



BRAINS ON FIRE

IGNITING POWERFUL, SUSTAINABLE,
WORD OF MOUTH MOVEMENTS

ROBBIN PHILLIPS, GREG CORDELL, GENO CHURCH, SPIKE JONES





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PRAISE FOR *BRAINS ON FIRE*

"*Brains on Fire* succeeds at doing what so many other business books attempt: It provides a recipe for how every company can succeed. But the secret isn't in the latest tools, online communities, or campaign tactics. It's about passion, humanization, and common sense. And to prove that it's possible, *Brains on Fire* is filled with examples of organizations that have already done it."

—Scott Monty
Head of Social Media, Ford Motor Company

"*Brains on Fire* is loaded with great advice from a team of people who have repeatedly built successful movements, ranging from an anti-teen-smoking movement to a pro-city-parks movement. If you want to lead a movement, start with this book."

—Dan Heath co-author of *Switch* and *Made to Stick*

"The world is both strange and small in a modern age, isn't it? There now seems to be a million fancy ways to reach and excite kindreds, like-minded, and customers anywhere in the world. A truly tantalizing notion. But for anyone who manages a business or a brand, the modern age has become increasingly difficult to decode in real time. More quickly than most of us would like to admit, the things we do to spread the message of our products, services, and causes devolve into dressed up versions of traditional strategies, a one-too-many controlled blast with a hat tip to an interactive tactic. It can be an unsatisfying exercise for all involved.

"Enter *Brains on Fire*. It isn't just a book or a company, it is a collection of real people, with souls and hearts and stories —oh, the stories!—able to offer real advice to anyone who wants to make a movement out of what they do all day. Put down your Powerpoints and ad campaigns, folks. This takes guts and faith and patience, but mostly it takes passion. Not yours. Your *customers*. *Brains on Fire* can help you find it, trust it, and gently blow on the ember until it ignites. It's not brand management, it's brand as transformation. You in? There's a truth that lies deep within the promise of this modern, digital world—that authentic leadership can be released from your customers, and their passion can be fanned into movements that

change lives forever. *Brains on Fire* can help make it true for you. Buy the book.”

—Ellen McGirt
Senior Writer, Fast Company magazine

“*Brains on Fire* has the ability to assemble a powerful team that speaks as one unit. This engaging book is all about how that team works, including love, hard work, shared passion, with a constant focus on the goal.”

—Douglas J. Greenlaw
*former Head of Sales and Promotional Marketing,
MTV Networks, New York*

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This book is dedicated to our dear friend and founding partner, Mike Goot.

His outrageous, often obscene, yet infinitely kind and generous spirit is part of who we are.

*It pushes us to be relentless in our pursuit of the truth,
and to never surrender any possibility
that our efforts could help make the lives of those we
touch more meaningful . . .
and a helluva lot more fun.*

Acknowledgments

LOVE

Brains on Fire is not really a business book. It's a love story, a story about being famous for the people you love.

When I was first approached by Dan Ambrosio at John Wiley & Sons in August 2009 about writing a book, I instantly said, "Yes. *We* want to write a book."

When I say "we," I don't just mean the four authors you see listed on the cover. "We" represents an army of believers. It's the people who comment on our blog. It's the courageous clients we serve. It's their customers. It's everyone who sends us a resume or a love note. It's our employees and extended tribe. It's people who catch a vision and inquire about our services. It is all of us who are learning and changing the way we think about the work we do in the world.

However, there are some very special people whose contributions I need to mention by name.

Without the inspirational vision of Geno Church, this book would not exist. For sure, Geno is a thought leader in the word-of-mouth marketing world, but mostly he is one of the most honest and genuine human beings on the planet.

Greg Cordell is also a huge part of the heart and soul of *Brains on Fire*. We are inspired daily by his brilliant insight and wisdom. He has a deep and soulful understanding of the emotions that connect and unite people.

And then there are the clients and the people who call Brains on Fire home. I took on the task of interviewing many of our clients, employees, and advocates. It was life-changing. It was also a privilege to discuss ideas and lessons learned with so many bright and shiny people.

Greg Ramsey and Eric Whitlock visually bring our communities and movements to life on a daily basis. Eric caught a vision for the cover and ran with it. The artwork was not created by a single artist; rather, it is a collection of doodles from many of our kindred spirits who love to draw. (Frankly, we see the cover as a type of visual expression of a movement.)

And then there is Spike Jones. He's a talented writer who helped give our message one voice. He poured his heart into the assignment, and we are very grateful for his help.

We believe with all our heart and soul that Brains on Fire is a movement. Join us. Let's continue the conversation at [brainsonfire .com/blog](http://brainsonfire.com/blog).

We're listening.

ox,
ROBBIN

We love our employees and extended tribe:

Robbin Phillips
Geno Church
Heather Hough
Cathy Harrison
Jack Welch
Eric Dodds
Samantha Lussier
Alexis Bass

Justine Foo
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Bryan Martin
Greg Ramsey
Justin Gammon
Samantha Lussier
Geno Church
Justin Gammon

It took an army of true believers . . .

Introduction

IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE, STUPID

Technology is a trap. A crutch. The shiny new object in the room. And while many people think it could be the answer to their prayers, we guarantee that it could also be your biggest detriment. A lot of companies that concentrate all their efforts in the area of technology seem to take the human element out of the equation. But the focus of business is not—and never should be—technology. Rather, it always has been, and always will be, about people. Living, breathing human beings with hopes and dreams, pet peeves, and a whole bunch of emotional baggage.

You will quickly discover that there are no social media how-tos in this book. There are no Twitter strategies, Facebook doodads, or MySpace thingamajigs. Sure, we'll touch on how technology can be used to create long-term, sustainable, profitable movements, but if you're looking for something completely technology-focused, then put down this book and go pick up the latest issue of *Wired*.

"It's about people. When it comes to technology, what's exciting and shiny to day will be frickin dead tomorrow."

Chris Sandoval - Member Experience Strategist for a diversified financial services group serving the Military community

You should also know that while there is a company out there in the world named Brains on Fire, this book isn't named after it. Nothing is named after our company. Brains on Fire is named after what we do—ignite the passion within employees and customers—which is really where brains on

fire happen. This book is therefore a celebration and tribute to the courage, vision, and enthusiasm of those companies and organizations we have had the honor to serve, because they are a true reflection of what Brains on Fire stands for. It is our hope that you can learn what our customers have taught us within these pages and, in doing so, open hearts and minds to new ways of strengthening the connections between people and companies. Our customers are Brains on Fire. Their employees are Brains on Fire, and their customers are Brains on Fire. They are an extraordinary, energized, empowered community. Far from ordinary consumers or target markets, these amazing individuals have learned to channel their passion to bring about positive, real change in people's lives.

And so the torch gets passed. The love grows. And the world is better for it.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT THIS BOOK?

Because—as any number of books before this one told you—the landscape has changed. Before the rise of the Internet, companies could at least operate under the illusion that they controlled their messaging and could tell the public what to think about them. However, if you're a company today that still thinks that, then there's a lot more delusion than illusion going on.

It comes down to trust. And people don't trust your company; people trust people. People they know. People whose opinions and recommendations they seek out and have faith in.

People don't buy your company, product, or service first, they buy people first.

One question that we get a lot is “Well, how does this ‘movement’ thing apply to B2B?” We tell them that it’s no longer a B2B, or even a B2C world; it’s a P2P, as in person-to-person. Because your company is made up of people.

Another reason you should care about this book is because we live in a world where companies are fighting for their lives. No, don’t worry; this isn’t the part where we talk about the crappy economy or how you’re a commodity or how the rise of the digital world has made your competition a lot fiercer. But when you’re fighting for your life, you’re a lot more willing to listen—to your customers and to your employees. Listen for advice on how to become a part of something that’s bigger than you. That’s where movements start: by listening.

WHAT IS A MOVEMENT?

No, we’re not going to pull out the dictionary. We’re just going to let you know that—for the purposes of what’s ahead—we have developed our own working definition of what a movement is: A movement elevates and empowers people to unite a community around a common cause, passion, company, brand, or organization.

So let’s take it a step further, since we’re talking about sustainable movements here: A sustainable movement happens when customers and employees share their passion for a business or cause and become a self-perpetuating force for excitement, ideas, communication, and growth.

Your ultimate goal should be to ignite something so powerful that if your marketing and PR departments or, God forbid, even your entire company got hit by a bus, your fans would pick up the banner and march forward with it.

Something like that takes many forms, and one might be your fans creating their own PR and marketing messages and picking up where you left off.

CAMPAIGNS VERSUS MOVEMENTS

Let's get something straight: We have come neither to praise traditional advertising, nor to bury it. It's not dead. It's not going away. So don't think that we're going to go into a tirade about how traditional advertising is broken, and you shouldn't be using it.

But allow us this sidebar: It's really intriguing to see, in 2010, the nostalgia that's being passed around about the way things used to be in the advertising world. The popular television cable drama *Mad Men* is all about the martini lunches and the thrill of the pitch back in the 1960s, Madison Avenue in its heyday. And there's something to be said about that: the good old days, trying to recapture the glory and thrill of the big, glitzy ad campaign.

Even today, the ad industry celebrates those fading stars of the old times, and when they do, they are acknowledging that those days are over. Sure, there are shining spots even in today's advertising. The ad rags call them out, and we all gather around and applaud, until we forget about it 20 minutes later because so few of them are memorable anymore. That brochure you designed is really just pretty trash, because that's where it's going to end up 10 seconds after someone looks at it. You're just creating more campaigns. And while campaigns try like hell, it's really hard to make a campaign into a movement. There's a big difference between the two.

Movement is also a word that's being thrown around a lot these days, especially by marketing folks. But if it feels,

looks, and smells like an advertising campaign, then guess what: It's an ad campaign. Not a cultural movement or any other kind. Ads are a tool. Movements are the workshop. You have to understand the tactics before it makes any sense to implement. And when you start to look at your marketing challenges in the context of a movement, your world starts to change.

"If I had come through with a litany of tactics and things that we wanted to do, I would not have gotten very far."

*Jamie Plessner - Best Buy
Consumer Marketing Manager*

Jamie Plessner—who works in Marketing Strategy and Communication for retail giant Best Buy—said the following about the concept: An idea "has to be strategically sound and insight driven to get through our corporate organization. If I had come through with a litany of tactics and things that we wanted to do, I would not have gotten very far."

So to get in the right frame of mind, set the stage, and push you out of your comfort zone a bit, let's compare campaigns and movements.

CAMPAIGNS HAVE A BEGINNING AND AN END

Ah, the media buy. Pulling the plan together. Analyzing the data for the best demos. Looking at the ratings and placing your bet on where you'll get the most bang for your buck. You know what we're talking about, advertising types. Those