



HOW TO MAKE  
COMMUNITY  
YOUR COMPETITIVE  
ADVANTAGE

# THE BUSINESS OF BELONGING

DAVID  
SPINKS

FOREWORD BY  
DEREK ANDERSEN  
COFOUNDER, STARTUP GRIND AND BEVY

WILEY



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# THE BUSINESS OF BELONGING

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**SPINKS**

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*For Alison*



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## Foreword

In 2016, I agreed to speak at the CMX Summit in the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco. It was still a relatively new conference, just a couple years old, and it proclaimed to focus entirely on community management. As a longtime community founder, I didn't know what to expect. At every other startup or marketing conference I had been to (and I had been to a lot), community building was usually a footnote on the agenda. But from the moment I arrived, I knew this event was different. Everywhere I turned seemed to be conversations, people, and products focused on building community. To my shock, as I sat in a dense crowd of hundreds of people, I felt something I hadn't felt since I started building my community six years before: true professional belonging.

The conference was started by David Spinks. We had first met a few weeks before the conference and I immediately recognized that he cared about and deeply understood what I cared about: building communities. But the way he spoke about community and how it would change the world of business wasn't something I heard anyone talking about at that time. He was sure that in the near future, every business would be building community. And he was dedicating his life to that cause.

My own journey of building a community-driven business dates back to 2010 when a few friends and I began hosting events called Startup Grind in my small office in Mountain View, California. At first it didn't seem like much of anything special—just a couple dozen startup people meeting up and networking. But the momentum soon started to build. Ten people at the first event turned into 20, then 50, then 100, then 250.

At one event, an attendee approached me and asked me if he could launch a Startup Grind chapter in Los Angeles. The culture we had built at Startup Grind around the values of giving first, helping others, and making friends were actually very unique in the startup

world at the time. They wanted to bring that mentality to LA. And it worked! Soon, the LA chapter was growing quickly.

After the success in LA, we started inviting our members to kick off their own local chapters in their city. Today, Startup Grind has 600 active chapters in 120 countries. We've hosted 15,000 events led by 2,000 volunteers. Most of what we did was self-taught, fumbling around in the dark until we figured out enough wrong ways to build our community to find the right things to do.

As a battle-scarred community builder, discovering CMX and meeting David that day in 2016 was like returning home after being gone on a long, impossible journey. At CMX, for the first time I was in a place where other people were speaking my community language. Each attendee seemed to be engaged in their own epic community building journey. I found myself nodding at every speaker's insights and having to hold back on all my questions.

When people ask me to describe David Spinks, I affectionately tell them that he is the Yoda or Dalai Lama of community (much to his chagrin). This isn't just because David is one of the most genuine and thoughtful people I have met, but because he is the first person I met that put frameworks and science behind the things that I had been building. The SPACES model was the first true business case for building a community. The language and tools he put forth in the industry have become staples in the process of building branded communities today.

Over the last ten years, David's advice has been sought by the very best companies in the world to help them figure out how to craft and grow an authentic community with their customers. Leaders from the top communities come to CMX to dispense their knowledge to the rest of the industry.

Tens of thousands of decision makers have already benefited from David's experiences and frameworks, but probably no one more than me. In a veiled excuse to spend more time working near him, in early 2019, my company Bevy acquired CMX so that we could be part of the community revolution that he helped pioneer.

Having worked side by side with him since then, I have been thrilled to see the *Business of Belonging* finally come to light as our company has grown 10X since David joined, in large part due to implementing many of the principles that he shares in this book. I

truly believe that this book will become the bible that every community builder reads.

When competitors' product features and functionality are the same as yours, having a community is, as David eloquently says, "The one thing they can't copy." At a time when no one wants to click on another digital ad, your community can fire up your sales channel or turn a detractor into a promoter. If I had this book when I started Startup Grind, I can only imagine how much further I would be and how many mistakes I could have avoided.

As you study and apply the lessons in this book, hopefully you will feel what I felt at that first CMX event I attended: a connection to the people who have trodden the path you're on or embarking on, and that there is a fountain of support and lessons you can benefit from to help you on your own community building journey.

Derek Andersen  
Co-Founder, Startup Grind, Bevy



## Introduction

The internet was where I first found a sense of belonging. It was back in middle school. I was a kid growing up in the suburbs of New York City, and didn't fit in.

Both of my parents were immigrants. My dad was born in Ireland, moved to Israel where he met my mother, got married, moved to the US, and I was born one year later. We didn't have a deeply rooted social network in our local community. We were new, and different. We had some extended family nearby, but most of our family lived in other countries. I was a bit awkward and tried too hard to fit in. I was bullied for being Jewish and having a parent with an accent. As I grew up, I found myself disconnected from early childhood friends, and I struggled mightily to find my social rhythm.

Despite not fitting in, I was still someone who felt *strongly* drawn to other people. I loved organizing and being a part of social activities. I loved meeting new people. For better or worse, I needed people to like and engage with me in order for me to like myself. And I would get deeply depressed when I was turned away by the groups I cared most about.

When I couldn't find community locally, I was forced to search elsewhere. I ended up finding it in online video games. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* was one of the first console games developed specifically to be played online. I picked it up and quickly became addicted. In truth, I think I was more addicted to the social network on the game than the game itself.

I became one of the top competitive THPS4 players in the world and had developed a strong reputation on the game. I decided with a couple friends to start up a clan and we quickly rose to the top of the clan rankings. We launched a website and a forum, which became one of the most popular online communities for THPS4 players at the time.

We had a really tight-knit community with lots of shared stories and inside jokes. I once won a personal meet-and-greet with Mr. Hawk himself and asked him if he could sign a Jell-O pudding

pack for me. It was an inside joke in our community, and we planned to give it away in a contest. He looked very confused when I handed it to him but just kind of smirked and signed it anyway. Probably not the best idea to get a valuable autograph on a perishable good, but it was totally worth it for the reaction from the community.

I was just 14, still in middle school, and would sprint home every day to get online, play games, and manage a community with hundreds of active members. We hosted competitions, created video content, dealt with trolls and spam, launched and relaunched forums, empowered moderators from the community ... all the things that anyone who manages an online community does today. I had not only found belonging, but I was creating community and belonging for others. It was the greatest feeling in the world! From that point on, I was hooked on community building. I became obsessed with how the internet could be a platform for community and started engaging in every online community I could find. I joined more gaming communities, started sharing poetry and journaling online and became an early adopter of every new social platform.

It was at college that I started connecting community to the world of business.

I was a business administration major. The problem was, all of the courses in the program felt super outdated. We were being taught things that worked for businesses 10 years ago. Meanwhile, I was witnessing a social revolution taking place on the internet. Blogging was wildly popular at the time. Every college student in the US was using Facebook every day. A strange social platform called Twitter was starting to grow in popularity. It seemed obvious to me that business would all be driven by online communities and social spaces. But none of my classes even mentioned the internet.

So I pitched the business department on launching a course focused on online communities. They said no. Womp womp. Luckily, my computer science teacher was more receptive and said if I helped create the curriculum, he would make it a course in his department. The next semester we kicked off the school's first online community and social media course. I soon had the opportunity to start doing paid community building work, organizing community events, and programming for the college union. I also launched our school's first-ever official blog, which is still going today.



## Becoming a Community Professional

While in college, I started a personal blog to write about what I was learning in the world of community, social internet, and business, and started making a name for myself. The founders of a startup called Scribnia, Russell D'Souza and Jack Groetzinger, read one of my blog posts and emailed me asking me to be their first *community manager*. Just like that, I had my first official job building community for a business!

It turned out that building community for a business was a lot different from building a community for a video game or for college students. Customer communities were a totally different beast. Members' motivations were different, expectations were higher, I had to have goals and metrics and report on my success ... I had to become a community "professional."

"No problem!," I thought. "I'll just find mentors and training programs to teach me how to build community on a professional level!"

Well ... it turned out there really weren't many people with experience building communities for companies back then. People didn't understand what it meant to build community for a business. They were still thinking about it like traditional marketing, using social platforms to build an audience rather than connect people to each other.

It truly was a brand new profession. I realized I was largely on my own.

Slowly, I started meeting other people who, like me, were building real communities for businesses. I ended up starting a blog and job board called TheCommunityManager.com with my friends Jenn Pedde and Brett Petersel who were also community managers. We started publishing regular articles about what we were learning, and invited other community professionals to do the same. We organized meetups, and just started creating spaces for people who did this kind of work to connect and support each other.

My role as the director of community for a startup called Zaarly and started a couple companies of my own, including a somewhat spontaneous two-year swing at building an online cooking school

called Feast with my roommate Nadia Eghbal. After giving it a good go, we were running out of investor money and losing interest; it was looking like Feast was going to be a bust. Nadia would go on to become a principal at Collaborative Fund and work on community at GitHub and Substack. And I had a new opportunity fall into my lap that would define the rest of my career.

## **Building the Community Industry**

As fate would have it, my friend and fellow entrepreneur Max Altschuler came to me with a proposition at the perfect time. I had told him in the past that I had a dream of hosting a conference entirely focused on the community industry. He wanted to help me start it.

This was five years after I got my first community manager job, and more businesses were starting to invest in community. I was meeting hundreds of community professionals, some of whom were doing incredible work for well-known brands. But their work was still going unnoticed in the broader business community. I felt that if we could organize a legitimate conference for community professionals, it would bring more credibility and awareness to the community industry, help community professionals level up their work, and motivate more companies to invest in community.

Max said he would handle all the logistics for the event since he had experience running a conference, and I could focus on curating speakers and marketing. I figured why not, I have anything to lose, and CMX Summit was born.

Launching CMX felt like the culmination of everything I learned and worked on in my life and career. That first event was one of the most powerful community experiences I ever felt. We had 300 people come from around the world. It was the first conference where every single person in the room was building community for a business.

Attendees didn't know what to expect. They were so used to being the only community professional at an event, and having to explain what they do a hundred times because no one understood what community management actually was.

We took a very different tone at the event than what community professionals were used to. The title "community manager" was

perceived as low value, junior level, nice-to-have. It wasn't well defined or respected.

At CMX, we told them that that community would be the future of business, and that they're doing the most important work in the world.

We put speakers on stage who successfully built community programs up at companies like Lyft, Airbnb, 500 Startups, and Apple. We told them community is extremely valuable, their profession is important, and we're at the start of something huge.

One attendee from that very first conference, Holly Firestone, who was running community for Atlassian at the time and would go on to lead community teams for Salesforce, wrote many years later about the impact CMX Summit had on her career.

I remember pulling up to the event, and I was so excited. I felt like a kid on her first day of school. I remember what I was wearing. White shirt, green jacket, jeans, brown boots, and a bright blue scarf. I remember exactly how the room looked. It was crowded with people in every inch of the space. I just looked around in awe. I couldn't believe that everyone in the room was there for a community management conference [...] When I think about what was most valuable to me that day, it was that I was surrounded by people with which I didn't need to push back. A huge weight that I had been carrying around was lifted off of me. I finally felt, without a doubt, I was making the right decision about my career. I left feeling inspired and reinvigorated. This was a huge turning point for me.

It was the sentiment that we heard from a lot of the attendees that day. It was the first time they were surrounded by people who understood what it meant to be a community professional. It was the first time they felt like there was a real career path for them in the world of business. It was a space where, for the first time, they didn't feel alone in their work.

I knew that there was something special happening here and felt like I found the work I was meant to do. I turned my full-time focus to building CMX. We made it our mission to advance the community

industry and help community professionals thrive. I wanted community professionals to have all the resources I wish I had when I first kicked off my career in community.

## The Community Era Has Arrived

Fast forward, and the CMX community has grown to tens of thousands of members, we've hosted numerous global conferences and have over 60 local, volunteer-led chapters around the world. I get to do what I love every day: build, research, and teach community. After five years of bootstrapping, CMX was acquired by the community and virtual events software platform Bevy, which helped both of us accelerate our growth and impact. I've had the opportunity to work with teams at companies like Google, Airbnb, National Geographic, Redbull, Facebook, Waze, Udemy, Salesforce, Atlassian, and hundreds more through workshops and consulting. And I've learned a lot about what it takes to launch, manage, and scale successful community programs that create genuine belonging for members and measurable value for businesses.

Our prediction at that first CMX Summit that community was the future of business has proven true. A recent study by First Round Capital found that 80 percent of startups today are already investing in community and 28 percent consider it to be their “moat and critical to their success.”<sup>1</sup> In our own study of companies investing in community, 88 percent said that community is critical to their company's mission.<sup>2</sup> It's hard to find a company today that isn't at least thinking about community.

Even with the increased attention, there's still a lot of uncertainty around how to invest in community. There isn't a human out there that would argue that community isn't important. The question isn't whether or not community is important. For a business that has to optimize every dollar spent and ruthlessly prioritize what it focuses on, the question is, “Why should we invest in community over all of the other things we could be investing in?” And once you're ready to make that investment, how does a business build a legitimate community that creates authentic belonging for members, while also driving business outcomes? Can you measure it? How do you know it's working? What does a successful community look like?

These are the questions I've spent my whole career working to answer. And these days, a week doesn't go by that I'm not asked by a number of businesses who are trying to figure it out.

I wrote this book to provide you with the answers. I've been writing this book for three years, but gathering the lessons and insights for this book for more than 10 years. It's a collection of everything I've learned and studied in the world of community-driven business.

After reading this book, I want you to understand what it means to be a community-driven business. I want you to understand how to drive higher trust, lower costs, and scale every part of the customer and sales journey in a way traditional businesses can only dream. I want you to have everything you need to build real belonging for your people and make community your competitive advantage.

Let's do this.

## Notes

1. "First Round State of Startups 2019," *stateofstartups2019.firstround.com*, 2019, <https://stateofstartups2019.firstround.com/>.
2. "2020 Community Industry Trends Report," *CMX* (CMX, 2019), <https://cmxhub.com/community-industry-trends-report-2020>.

