

# Lesson # 1

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**Movements Aren't about the Product  
Conversation; They're about the  
Passion Conversation**

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Dear marketers: You've been brainwashed.

It's not your fault. It's the industry's fault. The four Ps. The unique selling proposition. The out-of-the-box approaches. Jeez. We've been preprogrammed to follow the processes that everyone else follows (even though we all call it something different), crank out the same work, enter the same award shows—and then complain about how our clients don't let us do any good work.

But the biggest thing we've been brainwashed to do is talk. A lot. About ourselves, our company, and our product. We talk about benefits. Enhancements. Upgrades—God, the upgrades. How much we care about you, and how our customer satisfaction is the highest around. Talk. Talk. Talk. Blah. Blah. Blah. Me. Me. Me. And then we get turned down and go back to the drawing board to try a different approach.

It's *hard* not to talk about yourself first, or try to make it all about your product and service. After all, that's what you get paid to do. However, talking about yourself won't make others talk about you. As *Tribal Knowledge* author John Moore puts it, "Buzz does not create evangelists; evangelists create buzz."

So you have to ask yourself, is it really all about you? Or is it about others?

"Buzz does not create evangelists;  
evangelists create buzz."

John Moore – Brand Autopsy

## THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

There once was a local charity golf tournament where a putting contest was held at the end of the day. A dozen golfers signed up and paid to participate to claim the grand prize: two roundtrip tickets to anywhere in the continental United States. To win, you simply had to sink a 50-foot putt. The participating golfers lined up around a huge, undulating green. While one participant tried to make the putt, the others had to turn their backs so they could not "read the green."

Now, while a lot of people are far from being skilled golfers, one item of fairly common knowledge among golfers is that when it comes to putting, the green can play tricks on you. You can look at the putt from one angle and think the ball will do one thing and then get a completely different read from another angle. Any savvy golfer knows—at the very least—to always look at the cup from behind the ball and then look at the ball from behind the cup. As an instructor once said, "You want to see where the hole will welcome the ball."

The competitors were all decent golfers. Yet it was amazing to see how, as each walked up to the ball, he took a moment to look at the green and then just lined up and hit the ball. Not one of them ever even came close to making the putt. Not a single one of these guys—who knew better—ever walked around the green or stood behind the hole to get a better read. It was as if the moment there was prize money involved or people were watching, all of the fundamentals were forgotten. Maybe out of the corner of their eye, they could see what the person did before them and just assumed that was the way to do it.

How often do we see this phenomenon occur in business? We are all aware of how critical it is to look at what we do from both

our customers' and our employees' perspective. Yet how often do we skip that step and instead rush to make the putt? How often do our eyes and minds play tricks on us? Sure, sometimes we're good enough to get it close, but in today's hypercompetitive market, is close really good enough?

## REFRAME THE CONVERSATION

We've already determined that to start a movement, you have to come to terms with the fact that it's not about you. It never has been, and it never will be. So when you spend your advertising dollars talking about yourself, you are having a one-way conversation that you control (or at least have the illusion of control).

Something that is vital to success in developing both identities and movements is the need to reframe the conversation. Since we can't build a movement around the company, product, or service, we have to find the passion conversation and ignite the movement around whatever that may be. When we reframe the conversation, we allow people to look at it in a completely different way.

*"Your company is the stories  
people tell about it."*

Greg Cordell – Brains on Fire,  
Chief Inspiration Officer

## EXAMPLES? HERE ARE SOME FROM OUR OWN EXPERIENCE

### Rage against the Haze

Ignited in 2002, Rage against the Haze is South Carolina's youth-led anti-tobacco movement.

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In the late 1990s, The Master Tobacco Settlement was an agreement between the large tobacco companies and the Attorneys General of 46 states. In addition to agreeing to abandon certain marketing practices, particularly marketing to youth, settlement money was allocated to each state for tobacco prevention efforts. The nutshell is that the monies from the Tobacco Settlement spent in South Carolina were some of the lowest in the nation.

South Carolina also has the lowest tax on cigarettes, and some of the highest smoking rates. So some of state's younger citizens led a sustainable anti-tobacco movement that didn't use traditional media. They merely spread the word through peer-to-peer engagement.

But instead of focusing the conversation on fear and hatred of Big Tobacco, we chose to reframe the conversation. It wasn't about teens telling other teens not to smoke. It became a conversation about empowerment. We met teens where they were and just gave them the tools and platform they needed to express their opinions—about whatever their passion was: drug prevention, environmental responsibility, teen pregnancy, dropout rates, homelessness.

And as you'll read in these pages, reframing the conversation comes down to getting personal. Quentin James, one of the first teen leaders for the movement, said it wasn't about telling his friends not to smoke:

“For me, the moment that sparked everything was reading [a quote] from one of the tobacco industry executives who was asked if he would ever use one of his products and he said, ‘No, I don't smoke that shit, I reserve that right for the dumb, the poor, the black, and the young.’ And I don't exactly know why, but at that moment—I remember it—my passion was sparked. And I remember thinking to myself that I have the opportunity to find my voice in this movement.”

Quentin didn't know anything about tobacco prevention. We met him at a youth government workshop that was teaching people how to debate and present court cases. He attended one

of our sessions, he asked questions, and we wrote his name down because he was engaged. Quentin decided to take that step forward to find his voice. Involvement isn't something we can force on people. No one can make anyone else take that step. It's the difference between buying a product and *being* the product. And the Quentins of the world are the ones who make the difference.

## The Fiskateers

If you've ever owned a pair of orange-handled scissors, then you know what Fiskars is. A 360-year-old company based in Finland, Fiskars has many different divisions—office, school, gardening—but the one we'd like to talk about is their crafting division, in particular, scrapbooking.

The company realized that they were stuck in commodity land with their crafting customers. On top of that, their brand research found that they were seen as the milk and saltine crackers of their industry. They were lacking in both passion and loyalty. After all, scissors and paper aren't that exciting, right? Do you think that people really gather together to talk about how much they love their scissors? The angle of the blade, and the lovely color of orange, and on and on and on? Yeah, right.

The first time we visited the Fiskars North American headquarters in Madison, Wisconsin, a product engineer told us that he didn't know why anyone would really care about scissors. "I don't know why anyone would share their life with us, or share what they do about us." The employees simply did not see a connection between what they make and what people create.

But how do you reframe a conversation about paper and scissors? By listening to the words that come out of crafters' mouths. So with some digging, we soon found that it's not about the paper and scissors. It's about what people *do* with the paper and scissors: create amazing works of art that capture memories and are given away or passed down from generation to generation.

Fiskars becomes the conduit to their passion. The enabler. And therefore, Fiskars and its products become a natural part of the conversation.

### IndieBound

The American Booksellers Association (ABA) is the national trade association for independent booksellers and offers support and guidance on a number of key issues. One of the biggest challenges small stores face is how to compete with the huge volume of marketing and awareness the big-box retailers can generate. For seven years, ABA had been running a marketing program of sorts called BookSense for their members, but BookSense was dated, and most independents were not participating or even seeing value in the program.

The ABA needed more than a program; they needed a movement. A rallying cry. A way to give independent booksellers a voice. And that voice was found in IndieBound.

Do you think it's easy for your local neighborhood bookstore to compete with the Amazons and Barnes & Nobles of the world these days? Not quite. So the conversation can't just be about selling books; it has to focus on some kind of distinction between the places where people can buy them. Reframing the conversation for this group meant celebrating the independent, entrepreneurial spirit that made them want to start their own bookstores in the first place. It's about shopping local and building community—not just for independent booksellers, but for all independent stores.

Chief Marketing Officer for the American Booksellers Association Meg Smith puts it in her own words: “We were able to identify what the missing emotion was. It was this sense of belonging, community and real attraction to independence, and that had evolved over the years,” she said.

This was the idea behind IndieBound, a movement of independent booksellers that Meg calls a perfect combination of time and place and knowledge, the things we learned, the things that were brought to us, and the things that were happening out in the world. “People are able to identify themselves with an emotional concept—and maybe that’s what the movement is. It’s this emotional identification that we didn’t really have the language for before,” she says.

## The Park Angels

There are more than 100 public parks in Charleston, South Carolina, a city that simply doesn’t have the funds it needs to support all those spaces. So the Charleston Parks Conservancy (CPC) was created to help.

But when it came time for the CPC to define who they are and what they stand for, the group quickly realized that they couldn’t be just another public service organization in this historic city. And they couldn’t be about picking up trash or planting trees. So they reframed the conversation. Today, the Charleston Parks Conservancy is about connecting people to the past, people to people, and people to their parks. This allows them—and the people of Charleston—to look at their parks in a completely different light.

## Mi11

Electronics retail giant Best Buy has recently started selling high-end musical instruments in about 100 store-within-store locations throughout the country. We’re talking high-end guitars, drums, keyboards and mixing equipment.

Now, there are a lot of challenges that emerge for a big-box retailer that attempts to enter this category—like, for instance, how people don’t want to buy a Fender Stratocaster and a kitchen stove from the same salesclerk. So how does a Fortune 75 company

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reframe the conversation when it comes to selling instruments that they don't even make themselves?

After talking with the people who work within the Musical Instrument (MI) space at Best Buy, we found out that it's not about selling instruments. It's about the everyday life-changing moments that happen when they put a guitar in the hands of a kid for the first time, or meet that 65-year-old who's falling back in love with music again. So it's not about selling; it's about unlocking. Unlocking and celebrating the music we all have inside. And from that, Mi11 was born.

However, talking about the actual products can, in fact, enter into the mix. Jamie Plesser from Best Buy's Marketing Strategy and Communications explains, "Part of the passion conversation is actually the product itself. People who are really passionate about playing or making music are inherently passionate about the gear."

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Jamie Plesser – Best Buy  
Consumer Marketing Manager

## IT'S REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION

It's turning the funnel on its head, giving up on the "me" mentality, and making it about "us." We're in this together. People want to be a part of something bigger than themselves because everyone wants to be bigger than they are. So when you have a conversation about how *you* can fit into *their* lives—instead of the other way

around—you reframe the conversation and give them a chance to own it.

Justine Foo, a kindred spirit, sums it up nicely: “Reframing the conversation is about going from what role does our product play in people’s lives, to what role can we play? It’s from a product role to a social role.”

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Justine Foo – PhD of Complex Systems  
and the Brain Sciences

## **SIMPLE? NEVER. EFFECTIVE? ABSOLUTELY**

You might have noticed in each of these cases that we’re not looking for shared passion when we look for people to be involved in a movement. We’re just looking for passion. Period. When you bring people together, then the shared passion emerges. People unite based on the enthusiasm that brought them to the table—which they can now share with one another. The anti-tobacco message is the expression of one group’s passion. Crafting is an expression of the Fiskateers’ passion. What makes the community great is the different flavors of passion, and how everyone involved wants to share it.

## **WHY AM I LOOKING FOR THE PASSION CONVERSATION AGAIN?**

Because people connect through shared interests, and passion is the key to a sustainable movement, not to mention the best

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competitive advantage. It's the things we're most passionate about that we want to talk about. Sir Ken Robinson, PhD, sums it up this feeling up well in his book *The Element*. "Connecting people who share the same passions affirms that you are not alone. Finding your tribe brings the luxury of talking shop, of bouncing ideas around, of sharing and comparing techniques . . ."

It's the remarkable experiences that inspire us that we want to share with other people. And it's passion that separates a sustainable movement from a short-term campaign.

Building movements requires us to understand not only what people are saying about your products and services but also how your offerings allow customers to do what they love, or do it better. This is the passion conversation.

So find the passion you share with your customers, and support it. It gives your customers a reason to love you that the competition cannot easily supersede, because it's not about a product feature that can be replicated.

And while you're looking for that passion, remember this: Passion can be a scary thing, because it can't be imitated, feigned, or bottled up. So treat it with the care and respect that it deserves, because passion isn't a commodity.

## PASSION STARTS WITH PURPOSE

There's an old (unverified) story of an unannounced visit that President John F. Kennedy made to the space center at Cape Canaveral sometime in the 1960s. Kennedy toured the complex and met a man in janitor's clothing. "What is it you do here?" he asked. The man replied, "Earn a living." Kennedy nodded and moved on. He met another man in janitor's clothing and asked him the same question. "I pick up all the trash," the man said. Kennedy grinned and walked on until he met yet another man in the same outfit and asked the question once again. This time a big smile grew

across the man's face as he replied, "Mr. President, I'm helping to put a man on the moon."

You can't have passion without purpose. The two are intertwined. What are you passionate about? And why are you passionate about it? Now, how does that connect you with a sense of purpose? That part of you that believes you're making a difference or standing up for something you believe in?

## **THE PASSION CONVERSATION NEEDS TO BE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL**

If you're doing some things right—and your company has made it through the Great Recession of 2009—then you just might have some fans out there. Fans have passion; it comes with the territory. And while it's a great thing to have, allow us to ask you this: Is it a lopsided kind of love? In other words, do your customers love your company or product or service more than you and your employees do?

Because if they do, you might be in trouble. Passion needs to be a mirror—something that's equal inside and outside a company. And if it's lopsided, you need to find out why.

If there's passion inside the company—from the very top to the good folks on the front lines—then you're easily going to find passion outside your company. But if your people are coming to work just to collect a paycheck, then you're not finding much passion inside or outside your walls.

Passion is contagious. It's exciting. It fuels word of mouth. And we've talked about how it's no longer a product conversation—it's no longer about you and what you can do. It's about finding out how you fit into people's lives and how you can be a conduit to their passion. You're the enabler, not the destination.

So follow the passion. It'll let you know very soon what's working and what's not. A great way to do so is to ask questions

internally that will push your leadership and employees out of what they've come to know as their "job." We're looking to find out if a company believes that it truly matters. And here are some thought-starting questions to do just that.

### **If We Randomly Chose One of Your Employees and One of Your Customers and Put Them in a Room Together, Would a Passionate Brand Lovefest Break Out between These Two Strangers?**

Seriously. Take old Jimmy down in purchasing and a random every-once-in-a-while customer. Lock the door, pass the popcorn, and see what happens. Where is the common ground? Sure, they can talk about great services and products, but when the lovefest breaks out, they'll be knee-deep in stories that revolve around your culture. They are both part of a community. The lines between employee and customer fade away, and all that's left are two fans. Kindred spirits. People who love what you stand for.

### **If Your Company Were (Heaven Forbid) to Be Hit by a Bus Tomorrow and Exterminated, Would Your Brand Live On without You? In Other Words, Is Your Customer's Brand Loyalty So Strong That It's Self-Sustaining?**

Are you the main driver of what your brand stands for? Is it in the ads that the marketing department prints in the monthly pubs? Or does it live in the hearts and minds of your employees and customers? Brands that truly matter can, without a doubt, answer this question in a heartbeat. The culture of fans is so loyal that the brand they love so much will live on, even if it's not there to feed them anymore. And if something happened to you and your

company, there would be an outcry from your fans. They wouldn't be happy about it at all. Calls would be made. E-mails would circulate. You would be mourned. But, in your absence, those who love you would pull together and somehow continue the word you'd begun.

## **Can Your Brand Cross Its Heart and Make an Ironclad Promise to Your Customers? Do You Know What That Promise Is?**

The kinds of individuals you want attracted to your brand can easily find its core: the promise. The masses that blindly follow any big, glitzy ad campaign (insert your least favorite megaconsumer megacorporation here) will one day come to realize that's all it is—glitz, and no substance.

It's extremely scary to make a promise to your customers (and employees)—your fans—and genuinely mean it. Few can really do it. Now nowhere in this conversation do I want to lose sight of the fact that we're all in business to have fun, make money, and change the world; it's not all about feelings and lovefests. But it has to start with something: a promise. And if you can clearly tell people, in a couple of sentences, what that promise is, then you're already ahead of the pack. And if you can also deliver on it—well, then you've really got something.

## **Do You Have Talented People Invading You with Resumes? Are the Best of the Best Dying to Work for You?**

Everybody wants to stand for something and, ideally, find a job they love, but very few of us actually manage to combine those two elements. So, are the resumes and cover letters you get the standard slew of endless “Key Objectives” and “Relevant Experience” that

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have been sent out to 45 other companies? Or are people doing anything and everything they can to get an interview with you? Is their contact with you overflowing with passion? If you're doing it right, you never have to post a job opening. There's always a wealth of talent just waiting to work for their favorite brand.

### **If You Threw an Optional Employee Party, How Many of Your Employees Would Attend?**

Do you have an internal culture of kindred spirits? Sure, just like any family that spends 40-plus hours a week together, there will be the occasional spat and disagreement. But it's still a family, people who care about each other, with a common cause that binds them together. And they live and breathe your brand. But more important, they don't merely have a job. They have made a choice to be a part of something they believe in. It isn't about earning a paycheck; it's about being an extension of a product or service.

### **Is the Entrepreneurial Inspiration That Gave Birth to Your Company Still Alive and Well? Prove It**

Unfortunately, most people's idea of fulfilling the American dream is largely based on chasing that almighty dollar. But most companies were originally founded on something much bigger than that. A nugget of inspiration can take an industry from tired to inspired. The proverbial better mousetrap. So is whatever it was that brought about your company still easily recognizable—and can you say in one brief sentence that is it still true?

Remember the story from earlier in the chapter about the janitor who worked at NASA? When asked what he did for a living, he replied, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." Does everyone in your company from the CEO down to the mailroom

know what you're working toward? And is it more than being the biggest and making the most money?

## **Does the World Know about Your Brand Solely through Traditional Media Advertising and Promotion? Or Do You Rely on That Effective and Efficient Word-of-Mouth Advertising?**

Pop quiz: If tomorrow Congress passes a law that makes TV, radio, billboards, and print ads illegal, would your company survive? In a strange sort of way, this is already happening. It's not a law, of course; it's consumers bulletproofing themselves to those traditional methods of reaching them. (Not to mention technologies like TiVo that allow people edit out commercials altogether.)

If what you make, do, or offer truly matters, then you have fans who are spreading the word about your products, services, and culture like a virus (a good one) to their coworkers, friends, family, and strangers they meet in the grocery store line. It's like they've discovered a secret that's so good, they can't keep it to themselves.

## **Are Your Employees Encouraged and Empowered to Speak Their Minds—or Shut Up and Work?**

Do you see a theme developing here? Deep beliefs breed passion, and when passion oozes throughout a culture, you're going to attract people who will speak up on its behalf. Just start a conversation about religion or politics, and watch this theory in action. And duck while you're at it!

So, have you beaten your employees into submission? Are you suffering from “not invented here” syndrome? Are the only good ideas your ideas? For companies that truly matter, an open-door policy is really an open soapbox. We're not talking about screaming matches, just discussions where people use the term “fall on a

sword.” Your employees are your greatest assets; any good CEO realizes that. Your next big idea could be outside your door in cubicle land.

### **Do Your Financial Goals Have a Death Grip on Your Trachea?**

There’s no denying that the bottom line is important, and nobody ever complained about making a lot of money. But if that, and that alone, is the driving force behind your company, then maybe it’s time to revisit “Is the Entrepreneurial Inspiration That Gave Birth to Your Company Still Alive and Well?”

### **What Is So Important about Your Brand That You Would Work on It without Compensation?**

If you know what it is, then write it down on a piece of paper and frame it, because it’s your new credo. Are you the head of a company or the head of a cause? Or both? Are you satisfied at the end of the day with what you’ve accomplished for the bigger picture? Very few companies out there exist for no reason. Even those who have lost sight of what they stand for can still find—buried under corporate politics and corner offices—a glimmer of the inspiration that first started it all. And sometimes they just have to go back and dig it out of the rough again.

Let’s be honest. There’s nothing really groundbreaking here; it’s just common sense. And it’s the same stuff that all great brands have been built on for ages. Emotion. Inspiration. A culture of fans. Brands that truly matter have an edge over their competition. If you can give positive answers to all of the preceding questions, then you’re on the right track (and now you just have to learn how to stay there). If you couldn’t answer the questions, then you might have some soul-searching to do.

Customers are like adolescents with attention deficit disorder in a room full of shiny objects. They might take a look at you initially, but you're never going to hold their attention unless they believe and soon become a fan. Blessed be the CEO who figures this out first and lets it permeate every aspect of the company. Not only will the company be profitable but also it will be able to build a culture that would leave a hole in the world if it disappeared. And that's a sure sign that it truly matters.

## HOW DO YOU FIND THE PASSION CONVERSATION?

Okay, gather around, lean in real close, and we'll tell you how to find the passion conversation for your company, product, or service. Ready?

You participate.

To figure out what people's passion is, you have to talk to them. Spend time with them. Participate in their lives.

Quality insight is more important than quantity. Taking the time to really understand people is more important than having a strategy by next week. Traditional market research has its role; after all, if you don't know who your customers are, then you don't know who you should be talking to.

But you can't truly know people through paper or surveys, because some things just don't translate. You have to sit down with them. Listen to their reality, to their joys, to what keeps them up at night. You have to come to understand the world from their unique individual points of view, because the seeds of a movement lie somewhere in those conversations.

We can guess all day long about what motivates employees and customers. But if you stay up in your ivory tower and look down on all the people, more than likely, you're going to start to assume things. And we all know what happens when you make assumptions. There is a much higher quality of learning that comes from

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actual, real-life participation versus what you get with “agency insight” or “discovery.” In other words, it’s one thing to read the manual; it’s something else to put the damn thing together.

Quite simply, participating in employees’ and customers’ lives allows you to walk a mile in their shoes. It allows you to crawl inside their heads and go beyond those superficial, surface-level answers that people give at parties when you ask them “What do you do for a living?” It’s part curiosity and part anthropology. You have to want to know what drives them—beyond just doing a job. Being naturally curious has a lot to do with finding out the core motivations that live inside a person. And besides, it can be a lot of fun.

If you had to put it into a stuffy, agency-speak bucket, it would be called “qualitative insight.” But go deeper than that. Ask unexpected questions. Push comfort zones. Don’t just inquire about their jobs; ask both employees and customers about their lives. And then listen to the words that come out of their mouths. You want there to be a mirror—that the same passion felt internally is felt externally as well. And the passion that is felt externally can fuel that internal passion. There’s a constant cycle of excitement.

Participation can open your eyes and bring you new experiences, too. Our crew has delivered dry cleaning in Boston, mowed lawns in Florida, ridden on moving trucks in Kansas City, and worked the floor at a big-box retail store in LA. We’ve been to all-night scrapbooking events in Chicago, hung out with engineers in Omaha, and run the rivers with kayakers in Tennessee. All to dig for what the passion conversation was.

## IT DOESN'T END WITH PARTICIPATION

However, the terms “participation” and “engagement” are both being thrown around a lot these days. And they’re also being interchanged—something we think is a big mistake, a mistake that is further clouding the word-of-mouth marketing waters.

There's a distinction between the two. Can you tell which word belongs to which definition? One is "to take or have a part or share, as with others; partake; share," and the other is "to occupy the attention or efforts of." In other words, *participation* does not equal *engagement*.

When you go to your meetings today, you'll see the difference between those who merely sit in the meeting and participate solely by showing up, and those who add to the conversation because they are engaged. You can participate without being engaged. Engagement is the step beyond participation.

"Participation ≠ Engagement."

Robbin Phillips – Brains on Fire,  
Courageous President

So many companies are just seeking participants (friends or followers) in their word-of-mouth and social media efforts. "Come participate in our campaign. Upload your videos and pictures. Come on, be present, so we can count you and your eyeballs for our metrics." But those who engage—those who earn "the attention or efforts of" (especially the efforts)—are the ones who are building something that will last. It's the beginning of a movement. Which would you rather have?

## **BUT I DON'T HAVE A SEXY PRODUCT LIKE GUITARS AND KAYAKS**

Though you're certainly not alone, you'd be surprised to see what people can get excited about. Remember, Fiskars sells scissors. That's not very sexy to the average person. And to be honest, it's not all that sexy to the average crafter (who is their main audience). But remember: It's not about you talking about your product.

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It's about people celebrating how your product fits into their lives and how you enable them to use it.

The maker of oil in a spray can, WD-40, has a fan club. Yes. Fans of oil in a spray can. Sharpie has legions of fans—and they make markers. Markers, people! Is it harder for you to find the passion conversation if you're the owner of, say, a carpet-cleaning chemical business or a mulch company? No, it's not. Because it's still getting in the right frame of mind and talking to your employees and customers, not about your product or service, but about their lives. And in those passion conversations will you find your place in their lives.

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