words, you’ll be relevant. And relevance means you experience more robust customer acquisition, engagement and loyalty.

Okay, but what exactly are tribes?

Tribes are both an ancient and modern concept. People forever have organized themselves around common ancestry, community or custom.

But today the concept of “tribe” goes far beyond that. We define modern-day tribes as groups of individuals bonded by shared experiences, views and tastes, usually fueled by social media.

In the commercial context, tribes gravitate to brands, and brands have tribes, strong or weak, whether they realize it or not. The goal is to capitalize on modern day tribes by:

- Better understanding what they are and how they work
- Discovering existing tribes
- Developing new ones
- Giving them the shared experiences they crave

SOME EXAMPLES

People who served in the Navy are members of a tribe. Women college grads could be the basis for a tribe. So could car mechanics.

It’s reasonable to assume that sub-groups within these tribes, especially subgroups with an elite aura, have tighter bonds. Navy Seals, alumnae of elite women’s colleges, Ferrari mechanics.
Tribes can be lasting, as the examples above, or transitory. They can arise, develop, shift, morph, assemble and disassemble in a matter of years, months or even days. They can emerge in response to changing social, economic and cultural trends.

Consider the U.S. presidential campaign in 2016. Unlikely tribes assembled to elect Donald Trump or to ensure he wasn’t elected. And as you read this, those “tribes” are still moving, continually shifting and adjusting to a new Trump presidency.

**THE CHALLENGE**

Although none of this has been lost on marketers and communicators, they don’t always know what to do with the information. Marketers have long tailored campaigns to identifiable and reachable segments, quasi-tribal affiliations that fall out from traditional demographic categories like gender, age, geography, income, military status or alumni affiliation.

But the explosive growth of online social networks is dramatically changing all this. Social networks, a major part of virtually everyone’s life, are making it easier than ever for people of all demographics to flock together instantly around an experience, brand or idea. In fact, social networks encourage it. Traditional demographics matter less than ever, and the boundaries are all but erased. As a practical matter, there are no exclusive white enclaves, senior citizen communities or men’s clubs on mainstream social networks.

All kinds of people from various traditional cohorts form tribes around beloved hashtags, memes, pet videos, sports, ideas, candidates, causes, cuisines, faiths, and a million other interests and topics online. New modern tribal communities fluidly arise, develop and evolve around each one. The melting pot has become a high speed blender, spinning out tribes as we speak.

The most important thing to know about these new tribal dynamics? Because modern day tribal formation is played out in open forums and in real time, we are not only able to “find” these new tribes, but organizations of every size and shape – from the multinational Fortune 100 firm to the small community non-profit – have a new opportunity to connect and engage at the individual level.
That is why tribes are so important today.

**MOTIVATIONS FOR BEING PART OF A COMMUNITY OR ‘TRIBE’**

So why exactly do modern-day tribes form? If we know why people are forming tribes, you’ll be better-positioned to know how to listen, talk, engage and build relationships with tribes.

In our recent study around tribes, we performed some research on friends, their interests and their values, and determined that tribes form primarily for these reasons: *friendship, fun, learning, support and a sense of belonging.*

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**More on why people join tribes**

We gave people a list of ten words and asked them to select the three words that best describe why they are part of groups and communities outside of work and home. By far, the most important motivator was simple “friendship.” But there were significant differences based on life stage.

For **Millennials (age 18-34),** the next two most important relevance factors were “having fun” and “learning.” That is, Millennials are looking for a good time while growing their career skills. [Could the *learning* signify regular edification as well?]

For **Gen Xers (age 35-54),** the two supporting factors were “support” and “learning.” This makes sense as they are often at the stage in life when they are taking care of both their children and their parents. So while they, too, need to continue building career skills, they are also sorely in need of help with everything from day care to elder care.

For aging **Boomers (55+),** they share the Millennials’ desire for “fun” but are as motivated simply by having “a sense of belonging.” We’ve seen this in other work we’ve done. One of the many struggles that many retirees face is the feeling that they are no longer relevant or needed. For them, groups and tribes can give them a sense of meaning and purpose.
If these reasons explain why tribes form, we next need to know *how* they form.

The answer: *through shared experiences, views, interests and preferences.*

We asked people what percentage of their friends shared most or all of their views and preferences in eight different areas. In five of those eight categories – food, politics, the arts, faith and exercise – nearly one-third of respondents said that most or all of their friends share their views and preferences. Only about one in five said the same thing about matters of sports teams, fashion and finance.

What fun or educational experiences can you create to attract and build your tribe?
This suggests that a lot of people out there hang out and associate with people who value the same things they do. And social media has made it remarkably easy to find people with like interests.

But when you filter the data by age, things get a bit more interesting. **Tribes seem strongest among the youngest.** You might think that the younger you are the more likely you’ll have friends with varied and different interests, and that the longer you live the more likely you’ll narrow those friendships to people who share your views.

You would be wrong.

Our data suggests that Millennials are much more likely to have friends who share their views than those at later life stages. This suggests that on average, younger tribes possess more tribal energy – eagerness to come together around experiences and ideas. The only exception with Millennials: politics. Their circles of friends are as politically diverse as seniors’ (or no more homogenous).

Another surprising twist: **The strongest millennial tribes form around food and fitness.** While you might expect to see Millennials’ tribal tendencies in the arts – music, movies, etc., nearly half (49%) of Millennials said their friends most shared their views on food and nutrition. Two in five Millennials (42%) said the same about health and

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**What percentage of your friends share most or all of your views and preferences?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food &amp; nutrition</td>
<td>31.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>31.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The arts</td>
<td>31.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>30.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; exercise</td>
<td>29.02%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>22.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>19.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal finance</td>
<td>19.61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total "all" or "most"
exercise. Indeed, Millennials are more likely to have shared interests in those areas than in matters of religion and faith.

**Perhaps less surprising are gender differences.** Men are more likely to hang out with those who share their views on sports while women are more likely to hang out with people who share their views on food, art, faith and fashion.

We also looked at the importance of various types of relationships. Not surprisingly, the most important by far, was family.

**But beyond family, we saw evidence that some of the strongest and most meaningful relationships were not being made at the office or in the neighborhood, but rather through shared experiences and interests. These are the relationships we’re calling tribes.**
We broke down tribal experiences into categories and again saw Millennials displaying the most tribal zeal. In fact, they appeared to put as much importance on relationships they make through a night out at a restaurant or sporting activity as they do the relationships they make through faith-based activities.
SOCIAL NETWORKS FUEL THE GROWTH OF “TRIBES”

The big difference in tribal formation today vs. that in previous centuries is that experiences can be shared, consumed and animated through social networks. In his book, Seth Godin noted that today’s “always on” society presents a plethora of tools and technologies that facilitate tribal links, and that underpinning tribal infrastructures are social networks.

Among our findings: **Facebook is the king of the tribal landscape and Instagram matters a lot.**
We asked people who are active on various social networks whether the people they are meeting and the relationships they are forming on those networks are becoming more or less important in their life.

More than four in five respondents said that the relationships they are finding and nurturing on Facebook are becoming more important in their life.

But after Facebook, the landscape gets much more nuanced. The ascendant network for online tribes is Instagram (which happens to be owned by Facebook). Of the seven networks we tested, Instagram had the highest growth of meaningful relationships, particularly among Millennials and women. Nearly half of Millennials (45%) and one-quarter of Gen Xers (25%) say relationships there are becoming more important in their lives.

Relationships made through Instagram, while dominated by Millennial activity, extend well into the Gen Xers; however relationships through Snapchat appear to be primarily a Millennial phenomenon.

![Social networks play a critical role in the modern tribal life](chart.png)
Instagram also has a strong foundation among the emerging nonwhite population groups:

**The ethnic landscape**

Q. Are the people you meet and the relationships you are forming through these channels becoming more or less important in your life? (Total "more important")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
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**SHARED EXPERIENCES, SHARED INTERESTS, AND BRANDS**

So what does all this mean for brands?

**Brands tend to attract certain tribes that have a particular tribal profile.**

We looked at 70 brands across seven different sectors – retail, hospitality, automotive, food & beverage, apparel, consumer electronics, and non-profits. We then identified “brand champions” – people who said that brand was their “favorite” among all the others listed. We then looked at the profile of these brand champions based on (a) the likelihood that their friends shared their views and preferences; and (b) the importance these brand champions put on relationships made through shared experiences.

Take retail. Walmart fans were 23% more likely than average respondents to put a high importance on relationships they made through faith-based activities. *That is, Walmart attracts more people of faith.* But Walmart fans were also 18% more likely to have friends that share their views and preferences on fashion.
Now you might not think Walmart is the most fashionable of brands, but what this suggests is that there is among Walmart fans a particular look that they tend to share. So Walmart might want to understand what “fashion” means to their supporters and how that might translate into a communications or marketing strategy.

Compare that to the community or tribal profiles of some food and beverage companies, notably, Coca-Cola. Fans of Coke also over-index on having friends who share their tastes in fashion. But Coca-Cola fans also are more likely to value friendships formed through the arts. The latter (arts) may say a lot about the former (fashion) which means that the Coke “fashion” tribe may look a lot different than that of Walmart.
Then there are the profiles of the fans of two of the leading consumer electronics companies – Apple and Samsung. One appears defined by athletics and healthy eating (Apple) and the other by fashion and entertainment (Samsung).

That alone would suggest some very different strategies when looking to activate and energize their tribes.
We found evidence that certain tribes are inherently more devoted to their brands. We evaluated brands on how much their fans shared views and preferences with their friends across eight dimensions. What emerged was an overall uniformity and diversity profile. So, for example, in the apparel category, designer labels like Michael Kors and Tommy Hilfiger tend to have fans that, overall, share their views and preferences. Brands like Levi Strauss and the Gap are more diverse. This disparity suggests the designer brands’ tribes are stronger.

Some brands transcend tribes. As we went through this analysis we discovered four brands that one could label “trans-tribal.” These were brands whose fans are least likely to have friends that share their views and preferences in each of the eight areas we tested. They were Amazon, General Motors, Levi Strauss and The Salvation Army.

What could account for this “trans-tribal” quality?

Scale might be one. They are all global brands that help define their category, if not dominate it.

Multigenerational relevance might be another. Each brand is as familiar and iconic among Millennials as it is among Gen Xers and boomers.

Lifestyle transcendence might be another. These are brands that appeal to every station, walk of life, and ideology.

Then there is time and history. These trans-tribal brands didn’t arise overnight. Of the four, Amazon is the “baby,” having been founded 22 years ago (1994). But the other three have been at their craft well over a century - General Motors (1908), Levi-Strauss (1869), and Salvation Army (1865).

ANXIETY CREATES FERTILE GROUND FOR TRIBES

In an anxious age, tribes provide refuge.

Consider:

- **Money.** More people are losing sleep these days over their financial situation (up to 32% in 2016 from 28% in 2015).
- **Work.** People are less confident that they could find a new job within six months if they were to lose their current job (down to 41% in 2016 compared to 46% in 2015).
Why Tribes are the New Segmentation

- **Raw deal!** 71% of Americans think the **U.S. economic system is “rigged”** in favor of certain groups.

In light of this, it could be that more and more of us are coming together in groups and tribes as a **coping mechanism.** Moving forward, we believe that continued anxiety and uncertainty in society and the workplace will make tribes or communities much more important in people’s day-to-day lives.

We see evidence of this when we look at correlations between overall optimism and the importance of shared experiences. Remember that Millennials are at the vanguard of tribal formation? Well guess what? In our study they were – by far – the most optimistic.

While we live in a time where pessimism abounds, most of that comes from the older generations. When asked how confident they were that things will improve in the United States, from one-quarter to one-third of Millennials said they were “very confident” about future progress. That was far ahead of the confidence levels of either Gen Xers or boomers.

### How confident are you that things will improve in these areas in the U.S. over the next year?

![Bar chart showing confidence levels across different age groups for various topics.](chart.png)

- **Domestic Terrorism**
- **Environment**
- **Education**
- **Economy**
- **Immigration**
- **Healthcare**
- **Jobs**
- **Discrimination**

**Total “very” confident**
As we’ve seen, tribe formation results from a yearning to connect, and a youthful optimism that connection will be valuable. Experiences and interests provide the glue.

The bottom line

Understanding tribes is essential for individuals, brands, causes and candidates who would engage a consumer, customer or prospective follower in hopes of persuading them to buy, donate, vote or take action today.

So what are the implications for communicators? Here are several things brands and organizations should focus on for 2017:

- Identify your target audience’s passions beyond your product or service.
- Monitor the experiences your brand champions share with you and one another.
- Provide experiences the tribe can share together.
- Give the tribe many ways to be together (e.g., real-world events and online communities).
- Make it easy for the tribe to embrace new members and grow the tribe.
- Make the tribe visible (a proud tribe wants to be seen).
- Give the tribe a clear identity – its own brand, separate from yours.

To attract tribes, be relevant

Are you relevant?

Everything we have talked about in the previous pages can be reduced to that question. More specifically, it can be stated this way: Are you relevant to your customers and the people you would like to be your customers?

The concept of tribes fits perfectly with our relevance model as described in “Releva”nce: The Power to Change Minds and Behavior and Stay Ahead of the Competition,” authored by Brodeur Partners CEO Andrea “Andy” Coville.

As she writes, relevance is the full experience of a person, group, brand, product, idea, experience or interest sufficient to not only change minds but behavior.

To be relevant, an entity must satisfy the yearning for connection by activating at least one—and at best all four—relevance pathways: thinking, sensations, values and community impulses. Tribal activity does exactly that. It is another way of getting through to the people we would like to be our customers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance Pathway</th>
<th>Tribal Trait</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Shared Interests</td>
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<td>Values</td>
<td>Shared Beliefs</td>
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<td>Community</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
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And that will only happen if you can get past the mental filters in place. Understanding your customers’ tribes can help you do that.
Learn more

Brodeur Partners has studied tribes in depth and has applied the principles of tribes in events, community building, and business expansion, and a wide variety of communications initiatives. To learn more about successfully working with tribes, contact: Andrea Coville, CEO, Brodeur Partners, 617-587-2800, acoville@brodeur.com