



**THE PRACTICE PAPERS**  
ISSUE 3

# TRUST

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**CONTEXT PARTNERS**

# THE PRACTICE PAPERS

ISSUE 3 / TRUST

## ISSUE 3 TEAM

Editor, Creative Director: Tiffany Meyer

Art Director: Valerie Armstrong

Designer: Isabelle Swiderski

Research Lead: Gavin McLaughlin

## CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Benedict

Charlie Brown

Jared Cole

Zach Dundas

Jessica Earley

Sam Foulger

Ben Hecht

Tito Llantada

Chris Machuca

Kimberly Manno Reott

Gavin McLaughlin

Jensie Miksich

Alicia Nakamoto

Courtney O'Brien

Angie Jabine

Rachel Sario

Scout Story Lab

Trabian Shorters

Caroline Smeallie

Brendan Ward

Amber Wilke Fournier

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Hubspot

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**CONTEXT PARTNERS** is an insights and strategy firm. With an approach grounded in design thinking and community organizing, we help Fortune 500 brands and global philanthropies build and sustain engagement from their most important audiences. Services include surfacing actionable insights, designing deeply engaging experiences, and crafting strategies to drive innovation, engagement, loyalty, and influence. We've strengthened millions of relationships for Microsoft, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, C&A, The Rockefeller Foundation, IKEA, Nike, and others. Our work has been featured in *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and *Rotman Management Magazine*.

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# WHY TRUST?

A letter from the CEO

We've been in the engagement and relationship-building game for a decade, yet never before has trust played such a crucial role in our clients' success. Simply, those who earn it will succeed and those who don't, will not.

The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer reports the largest single drop in trust in the survey's history—with Americans' trust in all institutions dropping 37 points. And it's no wonder. Terms like data breach, fake news, and alternative facts riddle our national dialogue. Your customers, employees, and stakeholders are living and working in an atmosphere where truth itself is pretty uncertain. With it, their needs have changed. Edgy products and innovative tech won't keep them loyal if they don't trust the organization that created it.

We wanted to understand more about trust's role in the daily pursuit of a successful strategy. **We talked with over 75 leaders driving engagement within their organizations. From CEOs, to product designers, to chief marketing officers, we wanted to hear from individuals on the front line of decision-making.** We curated trends across these conversations, from our day-to-day client work, and leading reports, like the Edelman Trust Barometer and Accenture's latest research on purpose-driven brands. We surfaced best-practices we believe can offer the deepest value in understanding, measuring, and forging trust among your most important audiences.

Here we offer the most compelling stories and actionable ideas to help you answer the questions all leaders are asking: With trust at a premium, how do we earn and sustain customer loyalty? How do we pinpoint the "currency of trust" that our audience craves most? How do we optimize our influence for positive change?

These are the issues we hear you wrestling with and they are the same issues that drive our curiosity. While we're excited for you to dig in, we acknowledge that this work is never complete—in fact, we offer a mere snapshot of this complex and nuanced issue. As the dust settles on this third issue of The Practice Papers, we're already asking "What's next?" This spring, we'll begin this cycle again in conversations with leaders just like you. You're part of our community now—we look forward to your feedback and to what the next conversation brings.




**Charlie Brown**  
Founder and CEO

A stylized, handwritten signature of Charlie Brown in black ink.

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# AUTHENTICITY



People trust people. Show your human side and give audiences a safe place to be real, and you'll earn their devoted loyalty.

## **Know me, keep me.**

Your audience expects to be known. Continually invest in understanding who they are and they'll reward you.

## **Get real.**

Customers stay loyal to organizations that consistently wear their heart on their sleeve. Deliver an experience that is real, vulnerable, and honest.

## **Protect me.**

People crave connection with folks who share their values. Give them an easy and rewarding place to find one another, and they'll keep coming back.

## **SUPERSTARS**

REALSELF, HARLEY DAVIDSON, BEN & JERRY'S,  
LEVI STRAUSS & CO., SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

REALSELF

# FOLLOW THE WHISPERS

When Alicia Nakamoto took on responsibility for the online forums of RealSelf, she learned firsthand how candor fuels community. Context Partners has worked with community managers like Nakamoto for more than a decade, leaders committed to bringing strangers together in digital spaces to connect on a common need. Here she shares what she's learned about the role of trust and authenticity in her work, and the growth the RealSelf community has experienced as a result.



ALICIA NAKAMOTO is now director of marketing for Arivale, a personalized health coaching platform, where she continues her commitment to authentic community building, both online and off.

The RealSelf online community centers on cosmetic surgery: the site attracts doctors, past patients, and prospective patients seeking straight talk on the pre- and post-op reality. As vice president of community, Nakamoto looked after these online conversations. The online community was intended as a gateway for future patients, but she understood that the community's real responsibility was in building that first relationship. A transformative insight, however, came in the real world.

"I would be at a party," she recalls, "and someone would come up and *whisper*. 'Can you tell me about tummy tucks?' And I thought, oh, that is so interesting."

People think they're the only one in the world with a problem or question. That's why online communities can be incredibly powerful.

She coined a term, and a theory: "whisper topics." Uncomfortable subjects—intimate, potentially charged matters that lower volume and raise anxiety—foster and bond exceptionally committed communities. Why? Because people want to talk about them, but feel blocked by the societal norms around the topic. Finding a community willing to discuss

them openly and honestly is nothing less than a breakthrough, one that breeds loyalty.

Nakamoto came to believe that an opportunity to forge new community can be found on those nervous fringes of "polite" conversation—terrain that leaves people vulnerable but hungry for information. "In the case of cosmetic surgery, people whisper because other people think it's shallow," she says. Managing money can be tough to discuss for other reasons. Alicia believes taboos and judgments can paradoxically inspire honesty and connection. In a safe space, a global conversation can become highly personal.

"People think they're the only one in the world with a problem or question," she says. "That's why online communities can be incredibly powerful."

In one case, a woman visited a RealSelf forum when she was considering breast augmentation because one of her breasts had failed to develop. "She'd never worn a bathing suit," Nakamoto says. "Never been to the beach. It affected every aspect of her life. But then she'd found a community of people on the other side of the world with shared experiences."

Nakamoto identified ways to sustain and deepen community through the content (and values) her whisper-driven users sought.

"Photos really moved the needle and set the tone for the entire site," she notes. Realizing that imagery was critical to establishing trust, she asked a community member if she

would be willing to share photos documenting her experience with post-maternity procedures. Images posted in RealSelf's communal online spaces revealed the physical realities of cosmetic surgery and recovery, which can be graphic and obviously painful.

"Some of these things, you can't unsee," Nakamoto says. "We exposed what providers don't—before-and-after photos and everything in between."

For RealSelf users, those pictures provided just the actionable, frank intelligence they needed. "Before going into a procedure, patients want to feel like they have all the pertinent information, and our forums filled that knowledge gap," she says. For example, before joining RealSelf, a member may have heard they'd be back to work in two weeks after an invasive procedure. "The people who've actually been through the procedure can tell you, no, you're barely *walking* at three weeks."

Ultimately, she says, RealSelf rallied a committed, long-term community by unlocking authentic, fearless conversation.

"We started to see that members would do anything for each other," Nakamoto says. "They've never met, yet once they connected on the forum, they felt compelled to pay it forward and reassure

## PROTECT ME THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY MANAGER

When conversations turn intimate, who stands guard? Alicia Nakamoto shares insights on community managers' guardian role.

### INSIDERS CARE MOST

Alicia watched RealSelf's forums for authentic, generous voices—and hired them. Community managers *from* the community bring first-hand knowledge and an intuitive grasp on its culture. As she puts it, "It's finding that one person to build authenticity for the whole community."

### REPEL THE TROLLS

RealSelf allows pseudonyms—demanding extra vigilance against malicious interlopers. Alert, immersed community managers can spot intruders quickly.

### KEEP WATCH

"We had managers on duty around the clock, because the subject matter is so sensitive," Alicia says. "We could go to sleep on the West Coast, and wake up to problems from the other side of the world. You have to maintain your values and standards, all of the time."

## IN BRIEF

### REALSELF'S CURRENCY OF TRUST

Real photos shared by members that show the before, during, and after reality of their cosmetic procedure

### HOW THEY MEASURE IT

Active user growth and frequency of member interactions

### HOW THEY EARN IT

- Protect authenticity and anonymity
- Encourage peer-to-peer information sharing
- Keep watch with dedicated staff round the clock



One of the most fascinating things I noticed was there were no socioeconomic lines. It was just people helping people.

others that they empathize and understand their experience.

“One of the most fascinating things I noticed was there were no socioeconomic lines,” she says. “It was just people helping people.”

This level of intensity left RealSelf with a special responsibility to maintain a safe, member-centered community. For RealSelf—and any brand that aims to drive authentic conversation around a whisper topic—that means holding fast to self-defined standards. Online, any sensitive, personal subject is a ripe target for trolls. To combat this, RealSelf’s community managers police the forums around the clock. The company

also decided to forgo certain opportunities to maintain community trust.

“We never jumped on a media bandwagon, even if it might have bolstered awareness and provided exposure for the RealSelf brand,” Nakamoto says. “If a celebrity claimed they didn’t get a boob job, when they did, we could have called them out on it. But that’s not our story to tell. More importantly, any action that negatively affected one individual would have undermined the trust of our whole community.”

Cultivating community around vulnerable or taboo topics is challenging. But Nakamoto and RealSelf found powerful inspiration in honesty, authenticity, and a diligently maintained sense of safety. All of those factors demand commitment and intention. And that’s Nakamoto’s most salient conclusion about whisper topics: They’re not to be taken lightly.

“You have to be very clear about your long-term strategy,” she says. “It’s not about short-term traffic. It’s about building a community that stands the test of time. If you try to make it anything else, the audience will leave. Never underestimate the intelligence of your community.”

## THE RISE OF SOCIAL PROOF

In 1995, Amazon.com did something unprecedented in the retail world. It let real people post unbiased reviews on its website. Now, 20 years later, peer-to-peer reviews play a central role in more than 82% of all consumer buying decisions, and 70% of career change decisions. Authentic reviews and feedback loops are now a baseline of trust. Protecting the authenticity of reviews and user-generated content is the norm.

People trust real people.





## The return of real

Waves of scandal have had a tangible impact on faith in social networks. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 60% of people no longer trust social media companies. Against a backdrop of “fake news” and data manipulation, users have grown distrustful of influencers—both celebrities and media personalities. In a major reversal, trust has reverted back to immediate friends, family, and close acquaintances on social media, individuals whose personal credibility speaks far more than the size of their followings.

For businesses on social media, this presents a delicate challenge in 2019. Using social media as just another ad channel—filled with flashy clickbait and promo codes—feels increasingly out of step with social norms and user preferences. Instead, progressive companies will focus less on maximizing reach in 2019 and more on generating transparent and meaningful engagement, and 50% of respondents to Hootsuite’s survey agreed that personalizing social content will be a key challenge. Brands like Adidas and the *New York Times* exemplify this emerging ethos. They’re creating focused communities and sharing insightful, relevant content, then allowing passionate users to connect with one another.



GET THE 2019 HOOTSUITE  
SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS REPORT  
<http://bit.ly/pp-hs>

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## Do you know me?

Throughout Context Partners' research, chief marketing officers, product and experience designers, and community managers all agreed—while quantitative data like user behavior tells us *what* a customer did, qualitative research tells us *why*.

The real value of **qualitative research** is to create *better experiences, better services, and better products* that are directly aligned to the needs, wants, and lived reality of your audience.

It's the most important tool practitioners have for building trust and sustained loyalty. And because your audience's needs and wants are constantly evolving, this work is continuous. In fact, the most successful brands maintain a culture of curiosity about their audience. They integrate qualitative research early and often so it informs everything they do.



## IN PRACTICE

### Know your customer, keep your customer.

Use a range of qualitative research methods early and often to continuously reveal audience insights you can act on.



#### WHO ARE THEY?

To know your audience, you need to go beyond quantitative user data, purchase histories, and demographics.

Use qualitative research methods to understand who they are, what they value and who they aspire to be.

Surface the role they tend to play inside a community or group, and what experience they need to feel a sense of belonging.



#### WHAT DO THEY WANT?

With a better understanding of who your audience is, you can take a closer look at how they interact with your product or organization. Focus on their journey—what they do, when they do it, and where they do it—to surface their pain points, affinities, and corresponding gaps in their experience.

Your observations let you see your audience data through a human lens, contextualizing numbers with human behavior. This layering of information makes it possible to see your audience in an entirely new light.



#### WHAT'S KEEPING THEM FROM GETTING IT?

To understand your audience's true barrier to adoption or loyalty, you need to uncover why they say one thing and do another.

One way to narrow this gap is to stop treating your audience as a data subject, and instead bring them in as a partner in your design process. This partnership can reveal hidden opportunities to enhance your product or experience design for better results—moments in the customer's journey when they're the most vulnerable or the most in need of a sense of security, belonging, or community.



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[CONTEXTPARTNERS.COM/PRACTICE](https://contextpartners.com/practice)



VALERIE ARMSTRONG, CONTEXT PARTNERS


# Following the Peatland Path

## THE BACKSTORY

The politics of Indonesian peatlands are fraught: these rich ecosystems lock up vast amounts of carbon dioxide deep below the soil, but agriculture, urbanization, and other disruption above ground leave them prone to fires that pour that CO<sub>2</sub> back into the atmosphere. In this complex archipelago, global climate concerns clash with suspicions about international encroachment and, above all, peatlands' role in local and national economies.

Meanwhile, conservation efforts faced a key problem: there was no authoritative map of peatlands—and you can't protect what you can't easily find. From 2016-2018, Context Partners partnered with the Indonesian government and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to create a prize competition, motivating leading international scientists to devise new mapping techniques for this complex environment.

The prize experience Context Partners designed—from the stories we used to attract participants, to the requirements prize entrants were asked to meet—had to engender acute trust in the endorsed winner, while building a global network that would continue the conservation work long after the winners were announced.

 Sirah Pulau Padang locals steer the crew and me along the flooded banks of the Komering River.

**“Our visas were denied, but don’t panic.” Joyce’s words coming over the phone were meant to be soothing, but I was panicking.**

I was days away from filming a story at the heart of our project with the Indonesian government and Packard Foundation—my first of this caliber—and my role just got a whole lot bigger. Not only had I lost my well-vetted film crew, but I’d also lost my director, Joyce. With her visa blocked, capturing the story was now up to me.

“I have a connection in country,” said Joyce. “We’ll get you another crew.” A wave of relief came over me, but the panic lingered. A lot was riding on this story.

“You can only plan so much here.” The voice of my colleague Robert came into my head. As our project lead, he’d already spent hundreds of hours in country researching peatland depletion and its complex effects across the diverse Indonesian archipelago. But plan I did. The footage we captured on this trip would be used to build awareness of peatland conservation among a diverse group of global stakeholders, and authenticity was imperative. We carry a lot of responsibility when we step inside an unfamiliar culture with the intention of fixing a complex problem. Whether we step in as a storyteller (as I was), a designer or a strategist, we do so with an inherent bias. That was my conflict: to tell an authentic story meant showing up with a solid creative vision and a team I trusted to bring it to life.

Weeks before, I’d interviewed Indonesians to learn how peatland mismanagement

and climate change had altered their lives. A few spoke about endangered elephants and orangutans facing deeper peril as their habitats diminish. One shared a startling statistic—in a single day, peatland fires in Indonesia emitted five times the daily average air pollution of the entire U.S. But it was a personal story from Nirarta Samandhi, a conservationist who now directs the World Resources Institute in Indonesia, that stuck with me.

“When I was young, my father would take me fishing at a river near our home. I cherish those memories and wanted to recreate them with my own son. But that river is no longer there—it’s completely dry.” This was the story I’d planned to capture—a shot list and interviews that built from Nirarta’s experience.

Luckily, Joyce’s connection came through—I had a new film crew. I met the local team in Jakarta and we got right to work, capturing footage of the Solutions Showcase event inside a swanky hotel, where 10 teams were presenting their proposed peat mapping methods to the Indonesian Peat Prize judges. My biggest fears were quelled—the crew was a talented, funny bunch and had been briefed by Joyce. We flew together to Palembang, a city in South Sumatra.

In Palembang, we met Mayang, our fixer. A cool-headed Indonesian twenty-something, she introduced us to our local guide, Cobra, an ebullient young fellow who led us to Sirah Pulau Padang, a small village in Ogan Komering Ilir Regency—a remote area in South Sumatra named for the Ogan and Komering Rivers that pass through it.



Lufty, our lead cameraman, looking out the window of our host's home onto the Komer-ing floodplain.



Now, as we drive, I'm struck by how much the landscape resembles the island of Mauritius, my mother's home country. Banana trees bow toward us on bumpy dirt roads. Livestock, dogs, and chickens wander the streets. Families tend to their chores around hand-built homes topped with terracotta tiles, palm fronds, or corrugated metal. Today the sky is blue and clear, a welcome difference from the constant smog around Jakarta, now 300 miles away.

After a two-hour ride, we arrive at the home of our host, a local activist who lives with his family in a wooden house right on the Komer-ing River. The lush landscape belies the description of drought Joyce and I had been prepared for. It turns out the effects of peatland mismanagement can take several forms.

In this village, the story isn't of drought, but of inundation. Our host pulls out a hand-drawn map and explains how years of land mismanagement have affected their way of life. Acacia trees are cut and removed from the peatland dome to make room for palm oil plantations. Complex irrigation canals created to support the palm oil economy have deeply affected existing water flow, fish habitat, and rice cultivation—the crop that has sustained these villagers for generations.

"Let me show you," he offers, gesturing to the back of the house, which opens onto the Komer-ing River. Our crew gingerly steps into canoes with makeshift motors and jerry-rigged rudders.

To the hum of the motors, we probe deeper and deeper into the peatlands, a boggy mush of decaying plant matter sitting deep below the terrain's intricate pattern of islands and

waterways. We stop and meet people along the way—people whose homes are now flooded, who cultivate the little rice they can, and whose daily fishing expeditions yield measly returns. This is what it looks like when you interrupt the natural state of the waterways and peatland to support palm oil plantations. Here, it isn't a story of drought at all.

I take note of the sun—we've been out in the hot, humid, wetlands for hours and sunset is nearing. We must be far from our host's house and getting back won't be easy in the dark. The shallow wetlands are a tangled mess of vegetation that takes skill—and daylight—to navigate. I express my worry to Mayang, who relays it to Cobra. He laughs and tells her something in Bahasa. "He says you should relax," Mayang tells me. I try.

Night falls, and our boat's engine gives out. We're parallel to a road, but there are no street lights and no night-time traffic to light our way. Mayang, Cobra, our host, and the crew chit-chat in Bahasa. I later learn that they suspect the reason for our misfortune is that a "succubus" was pursuing our lead cameraman, Lufty. We neglected to ask the spirits to ensure us a safe journey and now we're paying for it.

By some miracle we sputter back to our host's house. Tired, sweaty, and famished, we sit on the floor and devour a dinner of fish cakes, rice, and bananas prepared by our host's wife. It tastes amazing—a welcome comfort after an adventurous day.

We collapse into heaps, the men sleeping on the floor where we ate dinner, the women crammed together in another room. I close my eyes and hear the whirring of insects and fans. The apprehension I felt at the start of the trip has been replaced by a flood of gratitude.

This journey hasn't gone according to plan at all. *Things will go wrong and you just have to roll with it.* Actually, nothing went wrong. Instead, the story I experienced was one this village lives with every day. Miles away, a different story could be told in another village, and still another story miles from there—this is precisely the point. The effect of peatland depletion is as complex as the landscape itself.

I take a deep breath and let the hum of singing insects lull me to sleep.




A stop along the journey, to visit a man whose home is now surrounded by water year-round, since water can no longer naturally move in and out of the Komer-ing floodplain with the tides.



VALERIE ARMSTRONG is a visual designer and strategist with Context Partners. In her work, she pushes for creative and inclusive methods to capture the complex, interwoven cultures of the communities with which she works. She envisions a world where every designer, and every design, contributes to equitable solutions to real, human problems.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Stay flexible.** Keep your biases at bay so the real story can emerge.
- **Complex problems have complex storylines.** Be cautious about oversimplifying.
- **Step inside their lived reality.** Doing so will almost always produce a better solution.

A photograph of two men, one with a beard and the other smiling, looking down at a smartphone held by the man on the left. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

People choose organizations they trust—transparency has emerged as a powerful strategy for earning it.

**What's this?**

76% of consumers will pay more for a product when they know how it was made, what values drove its production, and what impact it has on people and the planet.

**How does it work?**

Companies now have an obligation to be transparent about how they operate and use personal data.

**What do you stand for?**

Audiences expect brands to know what they stand for and to walk their talk in everything they do.

**SUPERSTARS**

HONEST, EVERLANE, BRANDLESS,  
BEAUTYCOUNTER, PATAGONIA, C&A

# TRANSPARENCY



C&A

# DEFYING RETAIL ENGAGEMENT NORMS

Lessons from C&A's *Inspiring World* employee engagement campaign

Imagine you're the head of global marketing for a major apparel brand. You're charged with interrupting the hectic workday of more than 33,000 retail employees and convincing them to participate in an "employee engagement" campaign.



A step inside their on-the-job reality reveals a deeper challenge. They are primarily women ages 18-25, and you'll have exactly 15 minutes to catch their attention amidst breakroom chatter and the distractions of phones, friends, and coworkers. Do they balk at the intrusion, or embrace the opportunity to make a positive difference?

C&A's 2018 engagement campaign, *Inspiring World*, accomplished the latter, earning a 65% participation rate from its workforce and a 2018 EE Employee Engagement Award. In the fast-paced retail industry, in which annual employee turnover can top 60%, this level of engagement is unprecedented. The success of the campaign offers powerful lessons for companies aspiring to strengthen workplace loyalty and trust.

## Stand for something (and employees will follow)

"Purpose" can be a significant market differentiator. The reality is that if you can't deliver it, you won't stand out and you won't earn an engaged audience. Yet it's tricky. "Purpose" has also become jargon that now glosses over the business world; it can mean a lot or nothing at all. To successfully earn buy-in to your purpose and the sustained trust of your workforce, your track record needs to reflect your vision.

C&A gets this. When the brand launches an employee engagement campaign, it's not a one-off effort, but rather part of an ongoing expression of its purpose-driven values. The world's largest purchaser of organic cotton, C&A has built an unparalleled reputation for environmental activism and humane employment practices—*Fashion for Good*,



“Purpose” can be a significant market differentiator. The reality is that if you can’t deliver it, you won’t stand out and you won’t earn an engaged audience.

which it co-founded, is a global leader in responsible apparel practices, and its Instituto C&A partners with nonprofits to address child labor, immigrant rights, and domestic violence.

#### Look for the threads that bind

In 2018, when C&A shifted the focus of its annual campaign from women’s empowerment to environmental sustainability, finding a common thread among

employees across 27 countries and 12 languages was challenging. Few employees could argue with the benefit of sustainable fashion, but this storyline can get dauntingly technical in a hurry.

Context Partners spent time with C&A employees to understand their relationship to the company, their feelings on environmental issues, and the role they thought C&A should play in addressing them. This discovery process gave C&A the insights needed to personalize the meaning of sustainability for a diverse, time-strapped workforce. The common perception—that qualitative insights are expensive and time-intensive to obtain—can cause many brands to skip this discovery step altogether.

65%

PARTICIPATION  
RATE ACROSS

27 COUNTRIES  
12 LANGUAGES

€1 MILLION  
DONATED TO  
45 CHARITIES

BENEFITING  
250,000 PEOPLE

Traditionally, employee engagement is a strictly top-down effort. A brand department or corporate responsibility team builds a campaign tied to an issue or cause that the company deems important. Then they push their message at employees—an approach we and others call “command and control.” There’s a reason command and control campaigns struggle to surpass a 20% participation rate.

#### Design with employees, not for them

C&A and Context Partners flipped the script, actively involving employees at every step to design a campaign built around employee participation preferences. Context Partners worked with C&A managers across several markets to test and adapt prototypes with their teams and local languages. This community-centered approach not only earned team trust, it revealed the threads of value that unite C&A, informing the final campaign design.

The campaign asked employees a single question: “What’s your dream for a better world?” For each story, photo, or video they submitted, employees got to vote for one global and two local charities to receive funding from the C&A Foundation. This feature empowered workers to effect positive change in their backyard

while linking their action to a global purpose. Ultimately the campaign generated over a million euros for 45 charities, benefiting more than 250,000 people.

Translating a complex idea into a universally appealing campaign that mobilizes 65% of one’s global workforce is remarkable. C&A invested time and resources to discover what matters to its employees, what they aspire to, and what changes they’d like to see in the world—and designed from there.

#### IN PRACTICE

Context Partners has been an insights and strategy partner of C&A and the C&A Foundation since 2017, with emphasis on aligning their purpose-driven work and the day-to-day relationship they cultivate with their global workforce.

##### WHAT WE DID

- Qualitative research
- Employee engagement campaign design
- Campaign testing and iteration

##### OUTCOMES

The *Inspiring World* campaign, designed in partnership with Context Partners, received a 65% participation rate and was the 2018 winner of the UK and Europe Employee Engagement Social Responsibility Award.



KIMBERLY MANNO REOTT is the business development director for Context Partners. Kimberly fearlessly builds relationships and connects the dots for her clients. She launched Context Partners’ DC office and champions our work in Europe.

## Six brands took a stand. Did they build trust?

Taking a bold and public stand on social issues can go far in establishing, building, and reinforcing trust. *Purpose-driven brands*, a phrase once reserved for a handful of market elites with values at their core, has evolved to a mainstream expectation among employees and consumers alike.

We've entered the Age of Corporate Action, as more executives acknowledge the power of their brand's voice, and the risk of appearing complicit in social problems by not taking action. More than ever, your audience wants to know what your organization stands for. But more importantly, they want to know how far you're willing to go in service of "doing the right thing."

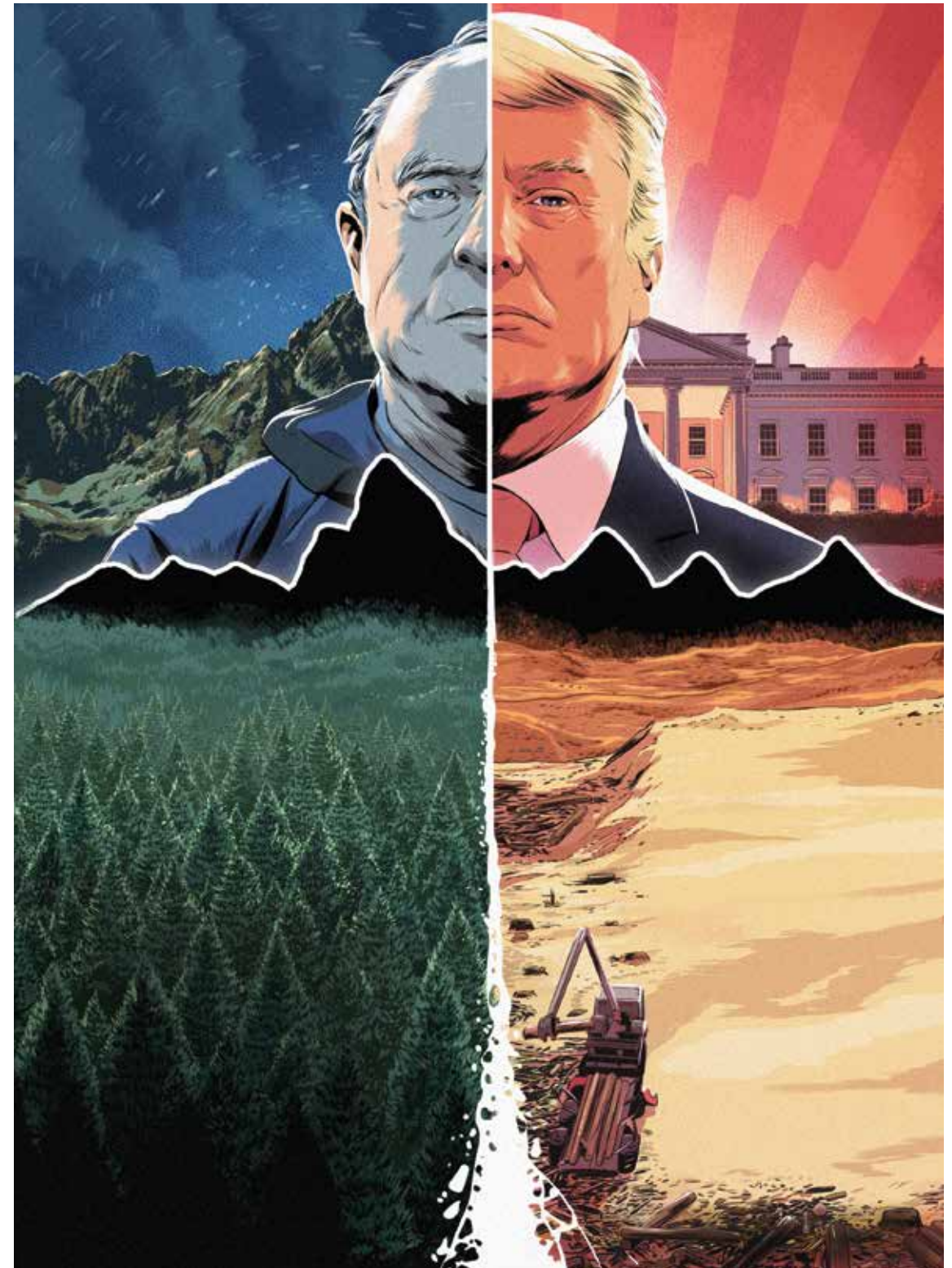


ILLUSTRATION BY GUY SHIELD



Between 2017 and 2018, the six U.S. brands below took a public stand on issues ranging from gun violence to immigration. In some cases their action provided definitive brand or social value—a surge in positive stakeholder action, a leap in sales. In other cases, sales plummeted, or the brand was rebuked for not taking a bolder position. Each brand moved the needle of trust in one direction or another.

What can their stories teach us about the ingredients of a trust-inducing public stand, or the role your audience wants to play to influence or bolster the stand you take? Use the discussion questions on the facing page to find out.

## 1 WAS IT MEANINGFUL?

Did it influence positive change? Why or why not?

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## 2 WAS IT RELEVANT?

Was it grounded in values its audience shares?

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## 3 DID IT INCREASE TRUST?

To inspire audience action? To influence positive change?

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### TOGETHER WE STAND

A mass shooting in Thousand Oaks, California hit a little too close to home, and in its first-ever political stand, TOMS shifted from its buy-one-give-one model to a public campaign and \$5 million donation to end gun violence.



### A BAN ON ASSAULT WEAPONS

Following the school shooting in Parkland, Florida in February 2018, Dick's Sporting Goods announced its decision to ban sales of assault-style weapons in all of its stores, bump the minimum age for gun-buyers to 21, ban sales of high-capacity magazines, and renew its commitment to not sell bump stocks.



### PATAGONIA V. TRUMP

Patagonia branched out from its deep activism roots and filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration in a bid to protect Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. This, following the bold, true-to-form campaign published on its homepage—"The President Stole Your Land."



### OPEN HOMES

Airbnb invited its global community of hosts to offer free temporary housing to people who need shelter due to civil conflict, natural disasters, or travel for medical care.



### BELIEVE IN SOMETHING

Nike launched the *Believe in Something* campaign with sponsored athlete Colin Kaepernick, known for taking a knee during the U.S. national anthem to protest police brutality, racism, and social inequality.



### END FORCED ARBITRATION

In late 2017, influenced by the growing #MeToo movement, Microsoft announced to its 124,000 employees worldwide that it is putting an end to the practice of forced arbitration, which requires victims of sexual harassment to settle cases privately rather than through a court of law.



## Co-design is the great democratizer

Every day our clients seek our help to solve complex problems. *How can we improve college completion rates in low-income communities? Drive sustained loyalty in a rapidly evolving digital marketplace? Engage the most innovative leaders to address the racial equity gap?*

We believe better solutions emerge when you give the people closest to a problem agency in solving it. This Community Centered Design mindset is in the DNA of Context Partners. Our commitment to design *with* people instead of *for* them permeates every aspect of our approach to understanding and solving complex problems like these. It helps us keep bias at bay, and it opens up possibilities we may never have considered before.

No problem can be effectively addressed without at least a baseline understanding of what's real for your audience. In fact, without that insight, you run the risk of tackling the wrong issue, imposing solutions that simply don't work, or unintentionally making a problem worse.

**Co-design, a method of actively engaging stakeholders in the design process**, can be a great democratizer because it offers the people most affected by a problem an essential role in defining the systems and services that are created to meet their needs. Unfortunately, while co-design has gained popularity among audience-centered practitioners, many design

teams only bring stakeholders in once a solution has been prototyped.

We advocate for a co-design approach that engages your audience as partners, rather than mere contributors, and involves them in a spectrum of authentic participation—from problem definition, to solution design, to implementation and iteration. Each stage offers a place for you to surface new ideas, build audience and team trust, and connect to your audience's lived reality.

We create co-design experiences that are participatory rather than extractive. That isn't easy—our role as Designers already privileges us, putting a barrier of trust in the room that can be tough to overcome. We're always exploring facilitation methods that help dissolve these barriers, because we know that's when truly innovative ideas can emerge.

Still, we hear these questions all the time: *Is co-design really worth the investment? If we make this switch, where do we start?* We get it—this level of audience participation requires resources and time. It also requires ceding control. Yet the value of doing so is palpable and measurable. Truly generative co-design can surface ideas you never considered, drive buy-in early and often, and ultimately support more effective implementation, better results, and deeper audience trust.



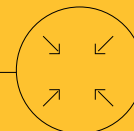
CAROLINE SMEALLIE is a design strategist with Context Partners. She applies her natural curiosity to give voice to every community she works with, and to design engagement strategies that deepen connection, and sustain growth.

## IN PRACTICE



## The co-design spectrum

Use this framework to tag where expanding your use of co-design can offer richer insights and new opportunities to build stakeholder trust.

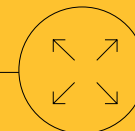


### DEFINE THE PROBLEM

How do those closest to the problem describe it? How does it affect them? What's keeping them from solving it on their own? A co-design at this stage helps challenge your assumptions, helps you find focus, and sets the stage for productive, user-centered design later.

Here you can:

- Define the problem in the stakeholders' terms
- Surface behavioral insights
- Build audience trust early

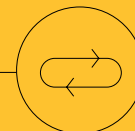


### DESIGN THE SOLUTION

There's often a gap between what people say they'll do (via a survey or focus group), and what they do in real time. Do you give stakeholders a solution to react to, or do you ask them to create the solution with you? Here's an opportunity to co-create, test, and refine with stakeholders as partners.

Here you can:

- Source insights and new ideas
- Learn what works and what doesn't
- Set the stage for effective implementation



### IMPLEMENT AND ITERATE

No implementation is perfect. Situations can evolve rapidly. Engaging stakeholders throughout the implementation phase enables brisk, real-time iteration, helping you arrive at a solution that sticks.

Here you can:

- Address implementation barriers in real time
- Adapt and iterate quickly
- Predict future needs



LEARN MORE ABOUT CO-DESIGN AT  
[CONTEXTPARTNERS.COM/PRACTICE](https://contextpartners.com/practice)



Audiences want a relationship with your brand or cause, not a transaction. Give it and nurture it, and you'll keep their loyalty.

**Keep it human.**

People want the efficiency that tech delivers, but it's the promise of live, human interaction that keeps them loyal.

**Make it personal.**

Customers now demand hyper-personalization. Deliver that with an authentic, trustworthy experience and they'll reward you.

**Give me my people.**

Audiences want to find each other. Brands that enable peer-to-peer relationships within their audience will forge powerful loyalty bonds.

**SUPERSTARS**

INTUIT, UMPQUA BANK, STITCH FIX, ARIVALE

# RELATIONSHIPS



INTUIT

# THIS IS RELATIONSHIP DESIGN

In the rapidly changing world of fintech, Intuit's product designers adapt brilliantly. The key? Stop designing products. Start designing *experiences* that enable relationships.

Money management, business finances, taxes—few tasks generate more anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt. Jane in New Hampshire wants to know if she's filing her taxes right. Susan in Los Angeles dreams of scaling her business but struggles with cash flow. George in Chicago is saving for the down payment on his first home.

Enter Intuit. Behind its suite of products—TurboTax, QuickBooks, ProConnect, Mint—is a vibrant ecosystem of interconnected relationships between consumers, small business owners, the self-employed, and the professionals who can help them make smart financial decisions. By enabling connections at the “seams” of this ecosystem—that space between the pain point, the pro, and the product itself—Intuit is building customer loyalty and powering their prosperity.

“Financial and compliance jobs are hard, wrought with fear and uncertainty,” says James Helms, Intuit's vice president of product design. “We knew that to keep offering value to our customers—the people doing these jobs, and the people needing pros to do these jobs for them—we needed a product experience that enabled relationships.” Intuit's designers knew if they got it right, they could help customers do less work, get better financial outcomes, and enable reliable, data-informed decisions.

“We knew that to keep offering value to our customers, we needed a product experience that enabled relationships,” says Helms.



When Intuit launched 30 years ago, it was a traditional product-line business. As market needs changed, so did Intuit. The company has evolved from a set of independent software products to a platform of interrelated products, and most recently to an ecosystem of products, data, and interwoven relationships.

“What we've seen,” says Helms, “is that the real pain gets solved when you have non-pros who struggle and pros who can offer guidance.” TurboTax Live, for example, matches tax payers with an accountant to do their taxes, making the software a conduit for what really matters—the human relationship. The tax payer opens the software, fills out basic data, then connects with a professional via phone or video chat. ProAdvisor does the same for accountants and small business owners. The breadth or type of support a business owner needs varies, so designing for flexibility was key.





“This is relationship design,” says Helms. An ecosystem business model de-silos business units so they can design in the seams of the products.



JAMES HELMS is vice president of product design at Intuit. He offers a design lens to Intuit’s strategy, helping shift their emphasis from delivering products that serve professionals to designing services that enable pro-to-client relationships.

For Intuit’s product designers, that’s required a new approach. “This is relationship design,” Helms says. An ecosystem business model de-silos business units so they can design in the seams of the products. “People struggle most in these seams,”

Helms says. “It’s in those seams that they say, ‘I wish I had help to get me better outcomes,’ so we design to enable those relationships to not just happen, but to help pros make what they call ‘complete confidence’ decisions.” These products enable conversations and the exchange of data and documents while heightening transparency about the pro’s progress.

Intuit’s journey offers a model for other businesses facing a similar market transition, particularly their ongoing investment in qualitative research. “We put a lot of emphasis on deep research on the customers we serve,” says Helms. His team immerses themselves inside CPA offices, for instance, and draws from other qualitative research methods like prototyping and testing that show designers the difference between what customers say they’ll do, and what they actually do in real life. Of course, Intuit’s existing customer base of 125,000 tax professionals makes that easier.

“We’ve learned a ton about how pros view their relationships with their clients, behaviorally. The immersives help connect us to the user’s pain points before, during, and after our products are used,” says Helms.

**For Intuit, qualitative research runs the gamut, from low-fidelity prototyping to share ideas, to methods that pinpoint the user’s emotional engagement at any given stage.** “Sometimes it surfaces something entirely new we hadn’t thought of before,” says Helms. These insights help Intuit anticipate how an experience is going to work, while showing internal stakeholders what the design teams are building to gain buy-in.

“There are places where pros work really fast—they’re gathering info from their client, punching in data, filling out paperwork,” says Helms. “At the point when they’re about to share something with the client, though, they slow way down. They realize they’re shifting from work mode to advisor and relationship mode. They know their reputation is a huge part of their success—their customer acquisition, customer loyalty. So they slow way down in that relationship moment.”

How did this insight influence the platform design? “Pros have to deliver really tough news at times,” notes Helms. “These are really vulnerable moments; there could be a lot of shame attached to people’s buying and spending habits. **Enormous relationship capital can be shared or squandered in those moments.**” As the pro slows down, so does the product experience. Helms and his team pinpointed places where they could give pros tools to make those moments less vulnerable, allowing them to dig further in the interest of the client’s goals.

“It’s now the software doing the hard work, instead of the pro feeling like she had to ask the first big sensitive question.”

Designing for ecosystem connections like this, Helms admits, is a big switch from designing a single product. Before, he’d investigate users’ experience of a single product, designing against their known problems in order to deliver a benefit they’re thrilled about and willing to pay for.



AMBER WILKE FOURNIER is vice president of sales and marketing at Context Partners, where she helps clients solve complex problems and achieve high-impact results. She’s a systems thinker who thrives on continuous improvement and positive transformation.

“Now I have to also give them some **affordances that foster trust.** I’m asking them to trust that it’s safe to have two products talk to each other, and have their identity and data carry from one product to another. I need to convince them that we’re indeed one company, it’s safe in here.”

There’s a lot of underlying data architecture behind fintech brands like Intuit. The design challenge for Helms is to deliver a holistic experience with common componentry so the products are familiar, and the experience is anticipated.

So, how does Intuit determine if its approach is indeed creating those indispensable connections that foster trust? “Is the business owner or pro willing to recommend the experience to a friend, a family member, a peer? That’s our best indicator of trust,” says Helms. “And that those relationships produced a better outcome for them.”

## IN BRIEF

**INTUIT’S CURRENCY OF TRUST**  
Peer-to-peer recommendations

**HOW THEY MEASURE IT**  
Net Promoter Score

**HOW THEY EARN IT**

- Know the customer’s lived reality
- Offer data safety assurances
- Design for relationships at the ecosystem seams

COURTNEY O'BRIEN, CONTEXT PARTNERS

## A platform is not a community.

Technology platforms are alluring for the social change sector. From knowledge-sharing hubs to interactive forums, tech promises unlimited potential to enable smart people to achieve great things together. And when you’re tackling complex issues like climate change, social equity, or public health, that can be a real value.

Unfortunately, it’s tough for many organizations to differentiate between the community or movement they aim to build, and the tech platform itself. Leaders adopt an “if we build it, they will come” mindset, with rapid investment in the tech before they’ve addressed critical questions about the purpose, audience, or goals of the community they aim to attract. That leaves many of them struggling to activate the right people toward their goal. Here’s why:

Platforms alone don’t cultivate a community or build movements. Relationships do.

Technology is a tool. For it to work, you have to be clear on what you’re using the tool for. Context Partners has worked on more than a dozen significant technology platforms for clients in the for profit and philanthropic sectors. We also have deep experience in community building—our work draws from how the most effective social movements have built sustained action toward a shared goal, usually without the aid of technology at all.

More than anything, this work has taught the importance of investing in your strategy first—*what do you aim to achieve, who do you need with you to achieve it, what do they need from one another to get there?* Then we can ask: *how can technology deliver what our community needs, at scale?*

Without investing in such a strategy, you’ll risk burning critical resources creating technology no one may actually need. Meanwhile, the real need remains unaddressed, while relationships critical to your success could become frayed, damaging the very thing the platform was meant to serve.



COURTNEY O'BRIEN is a senior design strategist with Context Partners. She helps clients see that real partnership with their community will bring more creative, longer-lasting solutions to whatever problem is at hand.

## Tech is great, human is better

AI-driven chatbots, machine learning, and other responsive technologies have surfaced as key ways to scale a hyper-personalized customer experience. Yet, despite the convenience (and human-like demeanor) offered by these tech-fueled tools, customers say they are still hungry for live, human connections. In fact, 47 percent of people say they prefer a person to a bot, and brands that prioritize this are winning. Customers want to be wooed, understood, heard: in short, they want a relationship. And that requires a real-time human touch.

Few industries have felt the disruption of the tech transformation more keenly than retail banking. Just this year, 1,700 bank branches in the U.S. have closed their doors, as more and more customers opt to manage their money digitally.

Customer-service-obsessed Umpqua Bank quickly recognized a growing gap between the efficiency its digital apps delivered and the human relationships that had long set the brand apart. The bank devised a “Digital+Human” customer

Is it important to interact with  
a real person when dealing in  
financial services? Yes!\*

31%

most important  
when getting  
investment advice

26%

when settling  
disputed credit  
card charges

delivery strategy that includes a BFF (Best Financial Friend) app that delivers personal bankers (actual humans) to a customer’s phone via voice, video, or chat. After an initial pilot, the app was renamed to Umpqua To-Go.

While other banks are either trying to drive more traffic into branches or more users into their digital platform, Umpqua combined the best of both worlds. Customer-driven details abound in the app’s service design: it allows customers to choose their banker (and keep that banker indefinitely) and it sets no qualifying criteria or interaction limits. It’s the kind of real-life, real-time service that customers are looking for.



\* Source: 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Financial Services Report. 33,000 people surveyed.



# Design for memorable moments

**Design strategist Chris Machuca, explores why service design has become such an important tool in his work with global brands and social sector leaders.**

## For those new to this practice, what is service design?

Most practitioners would agree that service design is the process of orchestrating all of the component parts of a service experience—from objects, to environments, to the people and systems operating behind the scenes, in order to improve an individual's experience and to better deliver on your organization's goals.

## Why are more organizations practicing service design?

As the line between products and services blurs, our clients see the value of getting a deeper understanding of how customers experience their brand and their offerings. Instead of just asking, "What product features do our customers want?" or "When and where will they use our services?" teams are also asking, "What emotion do we want the experience to evoke?" or "How can our product experience delight the customer? How can the service experience foster a relationship?"

Service design is an inherently human-centered practice. It serves as an effective tool to keep your customer squarely at the center of the design process by bringing the right people together to have the right conversations about the right experience.

## On a practical level, what does a service designer do?

If a team maps out all the steps a customer takes in experiencing a product, they'll find opportunities where the audience is most vulnerable, where their pain is strongest, or where they are most ready for a real connection. Those are moments a service designer pays the most attention to, because we want to turn those into moments of authentic value, moments of delight, or moments of connection.

A really simple illustration of this idea is a five-star restaurant. As a patron, you might leave the experience feeling like it was the best meal you've ever had. What you don't think about is that the entire experience of your meal was essentially

choreographed. The restaurant staff planned every detail of your experience to deliver you unique value, to delight, and to create a connection. From the moment you came through the front door, to every staff interaction, the table design, the menu, the pacing of the meal—it was all carefully considered and deliberately designed.

Remember, a product or a service is only as good as the last memorable moment your customer experiences. As Maya Angelou has famously said, "People won't remember what you said or what you did, but they will remember how you made them feel." So the question is, what feeling do you need to evoke to earn their loyalty?



## What's the most valuable output a service designer can offer?

The key tool is what we call a service blueprint, which shows us what steps a customer takes through an experience, who is responsible for each part of the experience, and how the experience is best delivered. It can draw our attention to flaws and where improvements can be made.

I try to leave a lot of room for what I like to call *moments* in service blueprints. The practical is important—the architecture of the concrete steps—but so is the emotion we're trying to evoke in the customer. This is particularly useful during critical areas in the service when, if the service breaks down, we could instantly lose the customer. How might we add a memorable moment, perhaps one that establishes an emotional connection with that customer? Or one that strengthens our relationship with them?

## What's an example of a service design "moment" that improved the experience on a practical level?

At certain times of the day, Uber fares surge, and the company found that customers were frustrated, saying, "Why was my fare \$55 last night when it was \$25 the night before for the same trip?" The surge came as a surprise, and that surprise wasn't delightful. So Uber implemented a simple change to

Service design can create key moments that are practical—moments that directly influence customer loyalty.

make that higher price more clear to the customer, so it wasn't unexpected.

The change was simple—when the fare surges, riders are prompted to type in the quoted fare to accept it and hail their driver. Normally they just click a button to accept. That simple extra step created a key moment—the rider had to consciously accept the higher fare. Of course she could also say no by not accepting the fare, but either way, Uber took a pain point and turned it into a moment of rider choice.

As with this example, service design can create key moments that are practical—moments that directly influence customer loyalty.

**What about an example of service design that created a moment of delight or connection for a customer?**

We have a tech client that believes its technology can create a more integrated, connected learning experience in U.S. classrooms. They were working with a pilot group of schools. Each had been provided with the technology and in-school coaches to help teachers use the technology in their classrooms. Yet, adoption was still low, and our client wanted us to help them figure out why.

Most of the teachers we talked to fundamentally agreed with our client's big idea, that tech could create a more integrated, connected learning experience, but they struggled with the service experience. Teachers are constantly being asked to do one more thing, and their experience with the program felt like that. The most critical opportunity in this experience was the moment the ask was made of the teacher. A simple change—namely, having teachers themselves suggest the behavior change—could make all the difference in the rate of adoption. Teachers trust other teachers, and they trust first-hand stories from their peers because then it stops feeling like “one more thing I have to do,” and starts feeling like “something I want to do.”

**Why should brands hire Context Partners for service design?**

We've spent nearly a decade studying what brings people together to solve problems. While features and functionality are important, we've found that it's things like relationships, connection, trust, and joy that keep people coming back. Our service design practice centers around balancing human needs and organizational goals, to deliver stellar service experiences.

We've spent nearly a decade studying what brings people together to solve problems. While features and functionality are important, we've found that it's things like relationships, connection, trust, and joy that keep people coming back.



CHRIS MACHUCA is a senior design strategist at Context Partners. Through his work, he creates impact by designing experiences for products and services, building bold strategies for teams, and launching big ideas.



TIFFANY MEYER is manager of marketing communications at Context Partners, where she heads up thought leadership. She's a passionate storyteller with a deep interest in fostering open, honest dialogue.





# COMMUNITY

People are hungry to find their people. Give them a place where they belong and a meaningful role to play, and together they'll achieve great things.

**Ground me.**

High-performing communities have a clear goal and values in common. Ground yours there to attract a community that cares.

**Let the community decide.**

Communities want ownership over their experience. Those that enable members to play a role in designing it will earn powerful loyalty.

**Let me lead.**

People want to contribute to communities they care about. Offer them the chance to lead and participation can skyrocket.

**SUPERSTARS**

LIVING CITIES, BME, THE DYRT, ETSY



# A COALITION OF THE WILLING

Ben Hecht knows how networks thrive or fail. He leads Living Cities, a collaborative that unites 18 philanthropic and corporate partners to pursue “dramatically better results” for low-income people.

Each member of the Living Cities collaborative is a power player itself—from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to Deutsche Bank to Morgan Stanley. But united they have access to something they can’t get on their own—the dynamic combination of grassroots know-how and the national heft of a high-functioning network.

After 30 years of social impact work, Hecht easily tags a common challenge for any emerging network—one so basic, it’s easy to overlook. “Participation is all voluntary,” he says. “Every member has to want to participate.” While other networks often focus on getting the right names on the roster, or baiting participation with grant incentives, Hecht suggests focusing on more intrinsic motivations. “Maybe they want to be viewed as a valuable member of the network, as a leader, as a good citizen.”

How do you find the right foundational members? And how do you keep them not just engaged, but contributing to your shared

goal? Living Cities’ approach to building a network is simple in its premise, though it can be tough to get right. “You only invite a coalition of the *willing*,” Hecht says. Get the most willing, values-aligned, and intrinsically motivated leaders on board from the start, and it’s a whole lot easier to keep them engaged and contributing. “You give a larger community a chance to take part, but realize that only some of that community will be really invested. You have to have people who believe that what the network offers is a better way to work.”

The quality of your network members, in other words, matters more than the quantity. Identifying the “coalition of the willing” at the outset gives a network a starting point from which to build mutual trust. “Trust is quite possibly the number-one requirement in a network,” Hecht says.

For a coalition of the willing to stay willing, says Hecht, you need a deliberate, long-term strategy that builds relationships, delivers

sustained value, and offers space for network members to take the lead.

“Trust is quite possibly the number-one requirement in a network,” Hecht says.

“It’s really easy for our clients to get hyper-focused on a single aspect of the network experience,” said Tito Llantada, who leads Context Partners’ work with Living Cities. “Clients will say, ‘If we can get that tech platform right, the network will come; if we get the in-person annual convening just right, relationships will take off, and our impact can scale.’ But it’s never that simple.”

Recruitment, then, is just the first step of a process that requires commitment, attention to detail, and an understanding of intrinsic motivation and how bonds form and deepen. “You have to have opportunities for people to interact in multiple ways,” Hecht says. Living Cities crafts repeated, sustained, high-quality interactions that keep the network engaged.

“Online, real-life—it doesn’t have to be in a certain order, you just need to include both,” Hecht says. “Most people are now comfortable with the digital aspects of a relationship.” Still, he believes face-to-face interaction—less frequent, but more compelling and powerful—remains essential to bonding network participants to each other and the whole. Both kinds of interaction, personal and virtual, emerge as vital to building trust, and ultimately to accomplishing a network’s mission.

Living Cities approaches the design of its in-person convenings with that long-term strategy in mind. “The event content is the most current, the most cutting-edge,” Hecht says, as content relevance goes far in incentivizing repeat attendance. That’s achieved, in part, by engaging the network’s members as faculty. “The message is, together the participants already have many of the answers we need, within the network. Everyone knows something that could be useful elsewhere.”

The best in-person event, however, can only do so much to give a network longer-term life. Living Cities puts a rigorous focus on what happens between gatherings, to make participation in the next in-person installment seem essential to each member. “You watch how the work is progressing,” he says.





“You’re building the next face-to-face based on what you see working. And you identify what’s not working, too, and you also build programming on that. So if you’re in the network, you can’t miss the events.”

That time in between gatherings makes digital relationships key. And here Hecht sees both challenge and opportunity. “Nobody has cracked the code on creating a 24/7/365 virtual and physical community that has maximized its potential,” Hecht says. “No one’s come close, if we’re just honest.” Working with Context Partners, Living Cities recently debuted its own online platform, the Economic Opportunity Roadmap, to help participants in two selected U.S. regions share solutions and link up with relevant colleagues. Hecht recognizes, however, that a platform can’t be an end in itself—any technology is only as good as the relationships it works to strengthen.

“There’s a genuine hunger for connection among practitioners all over the country,” he says. “People authentically feel very isolated. The challenge is, how do you translate that hunger into action? We’re still at a time when you can overthink

and over-invest in the digital, and far outstrip the cultural demand for it.”

As the work to figure out specifically how to build and maintain any network’s connections evolves, the aim remains the same: trust. In person and online, quality and substance keep a network’s participants engaged. As trust builds and collaboration deepens, everyone involved must do something that doesn’t always come naturally: give up power.

“Part of building trust is giving,” Hecht says. “If you’re always the giver, then you always have the power. But everyone has something to give. You can’t always be the smartest person in the room. It can’t always be about you.” Ultimately, a network succeeds when participants see a value in its work above and beyond what they could achieve on their own. Co-design, collaboration, and the democratic sharing of information and leadership are all key principles in play.

“Everyone sees themselves in the product,” Hecht says. “But not too much—otherwise, they could have done it on their own.”

Ideally, if you build mutual trust, leaders will emerge naturally. Meanwhile, someone has to keep everything going. Hecht draws a distinction between a network’s leaders and its managers. The manager does the vital, ongoing infrastructure and planning work. “The manager allows the network to get traction,” Hecht says. “Then you can see who the leaders are. Obviously, if you lead, you contribute more, and it will be harder. Making that contribution easier is management’s job.” Hecht adds that he often sees Living Cities in a management role, leading only selectively.

With a coalition of the willing, high-quality gatherings and new digital platforms can help a network evolve. Sustaining the attention to detail that makes those tools effective is, perhaps, the great challenge. “Until you get a network effect, it can be tough to make an argument that it’s all worth it,” Hecht says. “We have to make long-term investments. We’re not going to figure it out in a day or a year.”



BEN HECHT is the president and CEO of Living Cities, a collaborative of 18 of the world’s leading foundations and financial institutions who work together to boldly fight poverty in America’s cities.



TITO LLANTADA is a senior client experience lead with Context Partners. In his work with Living Cities and other social impact clients, he passionately explores the interplay between people’s motivations and imperfections, and their desire to take action.

## IN BRIEF

### LIVING CITIES’ CURRENCY OF TRUST

Willing participants

### HOW THEY MEASURE IT

The volume and frequency of member participation in convenings, committees, and online forums.

### HOW THEY EARN IT

- Focus recruitment on the willing and motivated
- Give members the opportunity to lead
- Invest in community building
- Offer high-quality, in-person and online interactions

## IN PRACTICE

Context Partners has been an insights and strategy partner for Living Cities since 2018, helping them identify and design experiences that will increase the quality and frequency of member engagement.

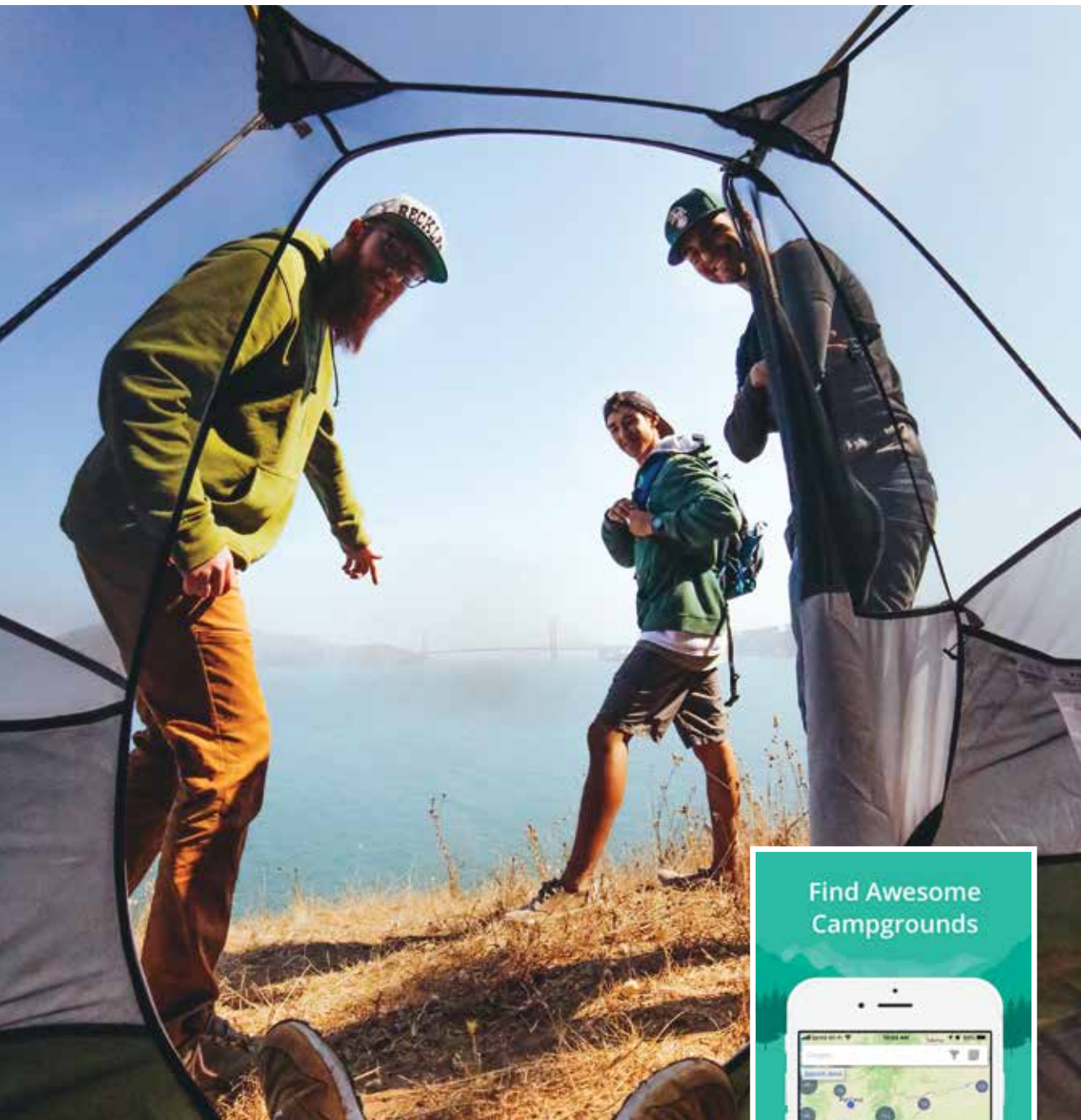
### WHAT WE DID

- Qualitative research
- Service design
- Community growth strategy

### OUTCOMES

With our help, Living Cities has designed and launched its new digital platform, and has onboarded hundreds of its members.





## THE DYRT

# The everyday ranger

**The Dyrt, often described as the Yelp for campsites, makes it easier for more than 50 million U.S. campers to find the campsite of their dreams.**

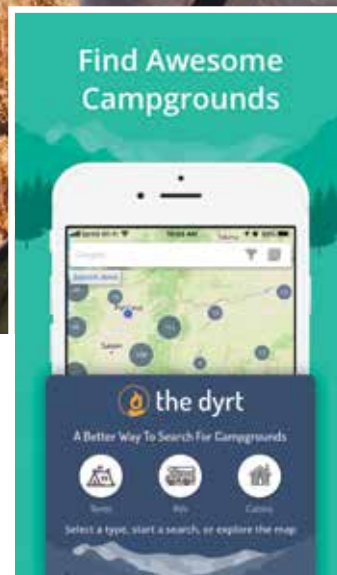
Reviewers—real, everyday outdoor enthusiasts sharing reviews from their real experience—are the site’s top currency, and trust in the reviewer is paramount to sustaining member loyalty. Anyone can submit a review, but each of The Dyrt’s 500 “Rangers” has passed a litmus test by earning the validation of their community peers.

Here’s how it works: The Dyrt launches a regional contest—it could be in Washington State or all of New England—and it invites members to post reviews. Incentives like free gear or outdoor products sweeten the pot. Then the peer-to-peer fun starts. Members earn points from each campsite review, photo, or video they post for the region, and more points for every review share they earn. The reviewer with the top leaderboard results and the most useful reviews wins the contest and automatically becomes a Dyrt Ranger.

This unique, peer-based recognition of The Dyrt’s highest-value members creates momentum while also shifting the brand into listening mode. When members point out what they want next, the brand hears it quickly and responds with offers of new features, services, or products.

Case in point: in response to member demand, The Dyrt has expanded from campsite reviews to outdoor gear reviews, and campsite bookings. To keep Rangers actively contributing, The Dyrt now rewards them with free products they can review in the field. But it doesn’t end there. The Dyrt staff engages these “elite campers” on topics of value to the whole Dyrt community. They might ask for a story of the time the Ranger got lost in the woods. Or to field test their new mobile app. Or to suggest a local partner who can improve camping access in their area. In other words, **community value is built on the backs of The Dyrt’s most active members, everyday people who already share the brand’s affinity for the great outdoors.**

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THE BME COMMUNITY

## The roots of reciprocity

In 2013, Trabian Shorters came to Context Partners with a bold idea. Design an unconventional fellowship that changes the narrative of Black men in America by recognizing them as the community builders they've always been.

Five years in, the Community Genius Fellowship was facing a dilemma: how does Shorters secure funding and support to scale the fellowship across more U.S. cities? While traditional fellowships measure success in hard numbers, BMe's grassroots impact in social justice work is tougher to measure. Still, its value in enabling neighborhood-level change has been palpable and persistently endorsed by its Fellows. Shorters asked Context Partners to cultivate success stories from the Fellows themselves, and draw critical insights between the fellowship's design and the pivotal, ripple-effect change that these leaders are achieving.



I like to come into discovery interviews with as close a connection to the person I'm about to talk to as I can; I have just a few minutes to capture their perspective. I read any background materials and articles I can find, things like where they grew up, the work they do day to day, and the values that guide them. I put a photo of them in front of me before the conversation begins, and I even check out a street view of their work space courtesy of Google Earth.

I spoke with 20 BMe Fellows overall—short, passionate conversations in the tiny sliver of their day they could offer. I was struck by the Fellows' unfiltered candor as they described an initiative they were proud of. Each man described who they were “before BMe,” and “after BMe,” noting how the experience has forever changed how they lead. It got me curious—what is it about the BMe experience that creates this powerful influence and sparks each one's desire to practice reciprocity: to give back in equal measure? I landed on three insights.

### Invest in assets vs. mitigating deficits

In the U.S., there's an acute lack of investment in Black male leaders, particularly from an asset mindset. Instead, leaders who seek funding are asked for narratives of what's wrong in their community, rather than what's possible or already present. These deficit-framed

narratives are intended to incite action and investment by supporters, but they also have a powerful stigmatizing effect.

To shift that narrative, Shorters put asset framing at the center of the Fellows' experience, right from the moment they apply for its \$10,000 award. “Tell us what you'll do with the money”—that's the core question applicants answer. Its simplicity is subtle, but it shifts the conversation entirely. Applicants talk about their vision for change, rather than the bleak state of now.

Asset framing is the shift to narratives that define someone by what they can offer the world. All of the Fellows receive deep training in asset framing as well, to help them shift their personal narrative. That creates powerful moments that unify the Fellows. Most of them don't realize how much their deficit framing has influenced them until Shorters reveals what it is and how it might have affected their entire lives.

Fellows described having this “oh wow” moment. They realize, I shouldn't have had to feel lucky to not have been evicted from my home, or to not have my whole community pushed out of a particular neighborhood. I should be seen as a contributing, valuable member of a community just by virtue of existing. Some say the asset framing mindset lets them be themselves for the first time. It's one reason the program changed its name from Black Male Engagement to simply BMe: “Be me.”

## Applicants talk about their vision for change, rather than the bleak state of now.

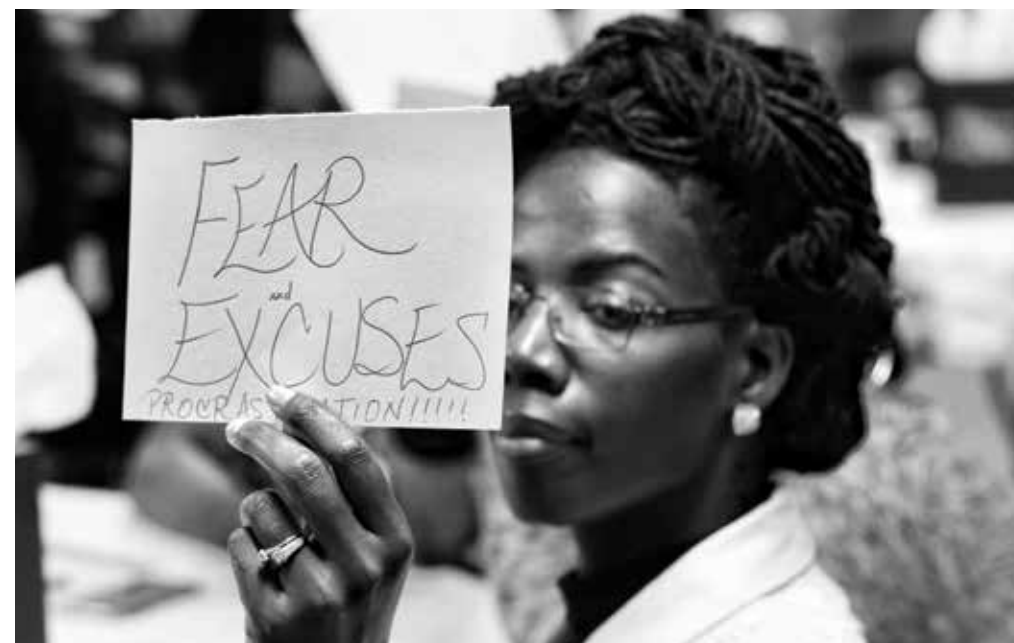
When they can embrace the asset framing mindset, they can take off the mask. They don't have to be anyone other than who they are, or who they thought they couldn't be because of how they grew up.

### Pivotal moments can shift the social equity needle

Every Fellow I spoke with could identify that pivotal moment that set them on their way—when someone saw their value or helped focus them toward different goals. For some, that meant a shift from

reliving cycles of violence or poverty to owning a different narrative for their life. Each Fellow wanted to reciprocate that pivotal moment for someone else.

Shorters' early vision was that organizations don't reward grassroots-level change adequately, namely because it can be tough to measure. Yet to achieve real gains in social equity, we need to enable more of these pivotal moments and the positive ripple effects they create. He saw proof of this in communities everywhere—leaders with a calling, all of whom had grown up in tough circumstances and had been deeply influenced by their own pivotal moment. What if a fellowship could scale the reach of these leaders in their community? Couldn't it also scale the pivotal moments these



leaders could catalyze? One leader helps 50, those 50 help 50 more, and so on.

Before working with BMe, I thought I understood the primary motivation for prospective Fellows to apply. I believed people wished to elevate themselves and their impact first, rather than their cities, neighborhoods or even other leaders.

But the BMe Fellows concurred with Shorters. BMe is using the fellowship as a springboard for community action and grassroots change. Consistently, Fellows said, “I’m doing this not just for me (my future, my career, my family), but to set a legacy of leadership from the neighborhood up.” Fellows are rewriting their own history as a means of helping other young leaders like them to not have to do the same.

### Informality and autonomy breed reciprocity

Many fellowships or networks assume that if you don’t require contact among Fellows, no community will form. Most fellowships, BMe included, have fund allocation rules and reporting requirements too, all well-intended, of course. But the reality is that too much structure can sometimes inhibit community. It’s human nature—rules don’t create relationships that last.

BMe is informal by design. While attendance to their events is required, the format is flexible. It’s the promise of community reciprocity that keeps the Fellows engaged, not rules or structure. From the beginning, the organization deliberately chose a decentralized, open approach to recruitment. The first cohort of Fellows, for example, proved instrumental in vetting the next cohort, and so on, meaning that many candidates initially encounter the program through informal channels.

Fellows are rewriting their own history as a means of helping other young leaders like them to not have to do the same.

Cross-pollination and collaboration occur naturally. For instance, Project Pneuma, a Baltimore nonprofit, teaches young African-American men meditation, yoga, and exercise. Co-founders Damien Myers and Damion Cooper met as BMe Fellows. Even though they weren’t under any obligation to do so, they were inspired to collaborate to provide boys with new skills and pathways into new potential careers. The degree of informality and autonomy built into BMe allows for the free-flowing collaboration that’s key to the organization’s culture of reciprocity. And by defining its Fellows as vital assets to their communities, BMe has begun to transcend cultural and interpersonal barriers to that collaboration.

A growing cohort of men—and now women—is building a new narrative. BMe Fellows are planting the seeds of social change in the expectation that future generations will live in a better neighborhood, a better city, and a better country. When you’re able to see yourself in a new light, an entire world of possibilities is revealed.

**Since 2013, Genius Fellows’ organizations and initiatives have provided hope and opportunity to over 2 million families. Fellows range from corporate executives and business owners like Evan Frazier and Greg Spencer, who use the network to help forge an executive leadership development program for Black people in Pittsburgh, to entrepreneurs like Chris Wilson and Shaka Senghor, who were each formerly incarcerated and have become important international influencers in the justice reform movement.**



BRENDAN WARD is a design researcher and strategist with a background in the study of social movements, globalization, and the new cultural forms created therein. At Context Partners, he works to illuminate and uncover the diffuse voices within a particular community.



TRABIAN SHORTERS is a *New York Times* bestselling author, social entrepreneur, and the leading authority on an award-winning approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion called “Asset Framing.” His pioneering work in Asset Framing earned him recognition as one of the world’s leading social entrepreneurs.

## IN PRACTICE

Context Partners has been a design, strategy, and implementation partner with the BMe Community since its inception in 2013. Together we’ve explored how authentic and often-informal relationships are changing the narrative of Black men in America.

### WHAT WE DID

- Qualitative research
- Service design
- Recruitment campaign design
- Community growth strategy
- Community branding
- Evaluation

### OUTCOMES

BMe has grown from 50 Fellows in 3 cities to 234 Fellows in 7 cities, serving over 2 million families.



## It's community, not commerce

The business model offered by platform marketplaces sounds simple: Bring buyers and sellers together in a scalable volume neither could achieve on their own. The reality is that these marketplaces are anything but simple. Important questions are surfacing for chief marketing officers and platform designers about what drives user trust and, ultimately, sustained loyalty at each stage of a platform's growth.

Brands that are nailing the user trust quotient see their marketplace as a community rather than just a platform for commerce. Etsy, which considers its success wholly dependent on its sellers' success as entrepreneurs, has done this well.

Etsy has long operated with a community model that enables high-quality interactions between sellers and buyers, empowers sellers with business skills, and engages sellers in the platform's service design. When Etsy launched, it built critical mass by aligning

with an existing community of "feminist crafters" and "alt crafters" that had already established a substantial, word-of-mouth network. While those communities had built a significant following, what they were missing was a marketplace. Etsy recognized that if it could deliver the marketplace while amplifying the voice of the seller community even more, a deep trust would form and network effects (users beget users) could drive sustained growth.

"Essentially, building a community around your marketplace means making your users feel that the marketplace is a part of their identity," marketplace expert Cristóbal Gracia has observed. That's key. It's the very commonality among its sellers that sits at the core of the Etsy success—they shared an identity as crafters, artists, creators, collectors, and makers already. Etsy expanded that shared identity into entrepreneurs who aim to earn a living with their craft.



## IN PRACTICE

### Measuring trust

The majority of leaders we spoke with agreed that trust plays an essential role in their success, and that it's tough to measure. Simply put, every audience has a unique currency of trust. For the RealSelf plastic surgery community, it's real-life photos of procedures shared by real people. For Intuit, it's what their customers call "total confidence decisions." For BMe Fellows, it's the prevalence of reciprocity.

The standard tools and metrics—Net Promoter Scores, user behavior data—by which we measure success tell a limited story of trust. Across our conversations, we heard time and again that a new "trust playbook" is needed, one that is flexible enough to reflect the demands and dynamics of your unique audience.

#### TO BUILD YOUR TRUST PLAYBOOK, TAKE THESE THREE STEPS

**1**  
FIND YOUR  
AUDIENCE'S  
CURRENCY OF TRUST.

Use qualitative  
research to  
reveal it.

**2**  
DESIGN  
EXPERIENCES  
THAT DELIVER IT.

Engage the  
audience to  
design it.

**3**  
TRACK YOUR  
PROGRESS.

Measure  
strength of  
relationships.

# ABOUT US HELLO

**CONTEXT PARTNERS** is an insights and strategy firm. With an approach grounded in design thinking and community organizing, we help Fortune 500 brands and global philanthropies build and sustain engagement from their most important audiences.

Services include surfacing actionable insights, designing deeply engaging experiences, and crafting strategies to drive innovation, engagement, loyalty, and influence. We've strengthened millions of relationships for Microsoft, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, C&A, The Rockefeller Foundation, IKEA, Nike, and others. Our work has been featured in *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and *Rotman Management Magazine*.

Learn more at [contextpartners.com](https://contextpartners.com).

  
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We help Fortune 500 brands and global philanthropies build long-game loyalty by:

- Surfacing compelling audience insights that inform better decision-making and design
- Designing high-value experiences that foster trust, loyalty, and sustained action
- Building strategies for long-game loyalty, influence, and innovation.



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