

Customer first thinking.



Digital Campfires:

An Interview with Sara Wilson, Founder and Principal, SW Projects

Sara Wilson:

Sara Wilson is a recognized authority on GenZ, digital trends, and building online communities.



The big social media platforms that have dominated everyday life for a generation are now becoming a giant melting glacier.

Slowly, silently, almost imperceptibly people are drifting away from those platforms to seek refuge in more private social spaces where they can have closed door conversations out of earshot from everyone except those they trust the most.

The era of “performative sharing” – of calling attention to even the most banal moments in your life – of waiting anxiously to see how many “likes” you got – may finally, mercifully, be coming to an end.

People are suffering from social fatigue. From the barrage of meddlesome posts inserted into their feeds from brands and influencers. From toxic content that stirs up negativity and indignation. From the feeling that Big Brother is looking over their shoulder.

Yet most people still want to connect online with friends, with friends of friends, with their social circle. They are driven by the

tribal instinct to “belong”. Instead of showing off in front of people, they are choosing to gather in closed niche communities where they can be more themselves. A place where they can chat openly with like-minded people who share their values, their interests, their lifestyle, their passion points, and yes, their world view, without fear of being judged or mocked.

GenZ is leading the way. Their preferred method of communicating with their closest friends is by far DM messaging apps like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram. And an estimated one fifth of GenZers now use the micro-community platform Discord which has over 200 million active users worldwide and 7 million servers that host a diverse range of communities. Users connect through text, voice, and video and spend on average four hours a week on the platform just hanging out.

This shift in social media habits has begun to wall off brands from a coveted demographic cohort. Whereas Facebook has always been a low-cost way to reach a target audience (and remains so), brands are beginning to realize that they have to find another way to connect with people or eventually be shut out of their digital lives. The answer, for many brands, has been to build communities of their own from scratch. According to one study, 80% of businesses report having a community program of some kind, if for no other reason than to provide customer support. But the brands that have been most successful at community building - that have built vibrant, engaged, devoted communities - have done so as part of a broader relationship building strategy.

Look at Salesforce with its massive Trailblazer Community – Sephora with its Beauty Insider program – LEGO Ideas which counts on the enthusiasm of their fans to come up with new product ideas – or at any of the activity-related communities like Peloton

Facebook Groups, Nike's Run Club, and Lululemon's Member program, to name just a few.

Of course those brands have the marketing savvy and budget to invest in building a passionate fanbase. They are careful to earn the trust of community members. They allow engagement between members to grow organically. They give the program room to breathe, having won the support of upper management. Which is why many communities start small and stay that way – just too many hurdles to overcome with too few resources.

An easier approach, suggests community evangelist Sara Wilson, is to show up in the communities where your target audience is already gathering, whether that's group chats, forums, subreddits, or private Discord servers. Sara has memorably and famously dubbed them "digital campfires", meaning intimate settings where people go to hang out. But in order for brands to join those conversations, they first need to be seen as partners, not interlopers, as creative contributors, not promoters, as event collaborators, not just sponsors. Tough to do for most brands, trained to hunt, not to mingle.

Sara is a former journalist specializing in lifestyle and culture with a keen observant eye who tracks the evolving world of community building through her incisive Substack newsletter "Community Catalyst". Her consultancy, SW Projects, specializes in helping brands adapt to a world where, as she puts it, "real purchasing decisions happen in the online rooms they're not in".

After a decade or so as a journalist, Sara joined Facebook in 2018 where she led strategic partnerships in the lifestyle category. I started by asking Sara what prompted her to veer off her chosen career path to join Facebook.

SW

Sara Wilson (SW): It's funny, I don't see it as different. I've always been really interested and attracted to being where conversations are happening. So I started my career in magazines and newspapers. At the time, the Zeitgeist was really firmly in print, right? In magazines, in newspapers, people were having conversations that often originated there, started there. So I was really excited about being there. Then that shifted to digital media. So that's when, about 2010, I went to Huffington Post because I saw that conversation shifting to digital media. And then the same thing happened in 2013 and I saw that conversation shifting to social. So it really wasn't different. It was more where are conversations happening and how is that evolving and how can I chase that?

And so that's how I ended up at Facebook, Instagram and, and it was a really interesting time when I joined the company. You know, it was still, it wasn't quite a startup, but it wasn't quite a big company yet. So it was at this really wonderful inflection point. The company Facebook had just bought Instagram about a year earlier and it was still largely untapped in terms of what are we going to do with it. And so I got to really have that app as a playground of sorts to really experiment and figure out how to build a culture-first brand and drive growth with, you know, tapping into culture. So that was really an unbelievable opportunity.

SS

Stephen Shaw (SS): Now your background was journalism...

SW

Yes.

SS

...as we spoke about, but no marketing experience as far as I can tell.

SW

Mhmm.

SS

Was that all new to you as well, this brand new world of digital marketing, Facebook marketing?

SW

I actually never thought of it that way because the way that I understand brands and marketing is that they are many media companies. So when you approach brand building in that way as building a media company, I had lots of experience. I had lots of experience building audience first strategies, understanding how to connect with audiences. And so as the landscape really shifted to be more towards brands as media companies, I was quite well positioned to take advantage of that. And I sort of saw the writing on the wall with that happening quite early on. But you're absolutely right, I don't come from a traditional marketing background and I often, I've had to learn and bring myself up to speed on what are some of those traditional things like the "funnel". Like, I never learned about that, you know, so it's all new to me.

SS

Well, there's an expression, and most marketers are accidental marketers, so...

SW

Yeah.

SS

...it's not really a handicap. Did you find Facebook or did they find you?

SW

I found them. It was actually through a friend of a friend who was running partnerships there, I believe in public figure partnerships in politics or that something related

to that. And I went and had lunch with her and I learned about what she did. I went onto campus and this was up in Menlo Park and I was just really intrigued. And obviously Facebook is a fascinating place to work if you are interested in aligning with culture, getting inside tech. It was just a really compelling opportunity and there wasn't an opening at the time that I had lunch with her, but I just stayed close and eventually there was. And so it really was a combination of just being right place, right time, but also being pretty proactive about that opportunity.

SS There would have been a ton of learning, obviously.

SW Mhmmm.

SS So you were there four years, I think?

SW Five, almost five.

SS And working on Instagram through that whole time?

SW No, so about the first two years I focused almost exclusively on Instagram. So the way that it works at Facebook and the way career pathing works there, at least in my experience, was you really have to build your own career, make your own way. So you're hired for this kind of remit, but you have to build the strategy for how to really deliver within that. And so that's exciting to me because I'm really self directed and I like that.

So it might mean that you're deprioritizing certain things within that remit. So for about two years, the opportunity to my mind was really doubling down on driving growth for Instagram and driving cultural awareness for Instagram, and making Instagram the number one social platform for fashion was the way we did that.

And so came on board, saw this opportunity with Instagram being kind of, I would say, organically embraced in a nascent way by the fashion community. And that was exciting because there was a lot of small signs that that was happening. But we really didn't know at that time that if we threw fuel on the fire of it, it could explode so much. So it was really a bet. It was a bet in saying we think we can really dial into this community and help them feel seen, help them feel known, and really speak directly to them and deprioritize a lot of other things. And in so doing that drive kind of outsize impact and that's a... That mechanic of really dialing into a core community and making them feel seen and known and loved is really my core thesis of how

I believe marketing... The best marketing happens today. (10.49)

SS

We're obviously going to spend a lot of time talking about that. So you left after five years, you said.

SW

Mhmmm.

SS

And just quick summary. What were the key learnings that you took away? Was it this idea that there's richness in community building?

SW

I think that was my number one. I think I learned that communities and community in general can be so powerful. And also remember that this was the rise of all things creator. I ran lifestyle partnerships, so I was in charge of all creator relationships, across food, fashion, home, health, travel, all of those lifestyle categories. I think another big learning is that those categories are often at the forefront of all major changes in industry and they're so often underestimated. And my belief is because they are female led. Oftentimes those categories which I just mentioned are female led, right? [Chefs] and fitness influencers, et cetera, et cetera. And they are not given their proper credit until you have the big podcasters coming in and doing the exact same thing, 10 years later. And it is really quite something how suddenly they're taken seriously. So I definitely think that was a big learning and I kind of learned to anticipate that in future and kind of go, okay, people aren't going to take XYZ seriously. People aren't going to take community seriously. And that's okay because that's usually the pattern. I just have to hold onto it.

SS

That's a fascinating revelation. And is that what took you to start your own consultancy in 2018 I think?

SW

Yeah, it was in 2018. So I'd been there for five years. Facebook had really changed a lot. I am not a big company girl. Like I thrive in, I would say medium sized to small environments where I can kind of do my own thing. And Facebook, Instagram, and I say Facebook Instagram because it really did operate like two separate companies, now it's much more cohesive. But really just let me do what I wanted, build strategy. I was in New York when I wanted to meet with Vogue or the social team at XYZ or [?]. Like I did, I ran that strategy as I wanted and delivered results. As long as I was delivering results, I could kind of do it as I wanted. That changed as the company grew. Things shifted and I just felt like this isn't the place where I'm going to thrive anymore. And so I started looking elsewhere, because

I knew that I could just deliver the value in different ways elsewhere in ways that are going to be fulfilling to me. I definitely saw the writing on the wall in terms of brands behaving like media companies. So what I was saying earlier about kind of like having a media background, I knew that I could be very helpful in helping brands to navigate that because I saw that happening. Brands were, you know, leading movements, brands were leading social conversations and not just in that ham fisted way of like, you know, sponsorships or whatnot, which is fine, but it's not. I really meant like people returning to brands as like a north star to be arbiters of truth. And that has everything to do with where the culture is, given that our institutions are crumbling, and all kinds of reasons. But I found it to be super interesting and I knew that would only expand. So that's why I left with that remit that I think I can do this. And obviously, what I do has really evolved. But that's the reason I originally left to go build that on my own.

SS

Wow, and everything you're describing is really leaning into the future of marketing. And we're going to get into that subject, as well. So let's just take a step back for a second. I mean, you were on the ground floor of Facebook basically during its formative years, to a large extent.

SW

I don't know about ground floor. I was kind of like medium floor. Like, you know, I wasn't there and there, but I definitely. From when I joined to when I left the company had grown by, I think it was 98%. Like, I was like the 98% most longest employee, which was crazy because I had only been there five years. So you have to understand the growth was happening really quickly. I think that's the bigger factor. (15.02)

SS

That's true. So let's take a step back and look at social media generally, where it is today versus where it was even back then. I mean, the promise of social media was a town square where people could commingle. And we all know what that initial, you know, perhaps utopian vision was. Instead, we know what it is today, this is a sprawling town hall where people are shouting at each other. You say that the era of social media is ending. How do you see it evolving?

SW

I don't know if it's ending so much as evolving. What I observed in 2020 and that I wrote about in the Harvard Business Review was a piece called "The Era of Anti-Social Social Media". And I think that's what you're referring

to. In that piece, I sort of gave voice and gave a name to a trend that I had observed that was backed by data and still very much is, of younger audiences moving away from open social platforms. So open social, that would be like Instagram, Facebook, et cetera. And the name that I gave to that of what are they going towards was smaller, more intimate platforms such as Discord, such as Roblox, even WhatsApp. And I called those types of platforms "digital campfires". And I looked at the three types of digital campfires, the sort of, like, I separated them into three types depending on how people gathered there. And then I looked at how brands were showing up there in these kind of early experiments.

And since I introduced that, since I kind of put my stake in the ground around digital campfires, I would say the concept has metastasized from just a platform trend to kind of a way the internet exists. Everything is niche now. Everything is a digital campfire. We are sort of living in this digital campfire era where all around us, the way we experience culture, the way we experience every aspect of society is now niche upon niche upon niche. Intimate is the way. So I think it's been really interesting to see that move from just a platform trend in the space of five years to essentially a paradigm of our online and offline existence, for better or for worse.

SS

So the motivation, and you say specifically with younger audiences, meaning Gen Zed or if you're living in the US obviously, Gen Zee.

SW

I love that, yeah.

SS

Yeah, do you find yourself crossing over between those two expressions or no?

SW

No, you know what? I've had to train myself. It's hilarious. I had to train myself out of the Zed. But I love that. I hear that. So I'm going to use it for the duration of this podcast. I love it.

SS

Thank you. But let's go back to the digital campfire concept.

SW

Yeah.

SS

I was going to ask you to really explain what that means. You've got the three types you just described the concept of micro communities. I get it. The shift from people feeling they've gone through this era of oversharing, which maybe you described millennials in that way, to Gen Z wanting more private conversations, more intimate conversations.

What are the three types of digital campfires?

SW

So there's three types based on the reasons people are gathering there. And this is how I sort of like understand them. So the first is private messaging campfires. That's pretty self-explanatory. So that might be Instagram DM, that might be - there's a platform called Community which is a, where you can kind of text at scale. That would be a private messaging campfire, any kind of DM, private messaging, WhatsApp, et cetera. Then there are micro community campfires. So that is communities based on shared interests, shared hobbies, where you have specific people coming together around those things to share, you know, swap ideas, think about, you know, all the things that are connected to that. Then you have shared experience campfires where they're actually having an experience together. So that's oftentimes it's, it's a gaming experience. So a Roblox, a Fortnite, etc. I put micro community campfires, probably the best example right now is like a Reddit. Subreddits are great example of hyper, hyper specific micro communities that come together around the most niche of topics.

SS

So there's private messaging, which is group chats, people texting each other.

SW

Yeah.

SS

Whether it's WhatsApp or, or what not.

SW

Yup.

SS

There's micro communities - you describe Reddit, which is, or a subreddit which is infinite number of topics already. And then the other idea is, it seems to me, it's more asynchronous, like it's a, it might be a one time event, but there are other types of micro communities I think of. I mean you gave the example in a recent, some examples in recent blogs of these sorts of, of micro communities. I'm thinking of Swa... I think it's "Swang", the golfing community that you described.

SW

Yeah.

SS

That's an interesting one because it also crosses over into this new media concept, right? (20.03)

SW

Absolutely. So Swang is a great example. So just for your listeners, that is a community I recently profiled in my newsletter. My newsletter is called Community Catalysts where I look at, often look at what are some

of these communities that are popping up. Swang is, it's a golf community that is really devoted to getting underrepresented voices into golf, but not such an earnest approach as I just described. It's really fun, it's really vibey. And the person who started it, it used to work I believe at Def Jam Records, like he has a music pass. So it just has brought in his whole culture forward sensibility. And I really believe that the next wave of these communities, not only is IRL in real life, so offline, but are really, really being built like media companies. So the way that the founder of Swang is envisioning this community is much more than just a meetup, you know, just, or a group. This is about creating multi-platform content. This is about getting membership experiences. So it's a big vision that is akin to a media company. So I believe the next wave of media companies are going to start as communities.

SS

Now where I get a little confused is the distinction between a digital campfire and a community. Because it strikes me that in some cases communities can spawn digital campfires all on their own. And so I think about Glossier, which has its own set of micro communities. I think of even Nike with its running clubs, ton of event-based types of communities there. Do you draw a hard distinction or do you see them being different somehow?

SW

Well, digital campfires is my term that I came up with - community - and I've applied it typically to platforms. So when I'm talking about what it refers to, it's usually specific to a platform. So it describes a type of way of communicating online. Whether it's, you know, those, one of those three types: experience, you know, micro community or private messaging. But community, the term, I do find to be, that's like the term people know. So I have kind of fallen back on using that a lot more. And what I talk about now is something called community-powered brands. So when I build brands, when I approach the brand building space with my clients or just in my writing to talk about it, I talk about tapping into existing communities. So a run club, a Swang community for brands to tap into. As long as they align with the audiences that they want to reach, they can really drive tremendous attention and loyalty, among other things for their brand.

And so I do find that, like, when I use digital campfires, that term, I do have to explain it because it's not like a widely understood term. So I found that, yes, it's great, it was great

for first outing for me, but I've stepped away from doing a lot on the digital campfires front because I do want to include more people in this conversation who maybe are not familiar with that.

So what is the difference? A community is a group of people who are united by what I call identity seeds. So values, beliefs, ideas, sometimes fears, things that bring them together around certain aspects of their identity. And it could be online or off. Communities, I do believe, you know, that are what we're seeing online. They do start as conversations, and then sometimes they'll bubble up into communities, movements, etc. So I think that a community can take shape as a digital campfire. So you could have a community that has a Discord, for example, or a community that has a WhatsApp. That would be the digital campfire, kind of like expression of a community, if that makes sense.

SS

So are there communities that fall outside your definition? So immediately I think of where largely communities, for the most part, were formed by companies, which is as a support tool for their customers. Are they disqualified as a community simply because they're serving a corporate function? Or can they be a subset of a broader community? How does that work? Is that, how does that work exactly?

SW

You bring up a really interesting point. First off, this is a very confusing term that a lot of - it's such a hot term - anytime something is thrown around, I think there's bound to be like, a lack of understanding. I think that companies have taken the build a community mandate remit, and said, okay, cool, we need to launch a Slack channel. And they've done that, and oftentimes it does not work. It does not, you know, drive engagement, and it takes up a lot of resources. And so I think when I looked at the community landscape and thought, where can I add value? What I saw was a lot of this community conversation and that being the directive for brands.

So the community conversation, like, okay, brand X, build a community. And that means you have to start a standalone, whatever- channel but what I found was a brands don't always need to do that. They don't have the resources to do that. And so my like approach is much more about tapping into existing communities to drive your goals. Like what are your goals as a brand? They're usually going to be around some combination of attention, relevance, and loyalty. That's what brands come to me for. So I realized

what's the solve for that. It's not starting a Discord necessarily. Nine times out of ten it'll be about going into an existing Discord where your audience is or going into an existing community digital campfire where your audience is and figuring out how to show up there in a way that is going to help your audience feel seen and track back to your brand goals. So that is the difference.

And I, it's stuff that I don't include, like Salesforce has you know launched a very successful - like notoriously very successful - SaaS-like community for years and had that had community - they were very early on. So it's not to dismiss the ones that I have seen. It's more that, typically when I'm talking about this I'm talking about organic communities that have not been started by brands and have bubbled up from the culture. That said I'm now seeing some incredible brand communities that are being started by brands, and I think those are also ripe for collaboration with other brands. So for example I think I've, I've written about the brand Sleep or Die which is actually based in Vancouver. Sleep or Die is a really interesting, cheeky, like it's starting as mouth tape, but the whole ethos of the brand is about kind of anti-hustle culture for Gen Z women. Anti, kind of like get your sleep, anti-hustle. And the founder has done an incredible job of tapping into and building her own community for the brand. So now I'm out there looking at her brand and going she would be a great community to partner with for other brands. So I do think that - and another example is one that I just wrote about today actually called NOYZ, N O Y Z and it's a kind of next gen perfume brand and they've also done an incredible job of building community. So when we say our brand communities like are some of them robust, never do we like, it's like yeah some are amazing and some have been incredible at building, but a lot just don't know where to start. And I want to be careful about recommending the start a community thing because I think it's misinterpreted a lot. (27.45)

SS

And we're going to get into that a little later on just what your playbook is around that. But I just want to be sure I'm understanding you correctly. You're advocating for brands that aren't necessarily, not haven't necessarily started their own communities to start with, finding existing communities somehow...

SW

Yeah.

SS

...entering the conversation. You're not suggesting that brands though, shouldn't start one from scratch. You're just saying there's an order here, a sequence that you need to follow.

SW

Yeah, or that there's a yeah, if. And absolutely not if it makes sense. But what I'm saying is it doesn't always make sense for a lot of brands. And when I say - and also the way to start one from scratch is not simply to launch a Slack channel. Like I think you look at brands like Sleep or Die, you look at brands like NOYZ and you realize, oh my gosh, community is multi-platform, it's multidisciplinary. It's not just one thing. And that's what I think, the conversation about community has really been limited until recently on this idea of like, community has launched a Slack channel. And I do not believe that.

SS

Communities have become pervasive. I mean there's like thousands and thousands and thousands of brand communities out there now. Now many of them also struggle with growth. What are the major obstacles, from your perspective, that stand in the way of a community growing, becoming vibrant, becoming a truly organic part of the business growth of a company? What do you think are the main obstacles in the way of success here?

SW

Well, when you talk about community, like which, what are you talking about? Are you talking about? Because I think I just like, help me understand.

SS

Well, I think. Well, that's the challenge, isn't it? There's all kinds of different types of communities, aren't there?

SW

Mhmm.

SS

And even if they're operating under a brand, it may be a community that's set up specifically to serve existing customers that are really an extension of loyalty and loyalty building. It could be promoting advocacy, it could be finding brand ambassadors. I could go on. It takes various shapes and forms, but the general truth is that those communities, as far as I've read, and maybe you can correct me here, most of them struggle getting resourced properly, having enough people to man the dialogue that has to go on, it's extremely time-intensive, et cetera, a lot of resources. And it's hard to prove the connection between that and the bottom line of a company. (30.11)

SW

Absolutely, so the way that I see this is most brand communities are just sort of customer channels. They're

customer channels for people to get customer service. They are not communities. They're not places where people go to connect with other like minded people who share similar identity seeds. And that is the fundamental misunderstanding that I think most brands have when they are talking about community. Nobody's going to just join-your-fill in the blank because you believe they like your brand. There has to be something bigger.

And that's why when we're thinking about community, we always have to go back to what is the bigger belief system that your brand taps into. It's not just a product anymore. We have to think about what is the bigger idea, the transformation that your brand can spark. So when I'm working with the brands, my clients, we actually, before we do anything on community or audience, we go back to what I call building a community magnetic blueprint. And the blueprint process actually gets us to a place where we're defining what is the brand belief, what is the transformation that you spark, what is the core emotional values that you offer and who are you for. So once we get that in a blueprint and I just, I call it that because it is really the thing that is going to make you magnetic to organic communities or enable you to build your own. Basically that's essential because nobody's going to come if you have not really done that work for yourself and ask those questions of yourself.

SS

That ladders up into the whole brand purpose discussion, doesn't it?

SW

It does, yeah. It's connected. I think the brand purpose discussion has gotten very confusing. I, I, I, everybody why? No, brands don't need a purpose. They do need a purpose. I honestly don't care. I just can tell you, I happen to know what makes people go to communities and it is a sense of identity and connection to something bigger than themselves. They need a transformation. So your brand has to deliver that.

People go into community for a transformation. They want to, when I say transformation, I mean they want to, for example, feel like they can be an XYZ version of themselves by going into your community. By going into this community, I am going to become a better parent, Dr. Becky for example. By going into this community, I am going to become a menopausal woman who is like loving life instead of one who's hating it, Mary Claire Haver. So like thinking about some of these reasons people go into

community. So if you're going to show up, you meaning the brand, in that community, you also have to have a brand... have to be a brand that sparks a transformation. So you really need to be thinking, what is the transformation our brand sparks? So how can we match what is already being done in the community?

SS

It's interesting because it's a paradigm switch from searching for brand advocates to being an advocate of what customers' values are. Like it's a total switch in mindset.

SW

Hmm. Explain, explain. Tell me a little more.

SS

I mean where brands are, they're looking for advocates, ambassadors, people type - influencers, whatever the case may be, to promote the brand. What you're seem to be suggesting is that, no, the better approach is, is for a brand to stand for something and to draw to it the people who share that value share that identity...

SW

Yes.

SS

...and be an advocate for them and their interests.

SW

Yes. Well, it's just going to be a lot easier. I don't think one or the other is better. If you can do it the first way, great. But I'm saying that you're going to create an army of evangelists if you do it the way that I'm suggesting. Because people will create and share word of mouth. You know, I want to talk about word of mouth actually for a second...

SS

Sure.

SW

...because you know, you hear about this very old fashioned way of marketing, but it is incredibly powerful. When you hear something from a friend, you immediately, it bypasses all your filters and it goes straight into like whatever, your limbic system and you're like, cool, great, I trust this, I trust this recommendation. So as a marketer we have to be thinking of how can we get people to share it, even more so now, because the number one way people use social, according to Statista, which tracks such things, is DM.

So people are private messaging on social more than any other behaviour. Therefore as a marketer, you need to be thinking, how do you get inside those DMs? How do you get inside the group chat? The only way, unless there's some magic way that I don't know, is to get people to take you there. You need to get people to take you there. And so how do you get people to take you there? You need to tap into some aspect of their identity. Oh my God. OMG, that's so me. I'm going to share it with friends. I call it the "OMG

that's so me effect". And it's the thing that's going to get your brand into the group chat, into the DM. (35.15)

SS

I love your expression in one of your blogs that people don't trust the platforms they're on, but they trust the people who are on the platforms.

SW

So interesting, right? That came out as an insight out of something, but I thought it was fascinating too.

SS

Yeah.

SW

Yeah.

SS

Well I mean it also speaks to why Net Promoter Score is a key metric because that really is based on whether people are willing to recommend or not. I want to move on to another interesting development. And you use the term, and you're really good at coining terms, by the way.

SW

Love a term, love a term.

SS

So one of them you came up with, and I loved it, is this concept of "narrative engineering". And this spins off the whole Cracker Barrel controversy where - and you point out this, first I've read this anywhere about fake profiles, bots really creating this illusion of outrage. And the only defense against that, you make a point of, is what you're - again, another phrase of yours - to create a community immune system.

SW

Mmhmm.

SS

First of all, can you just give people a little background on that, may not as be familiar with the concept of narrative engineering or engineered outrage and what you mean by this community immune system.

SW

I'll just preface this by saying I'm not an expert in disinformation and bots. That is a whole area of the landscape that there are many, many more folks than I who have expertise in that area. The reason that I brought myself into this conversation through the piece that you saw, where I chronicled the kind of rise of bot conversations, fake conversations, around Cracker Barrel and around the American Eagle controversies, is because I have been tracking the rise of disinformation on the Internet for quite some time. Largely, it's been relegated to the realm of politics. It's been relegated to public affairs. You know the drill, right? We've seen this come up around elections. This is no secret. And so I was really curious when I, when I started to see, at the beginning of, you know, a couple

months ago, around the Cracker Barrel stuff, the Sydney Sweeney, something just felt very off to me with how that conversation just popped so intensely so quickly. And I wondered, huh, is the company, you know, is the tracking company that I look to, for intel about this, about elections and disinformation, have they tracked companies? And I completely, out of the blue, went on their site and in fact, they had two reports, one on Cracker Barrel and one on the Sydney Sweeney and American Eagle. And I was riveted.

I read them and basically what they said was that in both instances - Cracker Barrel more than American Eagle - there was a very heavy concentration, a not inconsequential concentration of bots, of fake profiles driving the conversation. So driving negative sentiment, driving positive sentiment, essentially ramping up the online discourse in the same way that we've seen about around elections and politics. This is new. This is fairly new, but it is getting a lot more common, at least in the last 12 to 18 months. And so this company that I cite these reports from Sciabra, tracks this and had done this study. And so I wrote about it.

SS

Who's behind the outrage machine though?

SW

So I don't have an answer for that. I think in the piece, uh, you know, it's gosh, there's bad actors who want to sow discontent in our, in our country. I, again, I am not a disinformation expert. I do think I have a little explainer from - because I asked that question - when I interviewed the CMO of Sciabra and he did provide a little bit of explanation. But it's definitely something to go deeper on. I don't know. But we do know that this exists and this is happening. And so what I say is the way that you can prevent this type of thing from happening is A, understand you probably can't, but you can head it off proactively by developing something I call "community immune system". And what that is is actually investing in building your community, investing in knowing your people, investing in showing up in the spaces where they are with real interactions and building real relationships so that when, if and when, these kinds of things, controversies hit you, you will know the difference between real sentiment and fake sentiment.

I think what's so hard for brands to understand and know is that if they lose touch with their people, they don't know what's real, what's fake. They don't know how to parse

that. And if, you know, this doesn't feel right and we don't actually have to respond because we know this isn't being driven by our people. Because this is not how our people sound. This is not what they say. If you know your people so well and you've spent time with them in those spaces, then when those things happen, you don't have to be as concerned. (40.17)

SS

Well, and I suppose the other part of it, I guess we saw a bit of this with the whole Jimmy Kimmel thing, is your fans will come to your defence too.

SW

Exactly, so I actually saw this long before the bot conversation came to play. We saw it with things like Chipotle. Do you remember years ago when Chipotle had like this crazy lawsuit with somebody. I don't know if they died. Don't quote me, it was E. Coli related or like Salmonella rela... it was a really bad food, like contamination issue.

SS

They won. Yeah.

SW

Yeah, this is not like low key. This was really bad. And in the subsequent years, months and years, Chipotle doubled down on building out its community and social, really with social first conversation and driving really smart social conversation. They did a lot of really clever things. Everything from launching a Discord job fair to launching a standalone private finstat to test content. They just really invested in their community and they created this patina, this sort of like halo effect that drowned out the negative noise.

And so had this been a moment of bots where like bots piled onto them, they would have - and again it was pre that - but they would have been able to parse that because they know they have all this love, they have all this organic sentiment and love. And they know generally what their community is saying, feeling and doing. So that's when I talk about the community immune system. So that when sickness in the form of fake, you know, attacks hits, you can be much more immune to it. You will weather it much better in the same way that you, you can weather it if you're drinking vitamins every single day until you get exposed to the flu.

SS

Well, you can offer counterproof to executive management who's panicking.

SW

Exactly, exactly. That's another. Exactly.

SS

Right? The whole thing.

SW

Exactly. Yes.

SS

I want to get into the, a bit of the meat and potatoes. And I realize, I mean you, you have a quite a specific and important focus around this concept of more intimate, smaller groups having authentic conversations, tapping into people's passions, making passion points the focus of the brand. All of that is really pushing the boundaries of where marketing should go and we'll come back to that. But let's just get into meat and potatoes a little bit because you cater to small and medium sized businesses. Many of them I'm sure are coming to you to say, well, how do I even begin? But the other question I have, and I want to come back to that too, but how do companies organize around community?

So many of them throw the community manager into the marketing department, some throw it into CX, some throw it into the communications area, and some make it a standalone, although that's a small minority. What's your recommendation? The best way an organization can set itself up for success in terms of the remit of that community group and who it should report to.

SW

The times I've seen it work best is when it comes right from the top. When you have a CMO who is invest - and the CEO - who is invested in this as a business driver. And sees it as a huge value add, not kind of a sideline. By the way, the same goes for social. I've seen, you know, when it's sidelined, it's just not going to perform as well. Duolingo did not become Duolingo by sidelining social. So same goes for community. In the piece that I just wrote today, on N O Y Z, NOYZ, the CMO from the beginning said, hey, what if we prioritized our community and really made them feel seen? And everything flowed down from that insight.

So that's where I've seen it work best. Now directionally, like, how do you actually bring that to life? You can be best served with a social manager because they're going to be first on the ground, right? A community manager, someone who's actually looking at what are those community insights bubbling up. But I also encourage the teams I work for to divide and conquer. If you're doing social listening on Reddit, have each key marketing team member take a couple of hours a week, not even, 20 minutes a week, to go on Reddit and listen and learn what your community

is saying, just for one platform for example. It could be YouTube, if your community is mostly in YouTube comments. I'm not saying it has to be Reddit, but you want to be listening. You want to be learning on a regular basis across your team to digest those insights. And then get together once a week to say, what's the most interesting community insight you learned so that you can compile them and share. *(45.00)*

SS

I want to focus on that for a second because you also say that you make the statement the gathering of market intelligence is fundamentally broken. So pick up on your point that community listening is actually a richer source of insight. And you wrote a whole blog around Reddit's recent initiatives to sort of package this insight for brands. Can you elaborate a little bit on what you're seeing there?

SW

Yeah so and like, once again, as I don't come from a marketing background, I don't come from a traditional social listening background, so I've had to learn that. So forgive me if I'm not exactly aligned in the right terminology. What I noticed is that social listening focuses on mentions, so it's kind of like media monitoring. So you're listening for how are people talking about your brand? The problem is, with different ways, right? Like hashtags or monitoring the related topics. The problem is that most people don't talk on social. Most people are just there to watch, to consume. They're not talking. So you're missing what they believe. So I have two key ways to address that that I've come up with that I'm working on more.

The first is an analysis I have called Audience Atlas, which is looking at a, essentially a segment, a slice of your social following. Let's take Instagram, for example. We'll take a slice of your followers and look at what they follow to determine what are some insights we can tease out from that based on what are the accounts that they're over indexing on. And so I've run those Audience Atlas reports for several brand clients at this point, including Headspace and Soul Cycle and, oh gosh, Nest New York. And the output is just really fascinating identity intelligence about their existing audience. And those might be people who've never said a word on their Insta, right? So that's number one.

Number two is the most interesting identity intel. The most interesting intelligence is often coming up out of platforms that are not showing up on traditional social listening. So it might be a Discord channel, it might be a WhatsApp.

You have to join those places to listen and find out what people are saying. You cannot get them because they're closed. You know, traditional social listening does not pull in private Facebook groups, but you can manually join them and listen. Reddit, I believe a lot of social listening does, but it still requires a finer hand to go in, listen to conversations, really understand what's happening. And so I call that digital campfire reporting, where you're actually going inside the spaces and places where your audience hangs out to understand what are they worried about, what are their pain points, what are they excited about, what makes them tick, what's the language that they speak? All of that stuff is not typically being captured in traditional social listening or although I do see that changing with a few key players who are super smart leading the way, and I'm learning from them every day.

SS

Well, and I have to think AI will play a big role here because the volume, I have to think Reddit's already thinking about using AI to...

SW

Yeah.

SS

...to synthesize the volume of information that's available out there and as I say, basically repackaging it for brands. But the other part of this, which to me is the most intriguing part frankly, about building a community, is it gives you the opportunity to collect direct feedback from the people that are most important to your business, which is your own customer.

SW

Exactly.

SS

Right?

SW

Exactly, yeah.

SS

And open the door for them to feed you ideas or comment on ideas or rank those ideas, et cetera. You know, move away from focus groups into actual direct conversations with people who trust the brand and you trust them.

SW

Yeah, exactly.

SS

Hmm. So in the time remaining here, make sure that we talk about your startup playbook. You've referenced a few branded companies. Can you just take me through what that looks like, how you, well if somebody comes along, knocks on the door tomorrow and says, help me out with this, what's that playbook look like? Does it begin with finding shared passions, building a community around them,

cultivating relationships, et cetera? What's the life cycle that you recommend to clients? (49.16)

SW

So I have a few different ways I work with brands and the key brands that I, the size I work with is usually mid-size to larger, so 35 million to let's say 300 million annual revenue. And I say that because the work I do is really "strategy sprint". And I need the brand I work with to have a team to execute. I give them all the tactical implementation guidelines and strategic guidelines, but I am not executing. So I want to make sure that my strategy gets delivered and gets executed. So that's why I tend to work with those mid sized to larger brands.

I have an eight week sprint that I run brands through called the Community Catalyst. And what we do is there's three parts. It's called Fuel Up, Calibrate, and Engage. For the first, we build their brand blueprint, their community relevance blueprint I mentioned. That's phase one. We make sure we get really clear on who they are, what they stand for and who they're for. Then we go into an audience exercise where I really go deep on who they need to get in front of. Okay, we know generally who they're for, but what are those micro audiences we need to get in front of? And for that we look at a variety of clues, including who is in their current following and how can I analyze that to discern who might be most receptive to their messages? We really go deep on audience and we also define the communities, where those audiences are hanging out. Then in the third section of that, the third phase, we bring it to life. And I build them what's called a Community-powered Flywheel where I take each community that we've decided on, where their audience is, and I build out a social plan, a partnerships plan, a IRL events plan, and a creator plan. So essentially what you're doing is you're taking all four parts, all of those four elements, and driving it towards like how to build essentially a whole ecosystem for the brand around that key community. How do you embed them in that community? And so that's what I see as the future of brand partnerships and brand, sort of like awareness. Because that system together, that eight week sprint, is essentially a roadmap for driving attention, relevance and loyalty among traditionally Gen Z audiences primarily. But I also do work with some older. So that's kind of piece one.

Piece Two is I have something called Audience Atlas, which is a analysis of the identity signals within your current

social following. And again, I've done that for brands like Bobby Formula or Nest or Headspace, a bunch now, and I can share details about that with you afterwards to put in the show notes. And I also have my newsletter where I just write all these deep dive case studies for my readers because I'm obsessed with this, as you might be able to tell. But what I'm seeing is there's a growing desire to really understand all of this and what this space looks like. And really not just what's happening, but how to do it yourself.

SS

That's the journalism coming out in you.

SW

That's right, that's right, yeah, yeah. And that's, my newsletter is now on Substack. It's called Community Catalysts with an S.

SS

And it's fun to read. It's very, of course, very well written, as you would expect.

SW

Thank you.

SS

I want to just close out our conversation today with coming back to a sort of broader discussion of the new marketing model. Now, appreciating the fact that you know, you're not a, you weren't a marketer to start with. You've absorbed enough in your, in your time now to have to have some insight into where all of this is going, where brand marketing is potentially going. But also what I found most interesting about everything you've been talking about is this convergence between the thing I believe in, which is the concept of relationship building, community building, that the really two are, and to some extent synonymous. The idea of identifying those shared passions, harnessing that emotion, harnessing those passions. It's a reciprocal relationship. Give me your vision for where brand marketing is going.

SW

I am so glad you brought this up because the way I understand community is really just a conduit for creating a relationship. It is the fastest, most powerful tool in your toolkit as a marketer, to build an intimate relationship with the exact audience you want to reach. And I call communities "PIPES", personal identity ports of entry, P I P E S. And that is because they connect deeply directly into people's core identity. And so when you do that right, you can build a very deep and lasting relationship with them. But you're absolutely right that relationship building is the point. That's the point and that's what we want to get to. And what the community does is just facilitate that. So that's what I see in the future, yeah.

SS

So marketing's role has largely been, for its history, demand generation. I mean it even is today, to be honest with you. So you ask a marketer what he's under most pressure, it's to deliver results tomorrow, not a year from now, not two years from now. Community building is a slow burn. Like it takes time for a community to mature. So how do you have this discussion when you're in talking to these companies - now appreciating the fact that they've asked you to come in, which means they're actually interested. But how do you convince a skeptical CEO and in a hurry CEO, a next quarter results CEO, that this is a good investment and you know, just beyond the standard ROI metrics. What's the business case here that you would present to a skeptical CEO? (54.50)

SW

I don't work with skeptical CEOs. I solve problems. Like I legitimately solve problems. So like I will always assess where, what is the problem that this business is having. So if it falls into the realm of challenges around attention, around creating relevant content or around loyalty, any of those, if I start to hear, you know, problems, complaints, issues in some, any of those areas, I will start to talk about community powered brand building as the solve. And then we will talk about how what I do solves that problem. But I am not here to convince anyone. If what you are doing is working for you, go forth. I have no problem with that. What I am here to help with is when it's not working, when it stops working, when you pick your head up and look at the marketing landscape and go, oh shoo, I don't think what we were doing or what we are doing is going to work in three months, five months, a year, or it hasn't been working, then they come to me.

So that's why I think the newsletter is really helpful. Because it shows people, what does this stuff look like in practice and also how fast it can happen. I mean I keep referencing NOYZ because it's on my mind, but that brand launched in February 2024. It's like a little over a year ago. And now they're in New York Fashion Week with lines around the block, doing really cool activations, massive social following, incredible engagement, sales through the roof. So it's not like this stuff takes, you know, years and years. It can happen quickly if you make an investment in it. So I believe it's more, what do you have to lose by not doing this? Like, what are you going to lose by delaying? And then usually people understand, okay, this is an

investment I want to make. But again, I'm not here to convince anybody they have to come to it on their own because things have gotten bad.

SS

And have you noticed a groundswell of interest more and more as we go along here?

SW

Absolutely. I don't know if it's just the moment we're in. Like, everybody is kind of looking for solutions because they see how broken the marketing landscape is with the chaos of current attribution models, the chaos of paid media, and all the changes that have happened to iOS, with just fracturing attention spans. Like all of the things that make this a very difficult marketing environment, are leading people to seek new solutions. And then they're seeing through my newsletter and others brands that are able to really break through and using these techniques. And so they're going, huh, that's interesting. I am banging my head against a wall. These techniques seem to work. Let's figure this out.

So I think the smart marketers are already aware that they have to pursue another path. And that's exciting. Cause that's who I want to work with. The ones who kind of know what they want to do or know what the problem is, but do not know how to solve it. And so I am here to help with the how. Because I think there's so many people out there, whether it's consultants or others, who are saying, look at these amazing case studies. I want to go deeper. I want to say, okay, this is how they did it and this is how you can too.

SS

Alright. So in short, the future of business and marketing really is community building.

SW

I believe it is. I believe it's building community-powered brands. And that's why I'm baking my entire professional future on it.

SS

Well, I want to thank you. This has been...

SW

Thank you.

SS

...illuminating to say the least. It's any where, I don't explore that often. But I also love the fact that there is this convergence factor - that the things I've been, you know, writing about and podcasting about for years is all around building relationships with customers. And this strikes me as the way companies have to go.

SW

You've clearly been prescient.

SS

I don't know about that, but I now measure instead of years, my age in "eras". So I've been through every one, going back to the...

SW

I love that! You're just like Taylor Swift, you have "eras".

SS

Exactly. Speaking of social media and community building.

SW

Exactly, exactly.

That concludes my interview with Sara Wilson. As we learned, a digital campfire is where people go to connect on a more intimate level with others just like them. A place where they can relax and be themselves, free from the pressure to showcase themselves. They might be drawn together by a shared identity – a shared pastime - a shared passion – a shared belief system: really anything they might have in common that makes it easy for them to feel accepted immediately. That might mean joining a Discord server or a Facebook Group – engaging in private group chats – contributing to a niche online community on Reddit – or participating in communal experiences like gaming or live events. This shift is being led mainly by a younger generation who have grown disenchanted and distrustful of the big social media platforms. So brands now face the dilemma of trading mass reach for authentic connections. But first brands have to earn the right to join those conversations, showing they are more interested in building relationships with people than in building and monetizing audiences.



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