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## CREATING A CULT FOLLOWING

*Successful cult memes induce intense social interaction behavior between cult members.*

— Author Keith Henson

I've been fascinated with the dynamics of cult followings, both destructive and benign, since I left the cult I grew up in. For companies and those who hope to develop growth most quickly and influentially, developing a cult following is a crucial undertaking.

Allow me to explain.

Cults are all about creating a community where like-minded people can share ideas and enthusiasm for those ideas or products. Let's look at some of the most successful business cults today:

- Scion
- Van's Shoes
- Jimmy Buffett Parrotheads
- Apple, Inc. (rapidly losing cult status)

- Harley Davidson
- Crocs Shoes
- Traeger Wood Pellet Barbecue Grills (growing cult status, but not of their own creation; it is consumer-developed)

Each of these companies has something in common. They have a highly dedicated group of people who are actively pursuing a lifestyle that the company or product promises. They find great emotional satisfaction from belonging and being a part of something bigger than themselves. These are not people who want to be perceived as different and alone. These people want to be perceived as being on the inside, part of something bigger than themselves that is fun and interesting. They want something that is different from their day-to-day reality that they can identify themselves with.

For many people, the groups they belong to are in some ways replacements for families that have become increasingly spread out and mobile. There is great comfort in being able to go someplace new and not be alone for long, because you can find a group that worships (I choose that word very intentionally) just like you do.

There are many obvious correlations between religion and cults. People join organizations to the extent that those organizations help them move closer and closer to self-actualization. They also gravitate to groups that actively recognize them. Go to Jimmy Buffett's web site ([margaritaville.com](http://margaritaville.com)) and see how much he interacts with his Parrotheads. Recognition builds connection, and connectedness creates evangelists who spread your message.

For the subliminal persuader, building a cult is essential, because your persuasion efforts can be directed at a much smaller

group of people. Those brand cultists will then do the hard work of spreading your message. When I wrote my first book, I had to develop a following. When I released the second book, it reached the sales of the first book in about a third of the time. I suspect that this book will exceed both of those in an even shorter period of time because of the group of people who have come together around my ideas on persuasion. Those people will spread the word faster than I ever could through advertising, PR, or any other method. They'll spread it more profitably because they'll give the book their personal endorsement, which is worth everything when it comes to making a buying decision.

### CONNECTEDNESS

One of the key reasons people join cults is to be part of a like-minded group. The most effective cult brands have a very formalized means for people to connect. They sometimes seed those efforts in the beginning, but they take on a life of their own as the groups grow.

People become part of a group because they are looking to have fun. They want to share their experiences using a product or service and they want to do it with like-minded individuals. This connectedness allows them to group and be different from the masses but have the support of others so that they don't feel alone.

#### **Subliminal Selling Secret**

Focus on building a following by creating a means for people to group. Harley did this effectively with their Harley Owners Group (HOG) and Apple did it with its Mac Users Group.

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Ask yourself how you can connect your users. Here are several ideas you can build on.

- Create an online group or forum
- Have an annual event that people can come to
- Create local or regional groups where like-minded people can connect. *Fast Company* magazine did this well with their Company of Friends. Just remember that there has to be an overriding theme that people are responding to, which has to evolve and remain interesting, or people will leave.

The real key to success is making sure that people have a venue for connecting with one another, not just with you. When you or a representative of the company connects in the groups, it should be a huge perk for the group; it should make them feel very special.

## **EXCLUSIVE ACCESS**

Followers want exclusive access to things that the general public doesn't get. This level of access can be as simple as getting advance notice of certain things or can be as detailed as being invited into focus groups or design meetings. They need to feel like they are contributing to the myth, and when they do, they extend the myth.

## **IDENTITY**

Followers are creating an identity for themselves based on the ideals that you or your product offers. It is very important that you build a powerful ideal with which they can connect.

Create a focus on showing people how to develop an identity that includes your ideals. Show them how that identity makes them better, more powerful, more complete. The more that they feel the identity is who they are, the more committed they will be in spreading your word.

Cult followings are the ultimate in subliminal persuasion because the members are visible and vocal. The information they share has the perception of being consumer generated (and often is). So, there is a natural perception that if everyone is doing it, then it must be the right thing to do. In many ways, cults are another form of social proof.

## **BUILDING THE CULT**

Building a cult following is not as difficult as it seems at first, but it does take specific effort.

1. Create an ideal that is bigger than you and bigger than the product. Have a worldview that people can get behind. These ideas should also include an element of excitement and fun. Make them big ideas that don't feel too hard to carry out. The reason that many nonprofits have a hard time getting big followings is that their worldview, even if good, is too much work and there's not enough "feel good" to make it appealing.
2. Create your first event and make it very public to your users. Your event should honor and elevate your users as the real heroes of the event. Put it on your web site, talk about it in the media. Let people who weren't a part of it know what it was like and what they missed. Let them know how they can become a part of what you are doing

- next. Encourage and support leadership that springs up from the group; help them help the group grow.
3. Educate your followers. Once the group starts to gain momentum, it is important to educate your followers. Give them more information about products, the company, and what is coming next. Share information about how others are using or benefiting from the product or service. Ask them to share their stories, make their stories key to the education of future members where appropriate.
  4. Make it fun. Create more activities, events, and ideas that make being a part of the group fun. Show them more and more ways that their activity is actually living the lifestyle that you promote. The more engaged they become, the deeper their commitment.
  5. Document their success. Have people take pictures, videos, and so on, of their gatherings or their uses of the product. Publicize those. Use social proof to make other people desirous of the experience that their peers are having.
  6. Tell them what they should be experiencing. Give people clues about their success in embracing the ideals that you promote. Tell them how they'll know that they've been successful. Connect them with others who are true believers so that they can be further inculcated with the spirit of the worldview.
  7. Give them a means of connecting to others. Show them how to get their friends involved. They should especially focus on people who are not already involved or even using the products, because they are valuable recruits. You can offer free product samples, trials, exclusive memberships based

on relationships, or any other number of inducements that can be offered by the followers to their friends.

8. Never stop praising them for their commitment. Be sure that you always acknowledge the value of the following you've created. By acknowledging their commitment and importance, you make them feel even more valued and a part of what you are all creating together.

## **LEADING YOUR CULT**

One of the challenges of charismatic cult leaders is that they often experience terrible falls in front of their followers. When they fail, they become seen as being mere mortals. This is a real challenge for the narcissistic personality that leads destructive cults. It destroys a vital self-belief that they can rarely regain.

Fortunately, leading brand cultists is quite different. They don't rely as much on a centralized leader as they do a centralized idea or worldview. But even long after the person who was out front is gone, if the worldview was big enough, it will continue. Look at Elvis fans; his following is stronger now than it was before he died. I visited Graceland as part of my study into benign cults and saw people openly weeping and acting in reverence of being in Elvis's home. I also saw people lying on top of the grave in the yard and weeping tears of very real grief. When Jimmy Buffett stops performing, the idea of Margaritaville will not go away; the Parrotheads will carry it on profitably for all of Jimmy's successors. Those people will keep forwarding the worldview that is so important to them.

Leading those people is a very critical role that someone has to play. Once you begin developing a following, you must have

a plan for how they will evolve. Left to their own devices, they may evolve in ways you wish they wouldn't, or worse, they lose interest.

It is critical to develop a visible spokesperson who embodies the ideas your followers are connecting with. It may be the CEO, but it often isn't; he may simply offer his support to the person who will lead the charge.

When you lead a group, cultists (or brand cultists) need to see the leader as the conduit to the source of their beliefs. That person should teach them, train them, reward them, and even occasionally scold them to get them to follow fully.

The plan that the leader lays out should include a consistent and frequent reminder of the worldview so that people remember what it was that they bought into. He should also always interject fun and excitement into the event and should be present at all major gatherings so that people get to touch and know him as a person.

There occasionally needs to be tension and a joint enemy. Introducing a threat to the sanctity of the group, and giving them something to fight for, makes the group more powerful. Be very careful with tension, though; don't introduce it just for the purpose of creating tension. On an ongoing basis, too much tension becomes tiresome. It is a balancing act to create just enough so that people feel committed to defending their belief, their way of life, and their products and services, but not so much that they just give up.

Leading the group also entails involving them at many levels. You should bring some trusted (read *carefully selected*) members of the group in for a higher level of interaction. You can do this through inviting them to focus groups or making



them beta testers or giving them first access to a new product so they can share it with the rest of their group.

Always let your followers know about new releases, new services, or problems first. Address the faithful first and they'll help you with everyone else. Where it is practical and possible, it is a great idea to give your faithful advance purchase opportunities, discounts, or other incentives for being part of the group. Or, you can create a limited edition that is available only to them for their faithful service.

Work on building your cult following early and focus on it often. The more that people can identify with you and what you are doing, your beliefs, and your way of life, the further your ideas will spread and the more influence you will have.

If you want to see even more of this idea in action, visit [subliminalpersuasionbook.com](http://subliminalpersuasionbook.com) and click on the link that says "Join my cult." This is a total insiders' group and most people who haven't read this book will be frightened off by it, but it is the only way to learn some of the most powerful brand cult-development tactics that I teach and use. Don't worry, you are perfectly safe, but you'll be shocked by the information I share there.

### **Implementation Is Everything**

#### ***Money Follows Action***

Before you read the next chapter, take the following actions:

- Carefully evaluate the people who are currently working with you or buying from you. Look at how you can create or leverage a worldview that you've already created to develop a rallying point. Once you've identified the rallying

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point, write out a plan for introducing your worldview and the idea of an event around it to get followers engaged.

- Ask yourself how you can engage your current customers or followers in getting more involved in your organization. Can they help you on a design, give you feedback on a soon-to-be released product, or become a beta tester?
- Begin developing your leader. If it is you, build on your existing persona. If the leader is not you, carefully craft what the leader will look like, what the message will be, and how you'll disseminate the message.
- Ask yourself the question, "Can I set up a users' group, a social group, or an event around my product or service that will serve my following?"

## ESSENTIAL FURTHER STUDY

### **Books**

*Prophetic Charisma*—Len Oakes (Syracuse, 1997)

*The Guru Papers*—Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad (Frog Books, 1993)

### **Movies**

*Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (Mystic Fire Video, 2001)