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# Superfans and Microtribes

By Dev Patnaik

*Whether selling sneakers or streaming services, marketers need a tribal strategy. The article outlines how brands can harness passionate communities of consumers to drive growth.*

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The keenly awaited prequel to Game of Thrones is out and fans are in rapture. But how much of that joy stems from the quality of the new show, and how much from viewers being able to bond with one another over their favorite franchise again? I would argue that much of it comes from the latter—they're energized because their “microtribe” has been reunited.

Microtribes —communities formed around passionately held niche interests— are everywhere you look these days. They're shifting consumer behavior, disrupting industries, reshaping society and playing havoc with our political system.

Any company that wants to stay relevant needs to be thinking about what this trend means for their future and how to get ahead of it, or risk being left behind.

Why is this so relevant now? Tribalism has driven human behavior ever since rival groups of hunter-gatherers formed on the African veld millennia ago. Yet the explosion of choice and access brought about by the internet has supercharged this innate tendency in a mere two decades.

The result is an ever-increasing fragmentation of society as people select their groups and tune everything else out, a process that social media algorithms reinforce and accelerate. Whatever you identify with—vegan bodybuilding, 1990s K-pop or being a transgender Republican—there's a microtribe for that.

Sneaker-maker Brooks Sports, for example, went from the edge of bankruptcy to being a leading brand by adopting a laser focus on a single tribe—runners. CEO Jim Weber jettisoned all of Brooks' sub-\$80 “barbecue and lawn-mowing” shoes and threw everything at winning the trust and appreciation of the passionate runner community. Last year, Brooks scored record revenue of more than \$1 billion.

The bigger and more well-resourced a company is, the more microtribes it can successfully target. Disney has taken the first step, organizing around audiences such as teenage girls and 20-something men. Its recent hit show, “Ms. Marvel,” is a case in point, portraying a superhero Pakistani-American girl grappling with her dual identity and spouting phrases such as “bismillah” and “assalamu alaikum” that resonate with Muslim Americans.

Whether selling sneakers or streaming services, brands need a microtribe strategy. To be sure, it's a big pivot for those who once prioritized wider audiences. Taylor Swift's rise from country music star to national icon would be much harder for a niche artist starting out today. Likewise, the transition for Nissan Xterra SUV's breakout from surfer dudes to soccer moms, or Facebook's transformation from college dorm hook-up site to global social media behemoth, wouldn't be as assured. Mass appeal just isn't going to work as well anymore.

How do you and your company adjust? You have to be future-focused and the future is microtribes. Managers, executives and team leaders at companies large and small can help their companies adapt to the microtribe trend. Here's how:

**1. Identify groups with potential to move the business needle**

To find them, focus on psychographics, not demographics.

**2. Organize by whom you sell to, not by what you sell**

This was Disney's smart approach. Take this approach across business verticals, including sales, marketing, etc.

**3. Understand what makes your targeted tribes tick**

This was the key to success for Brooks Sports. Don't rely on survey data from the latest Nielsen or Gartner report. Put boots on the ground to collect unique insights on the problems, concerns and desires of certain microtribes. One idea: Tap an executive or specialist to travel the world (or the networks of targeted groups) to identify a tribe's needs.

**4. Rethink how the business makes its decisions**

Currently, most place too much decision-making importance on presentations rather than real-world experiments. Begin by rewarding future-focused trials or pilots rather than slick PowerPoints. Take a page from former Intuit CEO Scott Cook, who told managers they could allocate a small amount of funding to an innovative idea. If it worked, he'd allocate more money—again and again.

**5. Make adjustments as needed to back-end operations**

Producing more variations of products to appeal to different groups will place more complex demands on manufacturing. As tech such as 3D printing evolves, more customization is possible.

Being able to think smaller and smarter is going to be one of the keys to success in the coming years as businesses vie for the valuable attention of hyper-engaged customers. Formulating a strategy should be a top priority for every CEO and CMO. Just like on the prehistoric veld, being outside the tribe is a lonely and dangerous place to be.

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