How to activate your brand community
“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,” African Proverb
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This Brand Guidebook will give you an insight on neo-tribal marketing and how to activate your own brand community. After reading this you will be an expert in postmodern marketing and have a new marketing strategy that focuses on your consumer and suits your business. With the ‘activation’ test, you will find out what the right strategy towards activating your brand community is and what to focus on. This guide helps you establish a loyal customer and create a community that goes beyond fashion and the offered product. It is also established to create awareness towards brand communities, as my research shows that these are becoming increasingly important for a successful marketing strategy.

Even though a strong brand community does not automatically generate a businesses success, as my research shows, that even hard-core tribal members only purchase a few items per season, it is still a social phenomenon that is very useful for marketeers. With the right strategy it is possible to increase word-of-mouth marketing and create buzz with the help of a tribal following. The potential of peer activity that tribes contain is undeniable and offers the possibility of authentic brand ambassadors. Brands like Supreme on a big scale or Patta more locally confirm these theories and show the benefits of having a brand community. It is also visible that authenticity nowadays plays an important role in a consumers purchase decision and brands or products that are recommend by peers are more likely to be perceived as authentic. Many start-ups are trying to survive on the market with creative marketing ideas and a low budget, but also established brands are trying to establish a loyal customer base in these unstable times. It is important to understand how to interact with your customer on eye sight, whilst maintaining the upper hand.
What is neo-tribalism?

Not sure what neo-tribalism or a postmodern marketing approach is? No need to panic just yet, it really sounds more complicated than it is. The term neo-tribalism was first used in 1996 by the sociologist Maffessoli and has since been the new marketing dogma. However it is important to understand the circumstances under which this postmodern approach was developed.

Back in the days Marketing was seen as a science to increase sales or as Philip Kotler defines Marketing: 'The science and art of exploring, creating, and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit.' It is very visible that this modern view focuses on target groups as the customer base of a business. Further during that time a Marketing approach was developed by the following steps: Target, Aim and Shoot. This leads to highly paternalistic brands and a unidirectional exchange between brand and consumer:

Brand ————> Consumer

After this modern period, the internet rose and consumers had access to more power. By using like buttons on social media or becoming part of online communities, people suddenly had the ability to not only be interconnected at any time, but also provide their opinion about products and brands. Next to this technological development, hegemonic structures of society were also questioned. This means that for example new forms of families arose and western society does no longer participate regularly in religion. On the other hand, the archaic need for new social groups, led to passion based groups or brand communities. Humans always want to belong to a group, especially in the post-individual age after the 1990’s. Maffessoli also describes our time as ‘the aestheticized consumption era’, which means that we identify our equal by shared aesthetics. Scientists differ between brand communities and groups that form around a certain passion. The latter is often an activity (e.g. Running), but can also be food (e.g. Whiskey) or an art project (e.g. Lomo). It is already visible that the boarders of neo-tribes are fluid and people mostly belong to different tribes and also interact with different tribes on a regular basis. It is also important to mention that these neo-tribes have different levels of engagement. The hard-core of the neo-tribe might act differently than the periphery and vice versa. However there are certain behavioral codes that are adapted by new members in the affiliation process. Neo-tribes are communities that for example have similar aesthetics and share the same language or argot.

This new empowered, but also very resourceful consumer led to the development of tribal marketing. Therefore tribal marketing focuses on a neo-tribe instead of target groups. Target groups segment customers and are homogenous groups of people from a demographic point of view, but they mostly do not communicate with each other. In contrast to that are the heterogenous neo-tribes, who are already connected to one another due to their shared passion. That is why brands, who focus on a postmodern marketing approach rather use ethnographic research methods. These describe the collection of qualitative data, mostly by means of interviews with tribal members. It is actually about finding out ‘What’ theses tribal members talk about rather than ‘Why’ they behave the way they do. Marketers nowadays believe that that is the key to a strong brand.
What is neo-tribalism?

It is important to note that from these developments brands provide the opportunity for customers to identify with them, whilst also expressing their identity. Consumers then do not purchase because of the use or monetary value, but rather because of the emotional value. In this scenario brands become friends and the glue value is highly symbolic. Thus the interaction between brands and consumers is unidirectional:

Lastly it is important to note that postmodern marketing also suggests the active involvement of consumers in the decision making process of brands. Nike-ID is an example of co-creation, which can be considered as a high involvement. However my study shows that tribal members are not interested in influencing the brand values or even co-creating, because they are still looking for a leader. Be aware that this does not mean that we should go back to the paternalistic brands, but focus more on the brand story. This story is what makes your brand authentic to a community, so there is no need to give the consumer too much power. The dangers of giving your consumer too much power lie in a harmful brand hijack, like Lonsdale had to experience it.
Advantages of a brand community

After finding out about what neo-tribalism is or brand communities are, you are probably asking yourself, why you should put all this effort in it? Besides the previously mentioned danger of a harmful brand hijack, there are many advantages that neo-tribes offer. The correct interaction between consumer and brand can make or break a business, since the consumer is the most important resource. In regards to simplicity, please find the main advantages of a neo-tribal marketing approach here:

1. Communities are heterogenous, but already talk to one another and have a link
2. High Return on Investment (ROI), the strategies are not costly
3. True tribe members become brand ambassadors – for free!
4. Thanks to social media, tribes can easily have a wide reach and create buzz
5. High possibility of peer activity and added value
6. Your brand will be perceived as more authentic

'The human inclination towards virtual self-exhibition and group narcissism in social media inveigles consumers to provide highly impactful advertisement. In this case, photographic proof that the work-out is paying off. This supports the idea that outsourcing a part of the brand’s content generation to the customer can be of great value for your company’ (Muñiz & Schau, 2011).'
Find out if your brand has the potential for a brand community! This test is the result of my research, which proves its validity. Further the outcome should not be seen as a set strategy, but more an advise about which direction to take. The test has also been created to increase awareness about brand communities.

First of all let’s find out if your brand already has the potential for strong community. We might also find out that your brand already has a neo-tribal following. This test will help us determine the right strategy for your brand.

1. Are you a start-up or established brand?
   - We just started our business and are a start-up brand
   - We started our brand some time ago, but are also not very established
   - We have been operating for some years and are very established on the market

2. How would you most likely describe your consumer?
   - Our consumer is between 25-35, they have a medium income and mostly live in urban cities
   - Millennials, who share their live on social media
   - People, who engage in debates and are highly politicized

3. Why do you think consumers mainly buy your product?
   - Because our product has a great functional benefits and we are able to offer it for a low-price point
   - Because it has a high quality, but also means something to people in terms of emotional value
   - Because they use it as a sign or symbol to identify with others
4. Do you already have a retail space or provide the opportunity for consumers to engage with each other online?

☐ No, we only have our website

☐ Yes, we have a store in a location, which represents our brand values

☐ Yes, we have multiple stores in different cities

5. How would you most likely describe the style of your clothes?

☐ We want to be very commercial, therefore we try to always be on trend and constantly change our collections

☐ We try to have a signature style and also offer some styles with our logo. We want to be on trend, but stay true to our routes

☐ Our clothes are not trend savvy at all and we have our branding on most of the styles

6. How can consumers interact with your brand?

☐ By buying a product and contacting our customer service

☐ They can come by our store, but also engage on our social media accounts

☐ Multiple ways, from our store to our online offers and consumers even started online forums themselves
7. Do you offer anything in terms of content?
- No, we want to convince our customer with the benefits of our product
- Yes, we try to offer some stories about our heritage and feature local heroes. We also try to offer some recommendations in terms of art, music and other aspects of our customers life
- Yes, we always post many video’s about our products and feature other artists on our blogs and social media accounts

8. Did you ever change the story of your brand or rebranded your company?
- Yes, we don’t really have a strict brand story and are constantly trying to rebrand according to the current trend
- No, we want to stay true to who we are and are therefore not interested in changing our story
- No, but our consumers are currently influencing our brand values and assigning new ones

9. How tight do you hold on to your marketing strategy or how open is your PR/Marketing department for change?
- I would not know, because our PR/Marketing department is outsourced and I am not sure what their strategy is at the moment
- Our PR/Marketing department is very open for change, as we are a young company, we are still looking for the right way to go
- We have a clear vision regarding our Marketing strategy, but are willing to adapt and our PR/Marketing department is always influenced by the wishes of our customer
10. Does your customer already share things about your brand on social media, etc.?
- No, our customer does not share our products or other content about our brand
- Yes, our customers post pictures of our store and/or our products, they also interact with one another on social media
- Yes, we have developed several hashtags that our customer uses and they also created their own groups on social media

11. Is your product constantly available and do your regularly update your stock?
- Yes, we always have everything in stock and make sure the customer gets what they want
- No, when we drop a new collection customers have to be fast to get it and we don’t reproduce styles from old collections
- No, unfortunately we cannot guarantee that everything is in stock, but we reproduce good selling styles for the next season
Results and implementation

Please count how often you have chosen each color:

1
2
3

I mostly have answers of the following color:

Strategy 1  Strategy 2  Strategy 3

Possible solutions – let's talk strategies!

Once you have identified the rate of your answers, it's time to check your results. By analyzing your answer we will find the perfect strategy for your brand to implement tribal marketing and activate your brand community. In case you have the same number of answers for two strategies, you can simply combine the given advice in order to find a fitting strategy. In any case you will know how to activate your community!
Low potential – find your tribe!

Your brand currently has low potential for a brand community and does not have one yet. Be aware that you do not have to stress out, but can still increase your potential and find your brand community. The following strategy will suggest what you should now focus on.

If your are a start up business it is important that you have strong brand values and a good story. Research shows that community members are highly attracted to clear brand values and storytelling. This increases the chance that someone will identify with your brand, which is the ultimate goal, when wanting to reach a neo-tribe. If you are not sure what your brand values are it is also possible to ask your customers and let the consumer decide. Always remember that once you have already one strong ambassador others will follow. It is also very important that you do not consider finding your tribe only a marketing approach, but try to make it a general strategy. Brands who implement and lie focus on the customer brand relationship every step of the way are more likely to have a strong community.

Since you have not identified your tribe yet, you could make an event in the city where your headquarter is and simply see who shows up. That way it will be easy to speak to the people, who already know your brand and recognize similarities. When doing this it is important not to think in terms of target markets (e.g. demographic attributes), but in terms of what the consumer is interested in and talks about. Also especially focus on how and where you started the brand, most of the times you already have a very specific customer.

Another mistake that is commonly made is to advertise and focus on product benefits. This goes in hand with promoting a lower price point. At first it might seem strange not to point out those functional benefits, but a brand community will purchase your product due to the emotional connection. It is very important that consumers can identify with your brand and the product. Try to communicate personified benefits and make your brand accessible. It is also helpful to start thinking of your brand as a person, the friends and family attitude highly appeals to tribes. For fashion brands in particular it is also important to be recognizable. In streetwear and even couture nowadays that is achieved by styles with the brand logo. Neo-tribes consume to belong and therefore recognition is crucial. This does not need to be product based, but can also be a shared passion, e.g. sustainability.

When wanting to establish a brand community it is essential to provide spaces for consumers to interact. Without these you might also risk an entrepreneurial consumer with too much power. Therefore it is good to assist your brand community to get organized in a controllable manner, where your brand can also participate on eyesight. These spaces can be online, but research shows that consumers purchase decision is still highly influenced by retail spaces.

Lastly it is necessary to be authentic. There is nothing more important for brand communities than authenticity. These tribal members will identify with your brand and almost see it as a friend, thus ask yourself the question if you would like to have a friend that is inauthentic and not true to him-/herself?
High potential – nurture your tribe

Congratulations your brand has a high potential for a brand community or you might already have one. You are already doing many things right in terms of strategy, when it comes to activating your tribe. However in our fast changing consumer sphere it is important to keep up and nurture your community.

You most likely already have a created a store or online spaces for your community to connect. Thus you have the possibility of gathering data from your brand community, which then can be implemented in your CRM system. Even though neo-tribes seem to be very intangible and cannot be put in boxes like target groups, qualitative data can still be gathered. In order to keep track of your tribe, so it does not become self-sufficient it is important to be in the know. With this approach it is always important to offer the consumer the possibility of interaction with peers, but try not to be omni present as a brand, because you do not want to become intrusive or paternalistic. Try to understand what they are talking about and what they are fond of. By doing so you can also create suitable content.

The creation of content is second highly essential point, when nurturing your brand community. The study has shown that consumers are interested in recommendations, but also do not get actively informed. Therefore it is crucial to use the right platforms and formats in regards to efficiency. Social Media always has a wide reach, but be aware that brand communities enjoy local offers. If your brand operates in more than one city/country try to launch different accounts, so consumers have the opportunity to connect to

connect to their specific one. Nowadays most brands and especially streetwear brands benefit from having a soundcloud account, where they regularly post new music remixes. This is a benefit for the consumers, who can also decide themselves whether to use it.

Product-wise your brand probably already has a signature style or some kind of recognition. That’s when you might be in the right phase for a collaboration. Collaborations with the right brands or designers have the ability to broaden your brands reach and also appeal to other customers. These can also generate exclusivity or support local artists. Be very aware of who you choose as your partner though, because the wrong one could harm your brand image. Neo-tribes and the core of your brand community usually does not enjoy mass market offers. Therefore you have to be careful, that your brand does not become commodified.

As community affiliation is a long term strategy, it can be very intangible and hard to measure at times, whether your community is generating profit. Therefore it is even more important that since you already have the potential to set your goals SMART and always evaluate the outcome.
Past potential - be aware not to be hijacked

Your brand is possibly already established on the market and you have a neo-tribal following. This means that your brand is beyond having potential for a brand community, but rather needs a strategy to avoid a harmful brand hijack. This becomes especially dangerous if your consumer is already highly aware and politicized. Benefiting from a strong brand community means always keeping an eye on the power balance between brand and consumer in order to avoid that your tribe becomes plunderers.

Firstly you should find out if the community fits with your brand DNA, in order to determine if they will spread the values you represent. If not it might be wise to go back to modern marketing strategies and set clear boundaries. Further it is important to always work with your neo-tribe. You could for example open a pop-up store, that is just designed for their needs. There you also have the possibility to get in contact with your brand community in order to find out more about their intentions. As the community most likely identifies with your brand and glorifies it, this will make them feel special and satisfy their needs.

Another approach you should try is sponsoring the right crowd. My study shows that the right sponsoring influences a consumers decision about authenticity. An established brand, who still sponsors local artists or athletes is considered more authentic. This also helps you communicating your image and brand values. You could also think about special events with the people you sponsor or exhibitions to show their talent. That would not only help the artist, but also your brand.

Once your brand values are clear and you have successfully communicated them to the public, there is one step left to avoid a serendipitous brand hijack by your brand community. You can avoid your community wanting to harm your brand by recognizing their loyalty. Most neo-tribes form around a shared passion, whilst seeking some kind of belonging. Thus the consumer invests time and money in your brand, which you should reward. Try to find a reward system for loyal customers, but not in monetary ways. The reward does not need to be something physical or a discount from your brand, as that is a highly modern marketing strategy, but can be something that has nothing to do with your brand like a spa voucher or similar. This will make the loyal customer feel desired and understood, in a very personal way.

Never forget that a postmodern marketing strategy implies trial and error. It is also important to understand that you have to invest in your customer experience, in order to keep your community satisfied. Further every consumer wants to feel like there is a personal bond between him/her and the the brand. And as Wipperfürth already said ,a Brand Hijack takes time’ the above mentioned are all long-term, but very interesting strategies, due to the high ROI. However most importantly don’t try to control your tribe
10 Steps

If you’re still not sure whether you have found the right strategy:

Welcome to the last step, where you can find out how to activate your community in 10 short steps. These steps are generated from my empirical research and are supposed to show how to establish a brand community, so that everyone in your company is able to recognize.

1. Know your audience and carefully generate content
2. Engage – People don’t get actively informed about fashion on a regular basis
3. Go local - Create brand awareness with specific local offers
4. Don’t only offer fashion - Yes fashion is fun and we all love it, but try to have strong brand values and communicate your history
5. Go physical – Create spaces online and offline
6. Be recognizable – Logos are a useful tool
7. Sold out! Artificial scarcity is a helpful tool and generates exclusivity
8. Try to lead - A strong community needs a leader
9. Offer identification - Consumers want to identify with a brand the same way they do with friends
10. Focus on the customer and be accessible
In conclusion neo-tribalism or brand communities can be a profitable strategy, but not every brand is made for it. You have to be bold and willing to change, that might require being brave and restructuring multiple departments. Most importantly brands have to be approachable and it’s definitely not for every fashion brand, as you need to have strong brand values and a passion for your product / offer. Always remember that neo-tribes differ from subcultures and the boarders are fluid, so your customer might engage with another brand on the same level.