

**TO
TWEET**

OR NOT

**TO
TWEET**

**What Business
Can Learn From
Social Movements**



Design principles gleaned from social movements can help organizations achieve influence at scale.

by **Paula Goldman and Suzanne Gibbs Howard**



SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CREATED RAMPANT CONFUSION on the part of many organizations. Some all-but-beg people to ‘like’ them on **Facebook**, while others badger people to follow them on **Twitter**, or offer free trials that they hope will result in long-term patronage. They may even offer rewards that represent neither their brand’s values nor consumers’ interests. Not surprisingly, most people see through such hollow attempts. The fact is, of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent each year on social media marketing strategies, most of it achieves very little in the way of creating a sustained following.

Successful social movements, by contrast, have long managed to capture and sustain millions of followers over long periods of time—often for a tiny fraction of what private companies spend on marketing. What lessons can we learn from social movements and their organizers?

This article considers this question from the vantage point of our era’s shifting media landscape, empowered (and harried) populations, and competitive global markets.

Deconstructing Modern Social Movements

At their core, social movements excel at one simple goal: mobilizing communities towards collective action around things they care about.

While the stereotype of social movements is of radical activists protesting in the streets (i.e. Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring), in reality such overtly-political efforts are but one subset of a much broader group. Think, for example, of the *barefoot run-*

ning or *do-it-yourself* movements, both of which are powered by vibrant communities that are passionate about lifestyle choices and activities. Interestingly, both movements have been served by for-profit companies (**Vibram** and **Etsy**, respectively) that have helped scale the movement beyond their initial core audience towards a larger public.

A decade ago, Emory University’s **Anand Swaminathan** and **James Wade** explained that when new businesses survive and grow, their efforts often “bear an uncanny resemblance to tactics and strategies adopted by organizations that spearhead social movements.” It is not surprising then, that forward-thinking companies are now carefully considering the intersection of social movements and business strategy.

Swaminathan and Wade argued that movements require four resources to succeed: leadership and cadre; expertise or prior experience; financial and information resources (though not necessarily a lot); and legitimacy. We would add two other items to this list: a *communications strategy* that enables reach, participation, scale, and impact as never before; and *authentic and long-term commitment* on behalf of leadership. The latter is particularly critical because it’s important to be realistic about where social movement strategies do and do not apply.

For-profit companies like **Tom’s Shoes**, **Patagonia** and **Kickstarter** have been successful because their brands, products, and reason for being profitable tap into movements. Each has managed to weave collective action directly into its larger brand experience, and in so doing, has spread its respective



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When an organization is genuinely committed to serving the authentic passions of a particular community, ‘movement strategies’ can dramatically increase performance. But a movement cannot be manufactured for every product: if something is seen as a quick marketing fix, it is highly unlikely to succeed.

Design Principles for Social Movements

The following four design principles enable movements to achieve influence at scale. Taken together, they can help organizations of all types channel their attention to new, sustained practices that lead to greater loyalty, influence and success.

1. START OFF-CENTRE, THEN LET PEOPLE PERSONALIZE

Social change typically comes from the margins of society and can, on occasion, pull the mainstream towards a new reality or awareness. Likewise, a company looking to catalyze a movement needs to start off-centre with a point of view that is designed to inspire. Bold and provocative words and imagery should target people in a fresh, edgy way. But here’s the trick: for broad appeal, consumers simultaneously need to feel free to customize the message, to make it their own as they become part of a growing movement.

Take, for example, **The North Face** (TNF), a major global supplier of innovative, technically-advanced outdoor apparel. For more than 40 years, the company has joined forces with the world’s finest outdoor athletes “to define the limits of what is humanly possible.” After establishing the brand in Asia, TNF looked at how to resonate more deeply with Chinese consumers.

TNF identified a uniquely Chinese angle to start off-center. Since ancient times, Chinese poets have found rejuvenation in nature. Today, as people find less time to enjoy the benefits just beyond China’s large cities, there is a tangible desire to return to the outdoors to ‘refresh’ oneself. This insight led the design team to the provocative marketing campaign, “Go wild” (去野), realized in partnership with **Ogilvy**. The campaign links a new ‘outdoors movement’ with old, deeply-held beliefs about the power of nature to renew the spirit. To illustrate this, campaign images

include an ancient Chinese poet depicted in traditional Chinese painting style, but wearing North Face gear.

Alongside this provocative campaign, TNF also integrates a social hub where ‘outdoors newcomers’ can personalize the experience and find adventures that suit them. Both digital and retail channels in China aim to connect newcomers with more experienced outdoors enthusiasts and clubs. As the platform evolves, it will help aspiring adventurers plan trips, learn skills, and share their experiences through photos.

Starting out off-centre, on society’s margins, enables businesses to tackle taboo topics with a freedom rarely allowed elsewhere. In 2010, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and **IDEO** launched Bedsider, a ‘sex positive’ contraceptive information resource for 18- to 29-year-olds in the U.S. The design team recognized that young women were not excited or knowledgeable about contraception. Rather, it was a chore—a trip to the doctor’s office or the consideration of an often confusing, overly politicized topic.

Bedsider rallies women in a fresh way, boldly inviting them to “Get on top of their sex lives.” In November 2011, the National Campaign debuted a three-year multimedia public-service campaign promoting Bedsider and its Web site of comprehensive education about existing birth control methods. The effort includes an overtly provocative tone with “Frisky Friday” emails, which include a weekly sex booster, such as “Caught having sex? Here’s how to dismount gracefully.” Only one in five Frisky Friday messages talks about contraception, but all focus on building a sense of community. The National Campaign has learned that the edgiest messages are the ones that get forwarded, re-Tweeted, and discussed over cocktails, and this heavy sharing aspect is adding more and more women to the movement.

Bedsider wisely balances its suggestive messages with other services that are more personal and supportive: opt-in birth-control reminder services and personal stories from real women across the country on why a particular method was right for them. The National Campaign has heard that these services work in another way, fostering deep discussions amongst close friends and thoughtful decisions about what fits an individual’s life.

Both Bedsider and The North Face walk a tight rope with



An image from The North Face's 'Go Wild' campaign.

provocative core messages. Yet they allow diverse consumer voices to interpret and connect with 'the big idea' in their own way.

2. EMPHASIZE COMMUNITY OVER VIRALITY

Sure, amusing videos of cats or babies can sometimes hit a node on the network and spread quickly. But such content rarely, if ever, inspires meaningful action. Mobilizing millions in a sustained way takes time. In order to help a movement achieve scale, it is worth investing in communities with relevant passions.

Consider, for instance, **Invisible Children's** 'Stop Kony' movement, designed to bring awareness about the abusive tactics of **Joseph Kony** and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Central Africa. The non-profit spent \$699,617 on media and film creation in 2011, and in spring 2012 released a video viewed more than 53 million times within a few weeks. When media pundits considered the reasons for the clip's seeming overnight spread—production value, good storytelling, celebrity appeal—they missed the most important factor: organizers had spent 10 years working with Christian youth, as well as high school and college kids, across the United States. These youth were already passionate about doing good in the world, and were looking to have impact at a global scale. By the video's release, organizers had a large base of followers poised to circulate the video online and to wear T-shirts and distribute posters offline. As journalist **Charles Duhigg** notes, early momentum from a small, dedicated group is often the sine-qua-non foundation for broader distribution.

Businesses working like social movements can find meaningful connections by 'slipstreaming' (i.e. integrating themselves) with the right pre-existing communities. In recent decades we've seen how craft beer breweries and premium coffees have ben-

efited from communities of foodies, and we continue to see this benefit in other movement-like businesses.

Take, for example, **Nike+** and **Fitbit**. These companies show consumers their real-time activity, stats, and goals to motivate them to make small changes in behaviour that can add up to big results. Both products encourage consumers to share their efforts with others. Nike's digital ecosystem, first launched in 2005, now includes the Fuelband, an accelerometer worn on the wrist that tracks the wearer's daily movements and energy expenditures against his or her personal goals.

Nike+ has seen significant impact. Calling itself the "world's largest running club," it has grown to nearly 7 million members since 2006, actively working to connect runners around the globe. A similar device, the Fitbit tracks health through steps, calories and "sleep efficiency." Fitbit has grown through grassroots adoption by families, friends and co-workers — most recently being integrated into corporate wellness efforts. In both of these cases, Nike and Fitbit leverage communities, insert their offerings to help people share stats and inspire each other forward.

OpenIDEO is a final example of investing in pre-existing communities to help a movement scale. A digital community for creative problem solvers, OpenIDEO hosts diverse social-good challenges on an online platform, inviting the public to participate in designing solutions for complex global issues like maternal health, human rights, and youth employment. But it would be nothing without the quality people involved in the community, sharing their ideas. While the OpenIDEO community has been growing, the team is continually looking for ways to expand the movement.

In 2011, OpenIDEO was approached by Professor **Tracy**

COMPANIES THAT LET THEIR PASSIONS LEAD THEM TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

| Company | Passion | Movement |
|--------------------|---|--|
| The Bold Italic | Showcasing The Best of Urban Life | User-Generated Content |
| Whole Foods | Healthy Living | Foodies |
| DropBox | Simplifying Life | Radical Collaboration; Self-Efficacy |
| Etsy | Creating, and Selling Crafts | The Maker Movement |
| Fitbit | Helping People Lead More Active Lives | Quantified Self Movement |
| HackFwd | Freeing Europe's Tech Talent to Build Companies | European Startups |
| Kickstarter | Fueling Creative Projects | Crowdfunding |
| The North Face | Pushing the Limits Outdoors | Adventure Sports (U.S.), Outdoor Renewal (China) |
| OpenIDEO | Global Problem Solving for Social Good | Crowdsourcing |
| Nike+ FuelBand | Living Life as a Sport | Quantified Self Movement |
| Blue Bottle Coffee | Serving Guilt-Free Coffee | Conscious Capitalism |
| 23 + me | Helping People Know Their Genes | Personalized Medicine |
| Pinterest | Sharing Product and Creative Finds | Scrapbooking |
| Bedsider | Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy | Feminism 2.0 |
| Zappos | Doing Work with a Larger Purpose | Happiness |

Brandenburg of Wells College, who had integrated OpenIDEO as the backbone of her undergraduate design and innovation curriculum. By participating in the OpenIDEO process, her students became deeply engaged, with high rates of participation, producing bold new ideas and fresh thinking both in class and on the OpenIDEO platform.

Since then, the OpenIDEO team has focused on investing in relationships and developing tools for universities, students and professors in the U.S. and around the world. And it turns out that OpenIDEO resonates with classrooms beyond Tracy's: the students have time, want to build their reputations, are passionate to learn about innovation, and are focused on having an impact on the world; while the professors want to bolster their courses with social media savvy and blur the lines between live classroom and online learning. These connections represent true partnerships between the OpenIDEO team and these campuses to determine how OpenIDEO best fits within their own unique school culture and community. As Brandenburg writes on her blog, "Students love competition, and in the 'game' of OpenIDEO, everyone wins. They 'win' by simply receiving positive feedback and praise. This strengthens their confidence, validates their work, and motivates them to want to participate in social design. [Students said to me,] "Thank you for giving us this final exam." Thank you? Somebody pinch me."

3. POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

Up until now, many marketing leaders have believed that the key to brand success is finding the right 'influencers' — thought-leaders, celebrities, industry gurus — and getting them to spread the company's message. But today's reality is different. For people to adopt a new behaviour or product, they often need permission from their peers, not just — or even necessarily — those of higher status. Movement organizers get this, and they often think more holistically about how to provide new incentive structures that keep people motivated, unsticking them from the status quo.

The end of footbinding in China is a classic — though little-known — example of how this works. When activists in the late 1800s wanted girls to be able to let their feet grow naturally, they recruited cultural and religious leaders to lead the way. But they quickly realized this was not enough to change individual behaviour. Individual parents could not buck the norm on their own, because they would render their daughters unmarriageable. However, if communities could collectively decide to ban footbinding, they would still be able to marry their daughters to the sons of others in the community in which this decision took place. Thus organizers switched to in-depth engagement and training sessions with villages as community units. After the first few villages signed on to ban footbinding, this led to a domino effect, with neighboring villages following suit. The effort was enormously successful, ending a centuries-old practice in less than a few decades.

For a more recent example, take the case of storing and sharing files in the modern era. In 2010, the race was on for which company could provide a 'cloud-based' file sharing system to

ease the storage demands of both business and personal sharing. With a mantra of, “keep life and data access simple,” **DropBox** is a cloud-based file-sharing service that used peer pressure in a very positive way via a well-designed “Tell a Friend Campaign.” The company spent 2010 struggling to gain traction in the market; but by February 2011, it had grown from 100,000 to 4 million users over a 15-month period. Most impressively, the company did this with zero spending on advertising. Instead, DropBox relied on a ‘two-sided incentive’: both consumers and their friends get increased storage space for using the service. Who wouldn’t consider sharing that benefit with a friend? Today, 35 per cent of DropBox’s daily signups still come from this referral program.

Such positive peer pressure can help to tip a rising movement over the edge. The sense that ‘everyone is doing it’ helps to move change towards the mainstream. After all, how would you feel if you were the only house on your block without a recycling bin out on pick-up day?

4. YOUR CUSTOMER IS YOUR PARTNER

Marketing gurus talk about ‘engaging customers’ by inviting them to participate in social media, but movement organizers go much farther: they see community members as true partners and realize that, ultimately, it is the community’s creativity, passion, and stories that both ‘make’ the product and drive widespread attention.

Consider **Pinterest**, the virtual pinboard site that lets people share their passions through visual storytelling. Basically, it’s scrapbooking for 12 million unique visitors each month, and the site generates more referral traffic than **Google+**, **YouTube**, and **LinkedIn** combined. Simply perusing Pinterest’s community inspires ideas about emerging and current social movements. Think you’ve spotted a particular groundswell of passion? Chances are someone on Pinterest has, too, and she’ll show you how it looks to her.

The breast cancer awareness community—which now has almost universal brand recognition in the United States and Canada—was built largely on the stories of individuals. It’s easy to forget that 30 years ago, breast cancer was considered a radical feminist cause, and a taboo topic of conversation in polite company. Groups like **Susan G. Komen** helped take away the taboo by centering the message on widespread images of ordinary women we could all relate to. These women are the mothers, sisters, cousins, and friends who have either battled the disease or donned pink ribbons and joined fundraising walks to fund the fight against the disease. Such a shift in focus made it safe for major partners and government officials to join the campaign, thus further increasing awareness and brand penetration.

The Bold Italic, an ongoing experiment by newspaper giant **Gannett**, explores the micro-communities that exist within San Francisco by celebrating the people they call ‘Bold Locals’, storytellers selected for their authenticity, dynamic personalities, and unique take on the city. Their stories, experiences, and images make up the site’s content, which they view as mutually beneficial;

TAKING A CUE FROM SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: WHAT’S IN AND OUT WITH TODAY’S PUBLIC

The realities of building community, participation, and purpose in an organization are forcing organizations to reconsider what matters in today’s market, where consumers and citizens demand more than mere products and services. Increasingly, they want a brand they can believe in.

| Out | In |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Belonging | Belief |
| Participate | Purpose |
| Top-down direction | Self-organization |
| Exclusive | Inclusive |
| Aspirational | Self-actualized |

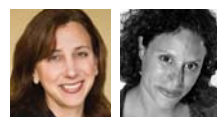
after all, these Bold Locals want their stories told and appreciate the design and presentation that the company puts into them.

Most online newspapers consider page views of three-to-four minutes a success, and so far, *The Bold Italic* is garnering double that. By partnering with Bold Locals, Gannett and *The Bold Italic* are creating waves in San Francisco media.

In closing

Savvy brand managers are wrestling with how much control to relinquish and how much to keep in order to garner positive benefits and business impact, but they also know that they can no longer control their messages in a top-down fashion. Following the design principles discussed herein won’t do away with this tough dilemma, but it can help you find the right balance between leadership and letting go.

By building authentic communities, participation, and purpose, organizations can take comfort in the fact that their consumers and communities truly want them to succeed and are willing to help them do so. **R**



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