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Trust Agents

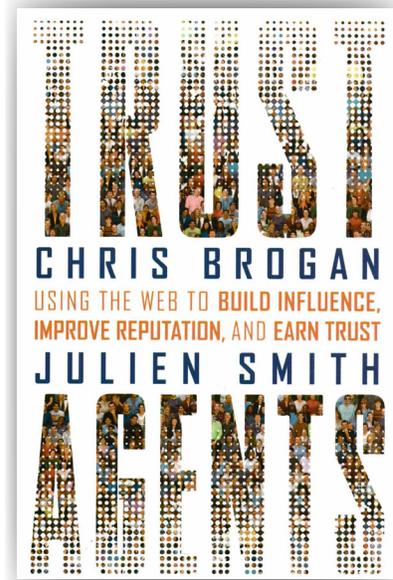
*Using the Web to Build Influence,
Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust*

Chris Brogan and Julien Smith

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

ISBN: 9780470743089



INTRODUCTION

Business marketing has come a long way since the days when the public believed everything they were told in advertisements. In the age of the Internet, people can check the Web 24/7 for information, and companies realize they need to change the way they market themselves. Businesses need more than just a great product; they need to earn the public's trust. Trust has become a valuable commodity. In **Trust Agents** Chris Brogan and Julien Smith present strategies for businesses and individuals to build online relationships with consumers that foster trust.

The authors stress that they in no way want the reader to think people can use others or build false trust just to sell products. That is not the purpose of being a trust agent. The Internet is a place where trust has not been previously established, so people are justifiably leery of it.

The Internet is also a transparent medium, which means nothing can be hidden there. Whatever is written and posted about a product or person will remain on the Web forever. Businesses need to know how to use that transparency as an asset. Digital natives, the people most familiar with the new gadgets of digital media, understand that transparency and use it to their advantage. They keep track of everything said about them online.

WHO ARE TRUST AGENTS?

People would not label themselves trust agents any more than they would call themselves divas or gurus. They earn those titles from others observing their expertise. Trust agents are people who connect and build fluid relationships as the communicators of today's online technologies. They are the people who humanize the Web, who speak online technological language fluently, who learn by trying all the new

applications, and who recommend more things more often on social sites. They are the digital natives who connect with more people than anyone else and leave very good impressions. Because of those skills, trust agents use current Web tools to spread their influence faster, wider, and deeper than a company's public relations department.

The authors know from firsthand experience that it can be tricky to balance being a trusted part of an online community and being aware of business opportunities. There are two ways to proceed with doing business:

1. Work completely within the system and follow all its rules.
2. Understand the system and learn to work around it, moving between different systems to get to a goal faster and cheaper.

Thinking of new media as an extension of the human body helps people realize their power on the Web. Writers can publish their writing in a blog and performers can post a video on YouTube or create a podcast. Individuals can choose to shape their own media to be an extension of themselves. It puts them in charge of their own business "game."

The authors suggest that people set up a blog and direct others to it. People need to establish themselves as experts and answer whatever questions they can on their blog, making it a hub of information worth seeking out.

There are six characteristics required of trust agents.

1. *Trust agents make their own game.* They know the established way of doing things, but they do it in a game-changing way so their game stands out from the rest.
2. *Trust agents establish themselves as "one of us."* They truly become part of the group.
3. *Trust agents employ the Archimedes Principle.* They use leverage to become more powerful.
4. *Trust agents act as an Agent Zero.* They are at the center of social situations, parties, and online events. Building connections allows trust agents to gain access to resources and find those resources more quickly.

KEY CONCEPTS

In the age of the Internet, companies need to build brand trust on the Web where limitless information is available to potential customers. Trust agents are experts in new media and social networking sites who humanize business online by building genuine relationships with communities of like-minded individuals.

Brogan and Smith outline the six characteristics of trust agents to illustrate how a company could benefit from having one and how a person could become one:

- They make their own game by working around established rules.
- They establish themselves as "one of us" in an online community.
- They use leverage from one area to become more powerful in another.
- They become the central figure in a community, known as an Agent Zero.
- They are human artists who have the soft skills of dealing with different personalities and recognizing strengths and weaknesses.
- They know how to build an army of smart and talented people who can work toward a common goal.



Information about the author and subject:

www.chrisbrogan.com

www.juliensmith.com

Information about this book and other business titles:

www.wiley.com/business

Related summary in the BBS Library:

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By Charles H. Green

5. *Trust agents are human artists.* They concentrate on developing the soft skills of learning to deal with people, empowering them, and recognizing strengths and weaknesses.
6. *Trust agents can build an army.* They know how to develop a large group that will collaborate. Trust agents know that to make something happen they need many smart and talented individuals pushing toward a common goal that unites them.

MAKE YOUR OWN GAME

People who successfully make their own game are the ones who understand the set rules and decide to work outside them. Some examples include Steve Jobs, who changed the way people use computers, and Richard Branson, an entrepreneur who changed the experience of airline travel and now has plans to launch commercial space travel.

These game-changers are people who set their own rules. Game-changers use a strategy called *gatejumping*, which is figuring out a way to do something better when everyone else is too busy to do it themselves.

Trust agents know that the Internet is a perfect place to gatejump. They realize that the Web is ultimately a collection of loosely joined resources in one central media platform. The opportunities for gatejumping online are limitless.

Gatejumping is an important element of building

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Brogan is cofounder of PodCamp, a popular new media conference series focused on the use of social media to build business and personal relationships. He is a widely read blogger on the subject of social media.

Julien Smith is a veteran trend analyst who has run Web communities for over ten years. He helps companies prepare for and profit from disruptive changes in their industries, and has appeared on news programs to represent companies and nonprofits in Canada and the U.S.

trust. People who can prove that they can reinvent the space they are in and create their own game can also prove that they are experts in their field, and people trust those who have proven themselves to be experts.

People interested in becoming trust agents need to look at business as a game and understand the three methods of relating to games – playing, cheating/hacking, and programming. They are defined as follows:

Making your own game is not just about trying to find innovative ways to improve your brand or business: It's about understanding that the tools to let you do this are at your disposal and most of them are free.

1. Playing is getting to know all the games' features, experimenting with them and learning through experience.
2. Cheating/hacking is finding the ways to guide a player to the end of the game with less work, like asking a friend for help.
3. Programming is finding another way around the rules to the point of creating brand new games.

The authors stress that taking advantage of systems is fine, but it is never acceptable to take advantage of people.

Method One: Playing

Trust agents know that the first step to playing a game is learning the rules and then deciding which rules are relevant. To win a game a person must have goals, so trust agents look for ways to create new games that include built-in goals, which will give the players direction.

Trust agents need feedback to know if the games are paying off. One way to gather feedback is through links, which are a form of currency on the Web. The more links a person has going back to their site, the more they are seen as important and trustworthy.

Part of playing the game is for people to expand their presence through a series of online "touches." A great way for people to reinforce trust is to leave comments on blogs and messages on Twitter and posts on Facebook and other social sites. By leaving digital touches

in all these venues, a person builds a reputation and makes others aware of them. This will lead to more people linking to that person's site and drawing larger crowds of followers to it.

Method Two: Hacking/Cheating

Hacking is not technically cheating, it is changing the rules and using a system differently than originally designed. For example, one way to hack the game of Monopoly when playing with friends is to decide that all players begin the game with money and property. Basically, people need to look for rules on the Web that they can gatejump to work to their advantage.

People can start to understand the concept of hacking by applying it to their work first. They need to think about what games they can play and what rules they can change to reach a particular goal at work.

Method Three: Programming

A person setting up and programming a new game will need rules, but they create the rules themselves. Tinkering is an important part of the process and people should remember that learning from trial and error is a crucial part of success. Unfortunately, people stop tinkering as they get older and they become arrogant that they know how the game will continue. This is particularly dangerous when dealing with new media. There is always something new coming out, so people need to stay abreast of every new technology and be the first ones to experiment with it.

The authors suggest an action item of memorizing the following rules to program new games:

Games have concrete goals and simple ways of measuring what's working, whereas life does not. It is important to differentiate yourself by creating a new category for you to fit in. This also creates a new way for people to be looking at you.

- When people treat others well, they will be treated well in return.
- The wider a person's network of professional contacts, the easier it is to get things done.
- The more personal the relationship, the more straightforward a person can be with followers.
- People who position themselves as experts make

others trust their opinion.

- Being the first one to try a new technology or game is very important because risk means reward.

ONE OF US

One of the first trust agents was Robert Scoble, a Microsoft employee who blogged about the problems with his company's products. The user community believed he belonged with them because he was not feeding them a company line.

In order to become accepted into a community, people need to treat others as humans first, not business opportunities. The authors suggest that people use the following rules in an online community:

- Ask about other people first.
- Understand the community culture by watching and observing.
- Promote others 12 times as much as they promote themselves.
- Use a good photo of themselves, never a logo.
- If they mess up they must apologize and make amends.
- Share just a little bit of their personal life.
- Remember that the online world is about relationships not campaigns.

CREDIBILITY ON THE WEB

Trusting strangers is a new and difficult concept because it is not part of human nature. Credibility on the Internet is established through other people's

comments about a person or a site. People realize that most buzz is suspect, and that the Web is rife with false rumors that turn out to be marketing scams. People, including trust agents, who leave

a trail of thoughtful comments on other people's blogs will automatically improve their credibility. Also, people who interact frequently and regularly at events build credibility by putting their face to their name in person.

People need to know how to spot a trustworthy site or blog, and the following are signals of those sites:

- The design should look polished, not like a template.
- It should have longevity and show how long the site has existed.
- There should be a high volume of content with real depth.
- It should exhibit a number of quality comments.
- There should be a lot of quality, recommended links.
- The domain name should be a dot-com not dot-info.
- There should be an “about author” page.
- The author of the site should be available on Twitter or Facebook.

With no geographical boundaries, the Web gives people a sense of belonging. People feel like they belong to a group through communication about shared interest and experiences. A lot of these people may wish to become “friends,” but trust agents know there is a big difference between friends in quotation marks and those they would invite to their wedding.

While not everyone can become a friend, trust agents know that building relationships with up-and-comers and not just the established leaders will help to build a fan base, and in turn build a group of trusting listeners.

Trust agents know that comments are a kind of currency on the Web. By commenting on others’ work, whether in articles or blogs, trust agents keep themselves connected to the group, which is just as important as direct marketing initiatives. They know that commenting often without any direct mention of a product or service is important. The quality of comments is important too. They make sure their comments are adding value and not just providing a pat on the back.

A checklist for engaging communities the right way includes the following:

- Listening comes first. People need to pay attention to where potential customers are interacting

- People need to measure the conversations they have and evaluate comments.
- People need to take small steps so they are not intrusive, and they need to be friendly.
- People need to lead a new initiative. When the time is right they can offer services to get closer to the group’s center.
- People need to take daily action to be inside a community.

Trust agents are not infiltrators and they are not phony. They know they cannot just sell products to a community, because members can sense a stranger in their midst. They do not try to sell to everyone nor do they ask for favors. They know that not everyone is their customer.

ARCHIMEDES PRINCIPLE

Archimedes of Syracuse was a famous third-century inventor who said, “With a lever large enough I can change the world.” The Archimedes Principle in trust agency is all about leverage. Trust agents know how to leverage the Web. They can use an advantage they have in one area to help them in another. They use the channels of the Web to network and make more and better connections. When they build relationships with groups they build leverage to help them affect other groups.

Trust agents don’t incessantly promote their own company or product. They plant seeds that bloom into evangelism on their own, through face-to-face interactions with individuals and through blog posts that continue to influence, because word-of-mouth is still more natural and powerful than any viral marketing.

Leveraging relationships is tricky because, as the authors reiterate, people cannot use other people. Trust agents and individuals should do favors because they like a person. A side benefit is the social capital and other favors that may be reciprocated, but doing a good deed is always its own reward. People cannot do a favor expecting one in return.

The Web is one gigantic lever to be used for accomplishing most things easier than before. The Web is

a technology to help humans get ahead. It is a good idea for people to adopt new technology early on so they can gatejump and master it before others, and therefore use it to their advantage.

To become a trust agent people need to do the following:

- Stop trying to find readers for their blog
- Start enabling their existing readers to talk to them
- Stop doing their own research
- Start looking for a personal research assistant and aggregators
- Stop spending money and time building their website because there are lots of shops to do it affordably
- Start looking at prefab solutions like Wordpress
- Stop telling everyone about their new thing
- Start crowdsourcing, which is accessing many people at once, and have them perform one small task each

We assess a variety of known options in order to find the best option for us, evaluating risk and reward along the way. The job of an Agent Zero is to place themselves among those routes, to become one of those options.

AGENT ZERO

A trust agent's mission is to become the contact at the center of a connective network who leads others to disseminate messages and ideas. That central contact is known as *Agent Zero*. The game is not about who they know, it is about who knows them. An Agent Zero requires the following characteristics:

- They want to connect good people to each other.
- They blend work groups and social groups.
- They often know influential people and can put them in touch with others.
- They reach out to the up-and-comers not just the leaders.
- They make connections online through small touches on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, and then socially and face-to-face at events and meet-

ings.

Becoming an Agent Zero takes time and effort. There are five steps that people can follow to reach that goal:

1. Build awareness of themselves
2. Gain attention for their skills
3. Develop recognition across many groups
4. Solidify a good reputation
5. Show authority in a field

For trust agents to build awareness of themselves they need to become visible through various channels of social networking. They need to leave traces of their visits, through comments and messages, so people will know they were at the sites.

Trust agents gain attention by showing people they are good to know because they are entertaining, informative, and skilled in specific areas. With the information overload on the Internet it is easy for people to dismiss what they deem as unimportant. Therefore, the information about a trust agent needs to be attention grabbing.

It is difficult for trust agents to gauge their influence because relationships on the Web do not provide immediate feedback the way face-to-face meetings do. In order to preserve their reputation and influence in a community, trust agents need to respond to e-mail as quickly as possible or people will feel slighted.

Trust agents know it is important to keep posting current projects to build their reputation. Because the Web is transparent and it houses everything ever posted about a person, it speaks for that person in their absence, similar to the way a Hollywood agent works for clients. Outdated information can damage a reputation. There are six tools to manage a person's reputation and check competition online:

1. Google alerts are set and customized by people to search for their specific key words
2. Rank checker is a measure of Google searches, which represent the current zeitgeist on any subject

3. Technorati.com checks how many times a person is mentioned and linked to other sites
4. Compete.com checks data on the competition
5. Twitter.com checks the “Twitterati” or important people on Twitter in a certain area
6. Search.twitter.com can show what people are tweeting about at the moment

In order for a trust agent to become an authority in an area, they need to build a network that listens and they need to be the best resource available. There are two types of authority. An *anonymous authority* provides information that people can access at Google or Wikipedia, where the value of the source is not very important. A *trusted authority* is a proven, well-versed expert on a subject. Clearly, trust agents need to be seen as trusted authorities.

HUMAN ARTIST

Etiquette is an important skill on the Internet. Trust agents know that they cannot sell to their friends. As the authors point out, “People like to buy but they do not like to be sold to.” Trust agents are simply trying to build relationships so that if a future opportunity comes up, they will be ready. Remembering that every member of the online community is a person first helps keep things in perspective.

Sometimes trust agents step over the boundary line and when they make a mistake they must follow the three A’s defined as follows:

1. *Acknowledge* that they made a mistake.
2. *Apologize* by actually saying the words “I’m sorry.”
3. *Act* by stating exactly what they will do to make things right.

Reliability is the key to success online and in person. Trust agents need to treat people the way they would like to be treated. Therefore, they need to be on time, be polite, and make a great first impression.

BUILD AN ARMY

Trust agents know that the true path to influencing people online is to create a group, or army, and fill

it with the smartest people they know. An army’s main job is to make a very big impact that individuals cannot accomplish on their own. Both the leader and the army need to get something out of it or the plan will not work. A group of people on the Web is far more powerful than a group the same size anywhere else. A Web group can influence politics and entertainment by donating money, time, or opinion instantly.

On the Web, being helpful in full view of others helps guide you into being a trust agent, and that gives you the opportunity to do more business. And, unlike conspicuously making an effort to be nice because other people will see, the Web just displays it naturally, because everything is in public view.

The Web helps create democracy because it allows individuals who are not geographically linked to produce and distribute their own materials. With older media systems, distribution was a major obstacle. Now that distribution is easy and instantaneous, there is a danger of information overload. It is also easy to spread false information or incorrect ideas, so people need to know who they can trust online.

When trust agents plan to build an army of like-minded people to affect or interact with, they consider the following three points:

1. Simple gestures matter, so they need to respond quickly to e-mails and queries so that people feel heard and seen.
2. They visit other people’s sites and participate in their events and include them in the online conversation.
3. They give as much as possible to their local community so they can empower and promote people within the community.

People need to understand what they are entering into when they join a group or an army of like-minded individuals. They are entering a social contract with unwritten but still agreed upon rules. They agree to spread information to their contacts via Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, or their blog knowing that they will get something in return, even if it is simply social capital. They may only get credit for passing it along,

but that will build their own reputation on the Web if what they passed along helped someone else.

There are five ways for trust agents, or people looking to become trust agents, to give an idea “handles” that army members can grab onto and pass along.

1. Write blog posts that give others the tools and strategies they want to spread.
2. Share information at sites like Google Reader, Delicious, and other new social sites.
3. Contribute to collaborative sites like Flickr and YouTube.
4. Discuss and develop ideas on Twitter, FriendFeed, and Facebook.
5. Write and distribute free e-books that explain their ideas so others can make them their own.

THE TRUST AGENT

The Web and new social media are game-changers affecting the way business is conducted. The Web allows personal interactions on small and large scales with very few boundaries.

A trust agent should think of the following four frames when developing an online body of work that they want people to read, talk about, and pass along to others:

1. What connections can be made to reach other people? They need to find ways to put people in touch with each other that they know will be mutually beneficial, such as introducing an unemployed friend to a prospective employer, or praising someone in a blog.
2. Where is the point of leverage? They need to ask themselves what their movements to other media outlets and sites will gain for them.
3. They need to consider whether the company they do work for is part of the community or just trying to sell something.
4. They need to be on the lookout for new opportunities in new and evolving media. They need to seek out the new game and figure out if its rules can be broken.

Almost anyone can learn to be a valuable trust agent

as long as they keep in mind that they need to treat others as well as they would like to be treated. They must also keep the best needs of the community in mind when introducing new information and ideas. A reliable and effective Web presence is the key to success.

People interested in becoming trust agents can improve their Web presence with the following six strategies:

1. They should write a content marketing blog about a passion of theirs. Many programs exist that could link to what they are passionate about.
2. They should build a small but powerful network and become an Agent Zero at the core of a group in their field.
3. They should become the name brand of a specialty so they can make their name synonymous with a field.
4. They should master leverage and use it to make important changes in a community. By finding leverage points to facilitate their work, they can create value for the community.
5. They should be guided by the desire to build genuine human trust. By building an awareness and exposure of their skills, they can be the default source people turn to in a time of need.
6. They should make an army to power their change. They should gather groups of people to work on projects with them.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 6 – 7 hours, 271 pages

Trust Agents offers advice that would benefit any individual or business looking to harness the power of the Web for building social connections and ultimately building trust from a community and potential customers. Chris Brogan and Julien Smith use personal experiences as examples and share caveats about relationships built online.

Individual case studies provide evidence of successful Web entrepreneurs who learned to become experts

in their fields and affect their companies' bottom line. Each story is succinct and told in a straightforward tone. The authors provide action items for the reader to follow and they also include many references to helpful websites. Although each chapter is dedicated to one of the six characteristics for becoming a trust agent, the job of a trust agent is best understood if the book is read chronologically, from beginning to end. An extensive index helps the reader navigate the book and zero in on precise topics.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Introduction: Hey I Know You. Have We Met?

Chapter 1: Trust, Social Capital, and Media

Chapter 2: Make Your Own Game

Chapter 3: One of Us

Chapter 4: Archimedes Principle

Chapter 5: Agent Zero

Chapter 6: Human Artist

Chapter 7: Build An Army

Chapter 8: The Trust Agent

Index

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