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# Trust, Social Capital, and Media

## **The Connected Guy**

Joe Pistone thought he was going to go undercover for six months. Instead, he vanished for six years.

He was already practically a wiseguy. He had grown up among the Mafia in Paterson, New Jersey, and worked the same kind of jobs as they did. Like many involved in the Mob, Pistone was of Sicilian descent and spoke Italian. When he started showing up at Carmello's—a restaurant at 1638 York Avenue on the corner of 86th Street and one block from the East River—he fit in perfectly. He knew it was a spot in Manhattan where wise guys hung out, and he knew he'd get acquainted eventually. He just didn't know how deep he would get.

Turns out that, to go undercover, Pistone knew how to make all the right moves. He knew that in order to be a good undercover

agent, he needed to be a good street agent: someone who understood not just how things worked in an office, but out in the city, too. He knew all about the Mob from growing up around its members, but he had been brought up by a family whose values led him to join the FBI. But the FBI didn't know who he was anymore. No one named Joe Pistone was working for them, nor was there anyone in the company records by that name; his personnel file had been removed and his desk had been entirely cleaned out. As Pistone himself says of his old life: "I obliterated it."

While Pistone was immersing himself in Mob life, the FBI was trying to figure out who this new guy with the Bonanno family was—Pistone had remade himself into a jewel thief named Donnie Brasco.

As it turns out, Pistone was so deep that even FBI surveillance teams who were following him had no idea who they were taking pictures of. The name Donnie Brasco was suddenly everywhere, but the FBI didn't know where he had come from. Most wise guys had grown up in or near the city, but Brasco's story was that he was from California and had spent time in Florida doing some jobs (i.e., burglaries) before his arrival in New York City.

When Pistone was officially brought in to the Mob, it was by Benjamin "Lefty Guns" Ruggiero. That day, he became a "connected guy"—someone connected to the Mob—but not officially a "made guy" (or wise guy), which is an official member of Cosa Nostra. But you don't just get connected to the Mob that easily. Pistone had spent more than six months working undercover in New York, becoming a regular at Carmello's, before he could gain Ruggiero's trust. It was this patience, this diligence, that helped him move quickly up the ranks.

His first moves, though, were subtle ones. At Carmello's, he would occasionally see mobsters the FBI wanted more information about, but, as he said, "I never got an opportunity to get into

conversation with them. It isn't wise to say to the bartender, 'Who is that over there? Isn't that so-and-so?'" Pistone "wanted to be known as a guy who didn't ask too many questions, didn't appear to be too curious. With the guys we were after, it was tough to break in. A wrong move—even if you're just on the fringes of things—will turn them off." Instead, Donnie Brasco learned to play backgammon (a game wise guys played a lot around then) and just hung out. Around Christmas, he was able to get into a couple of games with the right people. He introduced himself as "Don" and let people see him hanging around so they would recognize him as a regular at the bar. Now he could sit around and chat with the others.

"What do you do?" asked Marty, the bartender, eventually. Marty wasn't a Mob guy, but he knew that many of his clientele were mobsters. That sort of question wasn't "the kind you answer directly," claims Pistone. So he said, "Oh, you know, not doing anything right now, you know, hanging out, looking around.... Basically, I do anything where I can make a fast buck." He made clear what kind of guy Donnie Brasco was, and word got around. In Pistone's own words:

The important thing here in the beginning was not so much to get hooked up with anybody in particular and get action going right away. The important thing was to have a hangout, a good backup, for credibility. When I went other places, I could say, "I been hanging out at that place for four or five months." And they could check it out. The guys that had been hanging around in this place would say, "Yeah, Don Brasco has been coming in here for quite a while, and he seems all right, never tried to pull anything on us." That's the way you build up who you are, little by little, never moving too fast, never taking too big a bite at one time. There are occasions where you suddenly have to take a big step or a big chance. Those come later.

Finally, the time was right for Pistone to make a move. He brought some jewelry from the FBI that had been confiscated during investigations to the bar with the intention of selling it to the mobsters. Since cops are always trying to buy illegal items, to make a bust, Pistone decided he would make Brasco do something different. Because he had already made clear to anyone who asked that Brasco wasn't on the up-and-up, he could try to sell "a couple of diamond rings, a couple of loose stones, and a couple of men's and ladies' wristwatches" to the bartender. Pistone recounts the story:

"If you'd like to hold on to these for a couple days," I said, "you can try to get rid of them."

"What's the deal?" he asked.

"I need \$2,500 total. Anything over that is yours."

And so it began. At Carmello's, he met Albert, who was connected to the Colombo family; from there, he hooked up with Jilly's crew, who stole all sorts of goods around New York and sold it in a place called Acerg (backward for Jilly's last name, Greca). From there, he connected with Tony Mirra, a soldier for the Bonanno family. Mirra was a knife man, and Brasco was told, "If you ever get into an argument with him, make sure you stay an arm's length away, because he will stick you."

Pistone stayed in the Mafia for six years. He was so deeply immersed in that life that, at one point, he was one kill away from being made—turned into a real mobster. He claims that the whole time he never lost his moral compass, never doubted himself or strayed from his mission. Today, Pistone lives under an assumed name somewhere in the United States with his family. He brought the Mafia to its knees; every individual the FBI would

go after during this time, it would get—all because of Pistone, the best infiltrator ever to have entered the Mob. La Cosa Nostra never truly recovered.

There's a lot we could learn from Pistone's efforts, but first, we'd like to introduce you to another imposter of a wholly different variety: Alan Conway.

## Stanley Kubrick

Who was Alan Conway? Videos display him as an older British gentleman, effete and smug, with a sparkle in his eye and gray hair. But Conway is in fact much more than that. He is a small-time British con artist who became famous for impersonating Stanley Kubrick in the early 1990s. It was an act he kept up despite many challenges—namely, that he looked nothing like Kubrick. The famous director had dark, deep-set eyes, was famous for his thick beard, was of a different nationality, and had a different accent than Conway. In addition, Conway barely knew anything about the famous film director's movies.

Despite this, Conway conned many, many people. One victim was well-known *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, who was in London in 1993 and, with three other journalists, met Conway at a club. Although Rich had met Stanley Kubrick before, it didn't prevent him from being duped. ("I shaved my beard off," Conway told him.) Rich wrote about his meeting with the Kubrick imposter in the *Times* shortly thereafter. He said of the incident:

On our euphoric way out, we quizzed the manager [of the club], who knew only one member of the group Conway was with: a white-haired man, whom he said was a Conservative Member of [British] Parliament.

“That...should have been the tip-off,” a friend at The Associated Press told me when commiserating two days later. “They’re always surrounded by con men and rent-boys.”

By then, an executive at Warner Brothers who had been reached by phone had expressed his delight at the news that a tableful of journalists had been duped. He also told us that Kubrick’s new film was no secret, but was in fact a well-publicized adaptation of a novel by someone I know. Kubrick’s assistant called to add that the director was neither beardless nor gay but was concerned about the impostor, who had been sighted 15 to 20 times over the past two to three years.

Despite his concern, Kubrick was also fascinated by the idea of an imposter. But the director of *Dr. Strangelove* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a recluse, and this is what gave Conway his strength. Kubrick had become a kind of spirit whose name he could evoke to cause others to lose control over their senses. Thinking that they were faced with the opportunity of a lifetime, Conway’s victims wanted so badly to believe the ruse that all the contradictory evidence meant nothing to them. Conway was able to get away with anything—under Kubrick’s name, he cosigned a loan for a gay club in Soho, for example—and was long gone by the time his victims knew what was going on. Worse, no one wanted to testify against him, because they would expose themselves as having been duped by a con man. They would be ridiculed, they reasoned, so all declined.

Conway continued his Stanley Kubrick impersonation for many years. Eventually, he dropped it and later joined Alcoholics Anonymous; yet even there, he told everyone another whole set of tall tales, involving businesses in the Cayman Islands and an otherwise exciting life, recounted in a diary found after his death in 1998.

But by then the world was being transformed. The Internet was expanding in full force, and Google had just been founded, changing the way we would all interact, and whom we would trust, forever.

## Why Is This Important?

While most people haven't heard of Joe Pistone, they do recognize the name Donnie Brasco, because he was portrayed by Johnny Depp in the 1997 film of the same name. Likewise, most people haven't heard of Alan Conway, but they do know of Stanley Kubrick, or at least his famous films, like *A Clockwork Orange* or *The Shining*.

This book is about trust, but it's also about how technology can influence it. This book is about the crossroads between the two and how it impacts your business. Pistone and Conway were able to deceive everyone they met because, back then, you couldn't just type "Stanley Kubrick" into Google Images and find a picture of him. Conway delighted in the fact that finding information about Kubrick involved hours of vigorous research—something that few were willing to do. Today, Pistone might have had a Facebook or a Twitter profile page before going undercover or, at the very least, would have shown up in an archive of his professional profile on LinkedIn. Once your traces are on the web, they're there forever—as is your reputation.

We sit at a unique time. Technology overlays everything in life and business. The number of people with a smartphone in every developed country in the world is 67% and rising. When we first wrote this book, words like "Twitter" and "podcast" were still relatively foreign, and companies like Snapchat were unknown. Today, tweets are in every single daily newscast and

sports story as a way to accept and share people's ideas. One's online identity is a given in a way it was not when this book was first written.

In the Donnie Brasco example, trust could only be earned face-to-face. In this modern world, massive, world-shifting events are happening because of an app that lets you type 280 characters. (Heck, even that has changed since our first publication in 2009, when Twitter only allowed 140 characters.) Donnie Brasco could do a lot more studying before ever walking into that bar, such as it were.

A great website makes us trust you. Having a podcast makes us think that you've got something worth saying (even if everyone seems to have a podcast in 2020). Yet there's an irony that's far too painful to consider which we can't spare you from.

## **What Is the Truth, Anyway?**

The way people use the web is constantly changing. People have become warier of where the information they receive comes from, and with good reason. We read articles about how the person beside us at the bar ordering the Miller Genuine Draft is actually trying to create buzz for an underground viral marketing campaign. We read product reviews on websites, believing that they are a reflection of what the reviewers think of the product—only to find out that products returning a higher cut of the profits are always rated higher than products that may be superior in quality. We know how less-than-honest advertisers and marketers work to influence us. We realize that those few lazy reporters in our media who just report on whatever a PR firm tells them without follow-up offer poor reporting. We are living in an



age where the economic collapse of 2008 and 2009 shook our trust in our entire financial system, and where “fake news” is a phrase almost as common as “social media,” compromising the viability of our retirement funds, and our trust in the things we read and see, sending massive waves of distrust through billions of people on the globe.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, dangerous misinformation spread like wildfire. Reports of preventative “cures” were rampant, several involving potentially toxic ingredients. Bad advice spread quickly by word of mouth, sometimes innocently, and sometimes with potential malice.

In an age in which technologies such as Google prevail over almost all information, it’s unclear whether either of the two gentlemen discussed earlier would have been able to pass as the people they impersonated for so long. Conway’s elaborate Stanley Kubrick impersonation was eventually discovered as a fraud and exposed on television in a series called *The Lying Game*; by that time, he had already borrowed tens of thousands of dollars from people who believed he was the real thing. As for Joe Pistone, his true identity was never exposed (that is to say, until the FBI revealed it). This enabled him to send more than 100 members of the New York Mob to prison. How would he have done this in the twenty-first century, with much of our communication going through digital channels? Obliterating an identity online as well as in the real world is extremely difficult.

It’s easier than ever to reach out and do business with people using the web, but harder than ever to get them to trust you. This is especially true in an environment where the relationship is new and where the prospective customer has access to far more information about your organization, products, and services than ever before.

## *We Could Never Have Predicted “Fake News”*

Just Google the term “post-truth” and it will make you sad. In 2020, we live in a world where people see something posted on Facebook and accept it as true. Reports of Russian tampering with the 2016 US presidential election were confirmed and, worse, that continues to this day.

Nearly daily, a new report arrives showing how Facebook or some other site is trying to combat the endless stream of misinformation being published as fact. When we wrote this book, the biggest fear was that maybe your grandmother would click a link and crash her computer. Or maybe your uncle would send money to a Nigerian prince (those guys have all the money). But this is far worse.

Look also at “deep fakes.” Technology exists—and we’re talking desktop-app-level ease-of-use stuff—that will allow anyone to make convincing video footage of someone saying or doing something that never happened. You can’t even trust your own eyes.

Julien and Chris talked about what to say in this section. The problem is that this could be an entire book on its own. And other people have written books about the online misinformation phenomenon. You don’t need our take. Fake news is bad. That’s easy enough.

But there’s one way the social web and all our various tools have made fake news a little harder to pull off: We can look for more sources. We can look for people who aren’t us and don’t share our views for different perspectives. We can seek ways to decide for ourselves.

What’s changed is that you can’t really take anything at face value in 2020 and beyond *unless* it comes from someone you trust enough to watch your kids or your dogs.

## Humanizing the Web

Although the general public's level of mistrust is at an all-time high, there are individuals and companies who do successfully use the Internet and social media to establish levels of trust in the communities where they operate. Ten years ago, we first wrote about this in the first edition of *Trust Agents*. Today, we are here to update that book, and to talk to you about how social media and the web are used in a modern communications environment, now with Facebook as one of the world's dominant, most powerful companies, and where social media is interconnected with geopolitics and news—and sometimes impossible to distinguish one from the other.

When we wrote *Trust Agents* back in 2009, Twitter was only a few years old. We were telling companies that it “really could turn into something.” When was the last time you saw a mainstream news show or sports show that didn't reference someone's tweets? World news is coming in 280 characters at a time. Those who are most familiar with the digital space—we refer to them as “digital natives”—have become accustomed to a new level of transparency. They have always operated under the assumption that everything they do will eventually be known online. Realizing they are unable to hide anything, they choose not to try. At once, a new generation is building its own version of digital identity, with different personas for different services, sometimes deleting accounts over and over again to remain invisible. But both types leverage the web to meet their goals, using identity and a still nascent form of powerful media presence to affect their lives, whether it be by producing relationships for work or tightening the circles they want to share with. The world has changed—and it's not going back.

But listen, and this is very important: This isn't about age. When the whole “social media thing” landed in 2006 or so, most

companies looked around for a nephew or niece or “the kid” in some part of the company who “knew computers.” That was okay for about a year and a half.

If for some odd reason you think you still don’t have to understand these tools, the rest of your professional working life will be rather unpleasant insofar as you’ll have to operate through the agency of others. Instead of sharing your voice and ideas and seeking fellowship on your own, you’ll be relegated to asking “a kid” to convey the breadth of values and vision you want to communicate on behalf of your organization or yourself.

This world is *the* world. Digital isn’t “some other thing.” It’s one way to interact with the world at large.

## Transparency

You probably know what we are about to tell you, but it’s possible you’ve never much thought about it. For every photo that a magazine uses as part of an article, there are perhaps another 60 that won’t be used. For every quote a journalist pulls from a source for a story, there are several minutes of conversation that aren’t used. This is simply editing, a part of storytelling. Except for when it isn’t.

What if there are times when we want every possible angle, every possible description, every version of the story that we can get our hands on? What if what was left on the cutting room floor is of real value to the public? Think about moments of world-impacting news, or even moments within your company where a rumor leaks into the mainstream. It is those missed moments, the forgotten photos, the deleted details that tell the true story.

We are in a new era of increasing transparency, and it is becoming obvious from a number of angles that the world will never be the same because of it. Information flows faster and is

everywhere. Human memory is slowly becoming obsolete as you get access to everything you ever need to know through your Google Home. We barely need to remember everyone's name when all of their information is everywhere. It's all in public view. Clay Shirky examined this phenomenon in his book *Here Comes Everybody*, in which he explains how the barriers that have prevented like-minded individuals from coming together are disappearing, allowing us all to transmit our thoughts and get information faster than we ever could before.

Because of this, secrets are impossible to keep for long. First, digital photography made everyone look like a supermodel online. (It's easy to look great when you choose the best of 100 photos (check out Reddit's */r/instagramreality* community for a glimpse at this). But then something else happened. People gained the ability to upload their own pictures, the ability to tag themselves (affix information about themselves) to other people's pictures, and to remove the tags they didn't like. The next thing you know, all those terrible pictures of you—including the unflattering ones a photographer would have selectively edited and deleted—are all over the web, impossible to remove.

We've seen this over and over. Someone famous says something racist. A company makes a tasteless tweet. One quick bad moment captured on video becomes the instant downfall of someone. Your past is forever on the web for people born after 1998 or so, and your recent past can still bite you, even if you're older.

Those who are active on the web now realize that they need to embrace this new transparency, and that all things will now eventually be known. Companies can no longer hide behind a veneer of a shiny branding campaign because customers are one Google search away from the truth. So instead, companies work hard to appear human on Twitter and YouTube, showing off their

brand's personality for all to see. All the while, the audiences become more and more cynical, aware of everyone's potential motives, questioning everything they read and see.

Companies must acknowledge that they are more naked on the web than ever, just as individuals are. This shouldn't be a surprise; any new medium you jump into changes the way you're seen. But since the web is active 24/7 and has cameras on all angles, with everyone having their own version of the story, it's difficult for anyone to hide for long. In 2009, when *Trust Agents* was first released, we proposed a different solution. But first, we need to equip you with some tools.

## **How Trust Is Modified by Media**

Imagine that the radio had been invented yesterday. Suddenly you and everyone you know hears about this machine, and one day you actually see one at a local diner. Picture it: For the first time, you are hearing music coming out of a machine instead of being played live right before you. Or perhaps, if you couldn't afford to see a band play live, you were able to hear music for the first time. What now?

Imagine yourself in this moment. Immediately, it's obvious that something incredible is happening. If you are open to new ideas, you may realize how amazing it is. Now imagine that, following this song (we imagine a really jazzy Benny Goodman number), you hear a news broadcast.

Think about it. What happens? You're hearing a human voice right next to you, as if it's speaking directly to you. Some questions would pop up: Who is this person? Are they trustworthy? How true is this information? The answers would have a lot to do with the information being broadcast, as well as the sincerity and timbre of the person's voice. A variety of factors come into play,

all of which will cause you to wonder what's going on. If you need something concrete, consider two extreme examples of this: Imagine the Hindenburg disaster (“*Oh, the humanity!*”), and then think about the famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast, directed by Orson Welles. How would you react?

Whether you imagine yourself to trust what you are hearing or not, one thing remains true: The medium has transformed the message. An official-sounding voice might make you confident that what you're hearing is true. Another voice might give you the impression that it's a radio drama—fiction being performed for you through the technology in this new box.

This book is about all the new radios being invented in our day, from the common ones like web pages, email, or instant messaging, to the newest: YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and others. In our radio example, someone had to take control to get that broadcast to you. Likewise, there are people out there right now working to understand these new technologies and learning everything about how to use them—from etiquette to audience building and beyond. They are learning the ropes. They are the pioneers, mastering the latest one-to-many communications methods. Like your kids, they know more about technology, and maybe even more about people, than you do, and that makes them very powerful.

In 2009, we called them *trust agents*. Today, we are here to show why this is more relevant than ever before.

## Why Trust Agents, and Why Now?

Where we spend our time daily has changed dramatically. According to Mary Meeker's 2019 Internet Trends report, people spend an average of 6.3 hours per day online (3.6 of those hours on mobile devices). Mobile devices have now surpassed

television as the device most used for information gathering, and 28% of all video watched is digital (and growing). Where are they all? By the time we publish this, half the places we mention will be dead.

At the same time, this is the era of “fake news.” Fewer people than ever before can easily discern between a credible news source and fabricated news.

We need trust agents in companies. In fact, businesses cannot exist without them anymore. We need real-world trust agents to help us understand what we can believe and what should not be believed. Everything is different. It’s a whole new world.

We are currently living in a communications environment where there is a constant *trust deficit*. As a society, we no longer have confidence in advertising. We are hostile to those who appear to have ulterior motives, even if they’re just selling themselves. The result is our tendency to join together into loose networks, or tribes, that gather based on common interests. We tend to be suspicious of anything that comes to us from outside our circle of friends. So we form groups of like-minded individuals around those topics, products, or news items that interest us. For example, Reddit reports news differently than the *London Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. And that news might be suspect in certain circles, because the stories on Reddit that reach the top are sometimes moved to the top by dubious means: voting campaigns, robotic algorithms, and so forth. Again, we ask you: who should you trust?

Trust agents have established themselves as being non-exclusively-sales-oriented, non-high-pressure marketers. Instead, they are digital natives using the web to be genuine and to humanize their business. They build brand, they’re interested in people (prospective customers, employees, colleagues, and others), and they have realized that these tools that enable



more unique, robust communication also allow more business opportunities for everyone. And today, they are indispensable.

What, exactly, are trust agents? They are the power users of the web, educated more by way of their own experiences and experiments than from the core of their professional work. They speak new online technologies fluently. They learn by trying, so they are bold in their efforts to try out new applications and devices. They're not afraid to fail. They connect with more people than anyone else, and they know how to leave a good impression. As they do so, they build healthy, honest relationships. Trust agents use today's web tools to spread their influence faster, wider, and deeper than a typical company's PR or marketing department might be capable of achieving, and with more genuine interest in people, too.

We need to become them—and to harness them.

As we delve more deeply into this topic, we intend for you to consider two things: (1) how to be genuine, real, and open with people while also (2) recognizing that if you can think strategically and understand certain principles, you can learn how to master tomorrow's radios as well as trust agents do.

You can bring the news to people. You can build influence, share influence, and benefit from the other currencies that such exchanges of trust deliver to you.

Most people will do this within a business setting while working for a company, but always with an eye toward being legitimate and honest with the community within which they operate. The more you read, the more you'll realize that 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 help you realize business goals. We know that this can be tricky business, but also that it's absolutely possible. Further, we believe you can do it, too.

### **A Trust Agent's Version of a Resume or CV**

We know that you hate your resume; hey, we hate resumes, too. They don't really represent us. They diminish our skills and fail to capture the complexity of our experiences. For almost every job that we've held in the past three years, neither of us has had to present a resume, ever. We want you to get the job you want *without* a resume. This book will teach you how. As you build up social capital and reputation, don't forget to create a spectacular "About" page on your website. Weigh it heavily toward what others might hire you to do or how they might partner with you. Remember that this counts internally as well.

The web is such a powerful resource for leveraging contacts and presenting our strengths that a CV becomes irrelevant. It's not so much that you won't need one, but that you'll never be asked for a CV because your reputation will precede you. Instead, you'll just get hired. Read on.

### **The Matrix Thing**

When discussing the core concepts of trust agents, we find ourselves thinking a lot about the concepts in the movie *The Matrix* (the first one, not the sequels). If you've seen it, you know that Morpheus shows Neo that the life he's lived up until that point was all a big program. Neo learns that if he could figure out the program and navigate the space outside of the world, then he could figure out and "own" the Matrix, which is to say, ignore what everybody else sees as rules or laws. Well, that's kind of what we're talking about.

There is a lot of similarity in realizing the inherent gamelike structure of online interactions, and there are some similar (and some different) methods in which we choose to interact with

these experiences. We believe in the value of people and in being genuine with them. At the same time, we also realize that people frequently act within the context of these structures, and that if we want to find a way to success, it often involves breaking our connection to that structure.

There are two ways to proceed with doing business: One is to work completely within the system and to operate by the natural rules that exist. The other is to realize its structure, understand the rules that dictate the functions of the system, and to then choose whether to work strictly within it or not—or even to move between different systems that might get you to a goal better (sooner, faster, cheaper, etc.). In researching this book and organizing our thoughts on how we interact with people on the web, we realized that there’s a big difference between those who play strictly within a system and those who work outside it. We tend toward the latter, and you can, too. But we’ll explain more about that later.

Beyond that, you don’t have to know much about *The Matrix* to enjoy the rest of the book. We promise.

## Media and What They Do

We all know what the word *media* means, but in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (from which comes the famous slogan “The medium is the message”), Marshall McLuhan describes a medium as any extension of the human body. We like to think of media in the same way.

By basing our ideas of what a medium is on McLuhan’s definition, we come to see that wheels are a medium, because they are extensions of our feet, and that money is a medium that extends human power. It follows that we view online social networks (the Facebooks and Twitters of our time) as media,

not because they help us communicate, but because they *extend human relationships*. This is something that neither television nor radio ever could have done, because they are *one-way* entities. Email never did it as effectively, either, because the communication didn't occur in a public space. Now, with the advent of blogs, our communications can reach everyone, and thus we can *connect* with everyone, because they can respond to us directly.

There's a big difference in the way traditional print, radio, and television media was used from the 1950s until the present. Newspapers, magazines, television, and radio were all different ways to interrupt people, grab their attention, and shove a message into their thought processes. In the case of television, and during the heyday of print advertising, something interesting was happening: the mix of it being a novelty (not everyone had a TV, so conversations were often about every detail and nuance of the experience) and being persuasive before we had tools to counter any of the claims (a few scant years earlier, the radio drama *War of the Worlds* was mistaken as being a true news report of an alien invasion). This has changed over the past number of years, and even more powerfully in the past two decades.

Somewhere along the line, institutions took ownership of certain media. Newspapers won't print just anything you send them. Televisions won't play the video you made, and radio doesn't always play the songs you want or read the news you feel is important.

Over the past year, all of these systems have met with competition from an entirely unexpected source: you. You can print anything you want on your blog. You can post any video you want on YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok, or several other services. You can make your own music and share it; you can

podcast whatever appeals to you. Because of this, McLuhan's vision of media as an extension of ourselves is truer than ever. We've chosen to make the next media *ours*, and we've shaped our own media to be an extension of our own views, our own businesses, and our tribes.

We see now why this is an important time and why the communicators of today need a new title: that of *trust agent*.

### Why Trust Agents?

Having learned about the rainbow while we were growing up, almost any of us could easily recite its spectrum of colors without a problem: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. But were you aware that at least one of these—orange, a color we take for granted—did not always exist? In fact, its first official use was recorded in the court of Henry VIII. No one used the term before the actual fruit (the orange) arrived from China in the tenth century. We call people *redheads* and use the term *goldfish* because *orange* didn't exist back then.

New terms, in fact, are invented all the time and thus shouldn't really surprise anyone. *Podcast*, a word that describes audio that you subscribe to over the Internet, became the *Oxford American Dictionary's* Word of the Year in 2004 and is now so common that many of us on the web don't think twice before using it. Likewise, *trolling*—the act of anonymously annoying the hell out of people over the Internet—is another recently coined term. There is a vernacular here that is at once common to people online and foreign to those from other cultures, similar to the esoteric language used by Harley riders, Manchester United football fans, or wine enthusiasts.

*Trust agent* isn't the kind of thing you would call yourself. That's like people calling themselves gurus, divas, goddesses, or

experts. Let other people call you that. We prefer to say “trust agent moves” and point out people who act as trust agents. For example, we might say “Alex Chriss is the GM of QuickBooks and I can always reach out and ask him a question directly. He definitely makes trust agent moves for QuickBooks.” In another sense, “trust agent” can be a kind of unofficial job title. Some of these people have roles like “community manager,” or they might be in the online-facing part of “public relations.” The name isn’t synonymous with either title. First, communities don’t want to be managed: They want to be *cared for*. Second, public relations departments fill people’s inboxes with dozens of cold pitches every day (we’ve even received offers for free sneakers by email in exchange for posting to our “audience”). That said, we promise we’re not here to trash PR professionals—at least not the good ones.

You’ll get a feel for who trust agents are, and you’ll learn what being one entails. People who humanize a company or organization on a digital platform like the web or a podcast or a YouTube channel are trust agents. People who understand the systems and how to make their own game are trust agents. People who connect and build fluid relationships are trust agents. By the end of this book, you’ll probably be a trust agent, too. Just don’t call yourself one.

## **The Basics: Social Capital**

In October of 2002, after the largest study on humor ever conducted, scientists discovered what they believed to be the funniest joke of all time. Conducted over the web, the study collected more than 40,000 jokes and attracted almost 2 million ratings. This was the winning joke:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls 911. He gasps: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says: "Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says: "Okay, now what?"

The beauty of a joke (and information of many varieties) is that it can be infinitely reused without losing any of its value. But there's more at work here. You may not have realized what just happened, so we'd like to play it back to you, in slow motion, step by step.

First, we decided to include a joke at the beginning of this section. We didn't invent it; in fact, it was submitted by psychiatrist Gurpal Gosall, from Manchester, United Kingdom, to the aforementioned study. What happens then? Well, you read the joke, and if we did our job right, you laughed. However, it's what happens afterward that is interesting. But before we explain that, consider the next example.

Chris has an apple, and Julien has a dollar. Let's say that Julien wants an apple and that Chris would rather have a dollar than a piece of fruit, so they decide to trade. Simple, right? At the beginning of this story, Chris had an apple and now he has a dollar. We can actually continue to follow this dollar on its journey if we like, being traded for apples the world over, but the point is made: That is, dollars don't just grow on trees. They don't simply replicate themselves by being passed around. They are exchanged for goods. That's it.

What about our joke? Let's say you take our joke and tell your friend. What happens? Hopefully, he or she laughs, and then you both have the joke. It isn't gone; both you and your friend have it.

When we follow the joke along its path, though, something remarkable happens. Everyone is left just a little bit richer. Not only did they laugh, but now they can tell the joke as well.

Our joke is an example of social capital. *Capital* is usually defined as “any form of wealth capable of being employed in the production of more wealth.” Our joke has value; it’s hard to nail down exactly what the value is, but it’s clearly there. Therefore, it is a form of wealth, just as in our definition. But our joke isn’t regular capital—you can’t put it in a savings account and you can’t (usually) trade it for an apple. So, what is it?

In this way, *social capital* is different from other kinds of capital. When people come together and share a meal, they not only end up fed, they also become tighter as a group. The mere act of gathering means that they will exchange things—stories, favors, and laughs—and will grow richer as a result. It may sound touchy-feely, but these things have real value. And we don’t just mean that they keep you warm on a cold winter night, either; we mean they have real value, as in “you can take it to the bank” value. But how?

It’s simple: Jokes aren’t the only form of social capital; favors are, too. Buying somebody a cup of coffee is a real exchange of value, and it can at some point be repaid. You can never truly be sure *how*, but the fact that it can be repaid is unquestionable: You can ask for that cup of coffee back one day. Just think of your favorite television cop drama and how often the phrase “You owe me one” is uttered. These things are real.

We’ve already made clear that social capital has real value; if you find someone a job, then that person may find a job for you when you really need one. The real magic—the core of our argument—is what happens on the web. Because the web is made out of text, everything on the web is written down, and



once it's out there, thanks to Google, it will always be out there. This brings us to something we call *putting it on paper*. And it will change the way you think of our basic joke forever.

## Put It On Paper

What happens when we put our joke on our website or on our blog? At first glance, it shouldn't be much different than telling friends. But in fact, it is extremely different; it is much more powerful and long-lasting. And the reasons may surprise you.

Publishing our joke to a recent blog post may allow it to be seen by only a dozen visitors, or it may be seen by hundreds. In that way, this isn't very different than telling a joke in a bar, or maybe getting onstage and doing stand-up at an open mic night. The difference between putting it on the web (or in a book, for that matter) is that when the joke is being told on the Internet, the joke teller *is no longer there*. The joke teller is gone. Yes, the joke is still being told, and yes, the teller is still getting credit for it. He or she is still participating, but that participation is no longer active.

The same is true of YouTube. When the famous *Evolution of Dance* video was first posted on YouTube (by our count, in April of 2006), the video's originator, Judson Laipply, may have been present to upload it. Obviously, he was also there when he performed it. But after it went viral—eventually reaching a view count of more than 306 million views at the time of this writing—Judson Laipply was not there. He may have been having lunch, going on a date, doing another stand-up act, or even *sleeping*; but his presence was being felt, in different places all over the globe, by dozens of people at a time. In some small way, despite his absence, he was participating in each of those viewings.

You may think, so what? After all, you can write a book and sell a few copies. Your ideas are being spread passively there, too. But you can create a book only every little while. On the web, you are participating *all the time*.

This may seem insignificant when it comes to a joke video. After all, none of the people watching the *Evolution of Dance* are paying Laipply. What is he getting out of it? (Actually, after seeing it live onstage in Las Vegas for a private party, we have a feeling that Laipply is probably making a good living dancing for private events.) But our joke is just a colorful example. If we like, we can replace it with information about a coming emergency, or we can post a blog about some important information, or, if we want to really bring the point home, we can replace our YouTube video with a good sales pitch. All of this can be doing a salesperson's job, over and over again, without that person's need to be present.

Let's compare this to our original example. Say that you read the previous joke and tell it to some friends. Though you won't be there when they retell the joke, do you think your friends will credit you as the originator of the joke when they retell it? We consider it unlikely. Jokes spread, perhaps even more virally than YouTube videos, but they are rarely credited; comedians can attest to that. But YouTube videos *are* credited. Laipply may not be getting paid for every view, but some people are paying attention to who he is. As a matter of fact, Laipply self-identifies on the video as an "inspirational comedian." Can we really believe that he's never gotten a call about that? (After all, it is a pretty funny video.)

What are we to do when we realize that a video like this can do work for us like this? That is to say, it can tell people about who we are and convince them of our value even when

we're not there. Your authors (and many others) have realized the logical conclusion to this: Writing everything online, where it's visible to everyone forever, has value. Even if each video you post or each article you write convinces only a few people, that's a pretty great way to build up influence. In fact, it can make all other, non-web-based ways seem trivial. After all, we don't see Tony Robbins coaching one person at a time, do we? Instead, he works in auditoriums full of people, with all his success being seen by every one of them. He also sells tapes of them later.

The web is like this, too, except we're not putting on a show; we're just interacting. We used to do that by email, which is private; but the fact that it's all done in public view now means that all the participants on the web are creating value for one another simultaneously, instead of the old-fashioned way of one at a time and in private.

Let's take a concrete example: Say that you're asked a question by email about a specialty of yours—for instance, banking products. You could just respond by email, but you don't. Instead, you talk about it on your podcast. You're repeating the same information that would be in your email, but now it's public. You point the person who made the original inquiry to what you wrote, so that person gets what he or she wants; but now, anyone else can see it as well. People who arrive via Google by searching for similar information can visit and post comments weeks, even months, later. The episode, which offers an answer to typical questions asked by a few people, has now become a *resource*. If you're like most businesspeople, you're receiving a lot of the same questions repeatedly. But now you only respond once—and you get credit each time someone new discovers the answer.

Imagine that you do this 500 times. Over time, you've probably been asked 500 questions about your specialty; suppose you had answered them all on your blog. These 500 posts now make up a pretty hefty set of resources, with a lot of insider information and tips, and you're helping a fair number of people. As you do so, you're starting to become known for your expertise. You start to ask yourself, what might this lead to? And no wonder. You're getting emails now from strangers, and they're helping you learn more about your industry. Next thing you know, you may have built a fairly high profile for yourself.

This simple process is something a lot of people do accidentally. Chris, for example, never intended to become one of the world's top 100 bloggers. These things just kind of *happen* for some people. But that doesn't mean that success should happen only by accident. We're going to try to help make it available to you by *design*. The Action sidebars in this book will help show you where to start, and you can experiment from there.

**Action: Answer Whatever Questions You're Willing to Answer on Your Blog or Podcast or YouTube Channel; Get Credit More Than Once**

Have a blog yet? (Remember, authorities don't just talk, they write.) Start a site or a podcast or a video channel (or do all three). Give it a name that will catch attention. It might be your name, if it's intended to be very personal; or it might be a stand-alone brand that doesn't directly relate to the company. Probably the least appealing name for the blog would be something that ties it to the company directly. (The ability to choose this varies from company to company; we understand that.) Keep the following details in mind as you build your fledgling media empire:

- Always be thinking about what subjects will help you create content. Remember, you aren't talking about your home life or your cats; you're covering a topic that *you* know more about than anyone else. Make everything you write something that's helpful to other people; if those people might also be your customers, all the better.
- Look around on Yahoo! Answers and Quora for questions you can answer about your topic. Practice writing simply, so that nonspecialists can understand you. Don't use jargon. Use stories and metaphors, and learn a bit about copywriting. (We like [www.copyblogger.com](http://www.copyblogger.com) for this kind of thing.) When answering similar questions, don't be "that guy," which simply means don't talk about your own products all the time. Instead, talk about things in a way that allows other people to use the information. If competitors provide the better product, accept it! Don't pretend they don't exist.
- Check out blogs and podcasts and YouTube channels about your subject; see what they're talking about to see what the hot topics are. If you have an opinion, make it known through comments on those sites or by publishing your own take yourself. Always give credit for your ideas, and be humble. Commenting, by the way, is a lot easier than starting a blog, especially if you're unsure what you want to do. It also helps you write just a little bit and can help you to decide whether you want to commit a whole blog post to a subject.

## The Six Characteristics of Trust Agents

In researching how we wanted to talk about trust agents and how we would impart the information to you, we've defined six overarching but interrelated behaviors that describe what a trust agent is. We realized that if we were to build the book this way, you could understand each of these actions as a separate skill and grasp the concepts better. These actions form a linked system. We believe that trust agents use all six of them, though each manifests these traits in differing degrees. As you read about them, you may notice that you can place people you know into some categories, but don't forget to consider your own strengths and work from those, too. That's likely how you'll have the most impact.

1. *Make Your Own Game.* Perhaps the first defining skill set that trust agents seem to share is their recognition of the fact that there's the established way to do things—and then there's a game-changing way to do things. This new method, which usually involves skill, experimentation, and a comfort level with trial, error, and early failures, is how most trust agents break out of the mold and appear on our collective radar. Imagine taking the wild dancing and energy of a rave, but hosting it in the morning with no drugs allowed. That describes an experience bordering on the spiritual (but not religious) started by Radha Agrawal and Matthew Brimer with Daybreaker. The elements of this were all around, but until Daybreaker, this wasn't how it was done. Put another way, to Make Your Own Game is about *standing out*.
2. *One of Us.* One thing that distinguishes certain people as trust agents is the simple defining question of whether a specific community sees them as “one of us.” We are more willing to trust Ryan Boyles with a question about the Internet of Things

and IBM than we would a generic marketing document, for instance. This characteristic extends to every trust agent we identify throughout the book. In other words, being One of Us is about *belonging*.

3. *The Archimedes Effect*. You can do any and all of these six things well, but when you use your unique abilities to enhance them (using knowledge, people, technology, or time), then what you do becomes immensely powerful. We consider the web to be one of the best tools for increasing the power of what you do, so we discuss this with you to get you started on bringing it all together and achieving your goals. It's probably already clear, but the Archimedes Effect is about *leverage*.
4. *Agent Zero*. Trust agents are at the center of wide, powerful networks. They make building relationships a priority because it's a human thing to do—long *before* any actual business requires transacting. They are people who jump at the chance to meet others online, at events, or in mixed social settings, and who then often connect these new acquaintances with other people in their personal networks. They realize the value of using networks isn't in their ability to ask for things, but in their ability to complete projects faster, find resources more easily, and reach the right people at the right time. Because having a wide network is very powerful and opens doors, Agent Zero is about developing *access*.
5. *Human Artist*. Learning how to work well with people, empower people, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and to know when to improve relationships and when to step away are all part of what a trust agent does. In business terms, these are often called *soft skills*. From our perspective, companies that aren't valuing the power of peak performers in the arena of human interpersonal skills and social interaction are companies doomed to a painful future. This is an art

consisting of sciences. It's the hardest part to teach, but one of the most necessary ingredients. Being a Human Artist, in a way, is about developing *understanding*.

6. *Build an Army*. No matter how great you think you are, you can't do it all alone. When you can get a large group to collaborate, you can achieve monumental tasks that may have been previously impossible. As more people gather on social networks and elsewhere, asking each to push a little can help it become an avalanche in a way no set of tools was ever able to do before. Because the web is so vast and we are so small, to Build an Army is about developing *mass*.

## What Comes Next

The following six chapters of this book each focus on one of the six actions/characteristics of a trust agent. In each chapter about a specific topic, we mention the other five in regard to how they all interact. Feel free to skip ahead if something looks exciting; we won't mind.

Most important, remember that people on the web learn best by doing and that reading this book is only a starting point. You'll need the experience of all this to start to really understand what we mean.

Let's dig in.