

PRAISE FOR *THE PASSION CONVERSATION*

“It’s a fast read, a fun read, a smart read. Short sentences, huge heart. Read it. Why? To absorb an important truth from the masters of word of mouth movements: Conversations spring from passions, not products.”

—Dan Heath, co-author of *Decisive*, *Switch*, and *Made to Stick*

“Have you ever gotten teary-eyed over a business book? Better yet, over your own business? Prepare yourself for *The Passion Conversation*, where the folks at Brains on Fire tell how their business connected them with people in very moving and powerful ways, redefining words like marketing, sales, and success. Read this book to move your perspective from business to people, and experience the incredible effect it will have on your life and work.”

—Jon Mueller, General Manager of 800-CEO-READ

“Love is the missing ingredient in developing loyalty with customers. In *The Passion Conversation*, the smart folks at Brains on Fire expertly explain how to develop deeper connections with customers who in turn sing your praises to everyone they know.”

—Jackie Huba, author of *Monster Loyalty: How Lady Gaga Turns Followers into Fanatics*

“I’ve had my eye on Brains on Fire for a while. Their humanity makes them quite distinctive, and *The Passion Conversation* captures that unique voice.”

—Peter Sims, author of *Little Bets*, and founder of The BLK SHP Enterprises

Brains on Fire

Join the conversation at brainsonfire.com/blog.

**Understanding, Sparking, and Sustaining
Word of Mouth Marketing**

THE PASSION CONVERSATION

ROBBIN PHILLIPS | GREG CORDELL | GENO CHURCH | AND JOHN MOORE

WILEY

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This book is dedicated to the heroes, the driven, the wonderers, the rebels, to those who answer a calling—to those who wear their hearts on their sleeves and 146 on their hearts. You remind us that becoming more human is the journey to greatness for any brand. Because ultimately, the best brands, the brands we love most, are the ones that never let us forget how it feels to be good people.

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Preface

A Note from the Authors:

We won't lie. This was a hard book to write.

You see, at Brains on Fire, we believe that we owe it to our courageous customers to spend most of our time and efforts finding and sharing their passion conversation and growing their tribes. As people who *practice* word of mouth marketing, just finding time to write this book was a really, really big deal.

We burned some serious late-night oil.

But it was worth it because we learned so much along the way. And we grew even closer to our customers. We had someone ask us the other day, "Aren't you afraid you're giving away your secrets?" We smiled and said, "Nope." See, we don't believe there are any marketing secrets. We've learned that sharing and connecting with other like-minded people in the world is what's magical these days. By sharing knowledge with others, we've learned *good things will happen*.

Our first book, *Brains on Fire: Igniting Powerful, Sustainable, Word of Mouth Movements* (yes, Brains on Fire is the name of our company *and* our first book) was a really remarkable ride. It connected us with some super-cool people. Some of those people have

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become our friends and kindred spirits. Some of them knocked on our door and joined our tribe. Some we're honored to call our customers and advocates. You'll get to meet a lot of them in the following pages.

Consider this book a continuation of the lessons we shared in our first book. Here's a quick review:

Movements aren't about the product conversation; they're about the *passion* conversation.

They start with the first conversation.

They have inspirational leadership.

They have a barrier of entry.

They empower people with knowledge.

They create a feeling of shared ownership.

They have powerful identities.

They live both online and offline.

They make advocates feel like rock stars.

Many times they find and fight an injustice.

And most importantly, movements get results.

We love hearing people recite these lessons back to us. We love it when they let us know how they have applied some of them to their own businesses. And you'll absolutely see the lessons from our last book brought to life throughout these pages. Still, we knew we had learned more in the three years since our first book was published, and we wanted to spend some time digging deeper. We felt that we owed it to our readers, our customers, and ourselves.

We're big believers in the notion that writing (*and speaking*) inspires thinking, and writing this book and telling these stories has truly been a gift to us. We've talked to many wise and wonderful people including our customers, their customers, and even each other. Writing this book and having these conversations has helped us really *think* about the work we're doing in the world

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and define what matters. It has helped us grow. It has opened our hearts, and helped us fall even deeper in love with the people we serve.

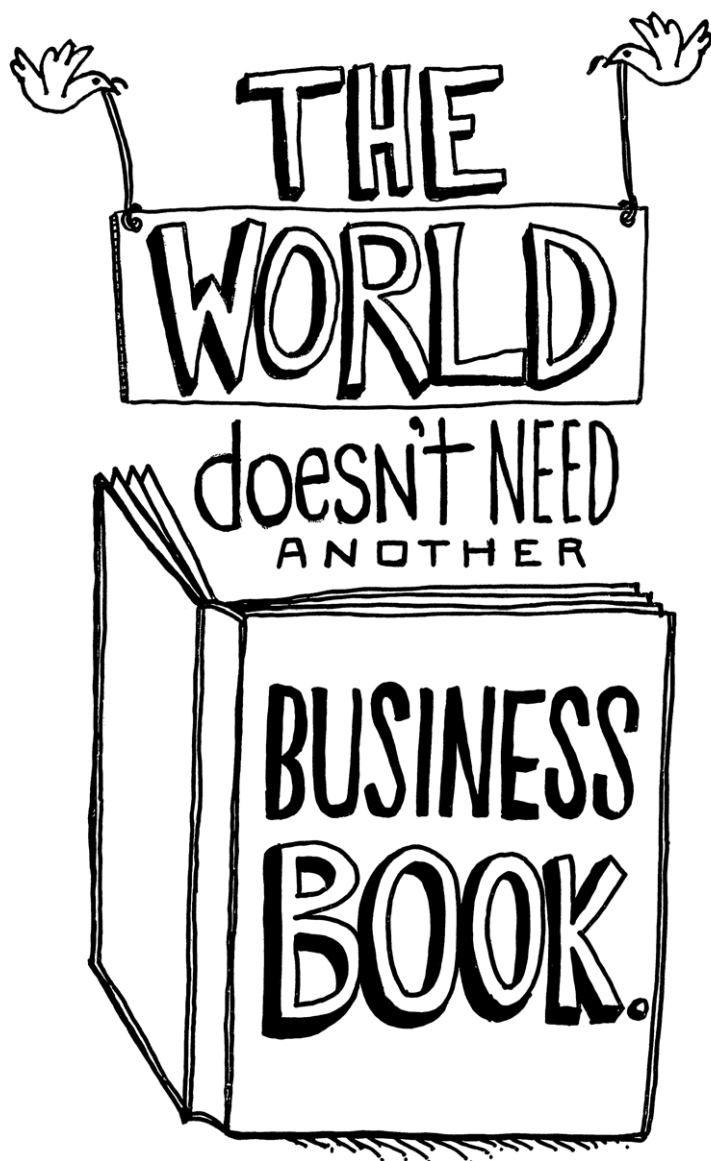
Our only hope is that it does a little bit of the same for you.

With LOVE always,
Robbin, Greg, Geno, and John
(and the entire Brains on Fire tribe)

A LITTLE SIDENOTE FROM THE AUTHORS



When you have a book with four authors, you have to make some style decisions. So just like several other author teams have opted to do, we talk about ourselves in the third person. Please know that none of us ever, ever, ever refers to ourselves in the third person when you're actually with us face-to-face. (Geez, that's weird when people do that.) We did it here to make it easier to follow. You'll even see us quote ourselves. Think of it this way: We simply decided to let you inside our walls and let you listen in on our passion conversations: conversations with our clients, our teammates, some smart people we know, and even among ourselves. Enjoy. And do us a favor: Please reach out to us and let us know what you think. You can find us thinking out loud most days on our blog at www.brainsonfire.com.



The Passion Conversation is a LOVE STORY.

We know what you're probably thinking: The last thing the world needs is another business book.

Don't worry. This is *not* a business book. This is a love story.

It might sound strange, but hear us out. *The Passion Conversation* is a story about being famous for the people who love you, *for the way you love them*.

We're going to share some remarkable *love* stories.

In the three years since our first book, *Brains on Fire*, was published we've done a lot of thinking about *love* and how it relates to business and to word of mouth marketing. We've also given a lot of thought to the word *passion*, which we actually mention 67 times in our last book. (Sixty-seven times? Yup. John Moore, the self-proclaimed "ticky-tacky detail geek" among us counted.)

Since that first book, we've wondered over and over again—at first to ourselves, then aloud to one another—is passion something that can be unearthed in someone? Can it be taught? Is it

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real? It is overused or misused? Did *we* misuse it one or more of those 67 times? Does it belong in business, or is it a word best saved for artists, romance novels, religious stories, or 20-year-old lovebirds who can't stand the thought of being apart?

We've asked ourselves over the years why the following lesson from our last book gets tweeted and repeated over and over and over again.

**“It's not about the product conversation;
it's about the passion conversation.”**

Hmmmm.

The book you're holding in your hands is called *The Passion Conversation*. We don't take that deliberate choice of words lightly. Can we really write a book worthy of such a lofty title? Who knows? But we do know the following:

We're all in marketing grad school. And there are some valuable *lessons* to be learned inside the passionate love stories we're about to share with you. They're lessons that can make our businesses better places to work. Lessons that can make us feel more alive and more purposeful in how we spend our time and talents. Lessons that can help spark social change. Think about it: Can you imagine a world where more of us are happy at work? A world where the majority of us are working with passion?

In the following pages, we'll share the stories of four amazing organizations—Foundations Recovery Network, Anytime Fitness, DeVry University, and the National Center for Family Literacy—that took the time and effort to bring their passion conversations to life inside and outside of their office walls. Regardless of their for-profit or not-for-profit status, each of the companies we're highlighting is adding value to people's lives, and in doing so, they're sparking word of mouth.

It's in our DNA as human beings to share things we find valuable and meaningful with others. We talk about things (*and*

people) we love often and with a force that sticks. You might not be a recovery business, a fitness franchise, a higher education university, a not-for-profit, or any of the other businesses we've sprinkled in, but chances are these stories will inspire you to take action nonetheless.

**We believe with all our hearts and souls, it is possible,
absolutely possible, to fall madly and passionately
in love with the people you serve.**

And we believe that it's possible for those folks to fall in love with *you*, too; and, yes, for you to become famous and grow your organization because of that love. If you want people to be in love with you and talk about you, you must fall in love with them *first*. Your clients, customers, donors, tribe, employees, advocates—what you call them doesn't really matter—can and should become beloved heroes in your organizations.

Because guess what naturally happens when you're in love? You talk about that person you love constantly. You can't wait to be with them. You think about how you can surprise them. You inspire them. They inspire you. You share secrets. You want to understand them. You have empathy. You defend them. You have compassion. You don't mind taking out the trash. You are deeply connected.

Passion is contagious.

As business owners, marketers, or Chief Love Officers (*a title we think more relevant than Chief Marketing Officer*) we should feel wildly romantic and passionate about the people who help fuel our businesses and spread our causes. Passion fuels word of mouth conversation and excitement. Our passions make us happy and let us know that life is worth living. They motivate us to do remarkable things. When we are passionate about someone, we really do talk about that person all the time. We're eager and excited to

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share the tiniest details. Spend just a few minutes around a new parent and you'll see what we mean.

Passion is not something you *own*; it's something you pass forward. So if you take the time to understand your own unique passion conversations—and *yes, we believe everyone has them*—as well as the ones that excite those you serve, something amazing will happen.

That's exactly what we've done to grow our own business over the years. Not only have we fallen in love with our customers, we received the permission and indeed the honor to get to know and care for our customers' customers. We are village matchmakers, facilitators, the Cupid of marketing companies. It's our role to help connect our customers with their employees and customers through *shared passions*.

Don't just take our word for it.

We've studied the work of some smart people who are also digging deep into *why* people talk—we've even become friends with a few. We've mixed and kneaded some of our in-the-trenches knowledge with the areas they've been researching and learning. We found that there's magic in that recipe, magic we feel compelled to share with the world.

What does it take to fall in love with your advocates, the customers and employees who are ready, willing, and happy to fall in love with you? The people who therefore willingly and passionately talk about you?

Here are the key things we've learned that you'll see come alive in the following pages:

1. **Know yourself and clearly define what you really want from a relationship with your employees and customers.** We hate it when we hear companies talk about *using* fans to tell their story. Think about it: Do

you really *use* people you care about? Absolutely *not*. You *listen* to them. You *get close* to them. You see them frequently. You want to be a meaningful part of their life. When we begin working with a new client, we almost always start by listening to stories within that organization's walls. We have a day of knowledge sharing. We play games. We laugh. We hear their hopes and dreams. Our goal is to help the people we serve better define who they are and what they stand for. So, we spend time with the people who answer the phones. We observe them in action as they talk with their current and potential customers and supporters. We ask to see their love letters. We take photos of the things they hang on their walls and keep at their desks. We talk to the people on the front lines as well as the CMOs and CEOs and brand managers. We spend time in meetings and just hang out socially to get know their passions. Because you know what? *Passion should be a mirror*. Write that down or star it in the margins so you get it under your fingernails. The reflections should match; inside passion should mirror outside passion. You have to know what drives you and your employees to get up in the morning before you can connect with other like-minded people. As author and speaker Simon Sinek says in his book *Start with Why*, we go looking for your *why*. (*By the way, if you haven't read Simon's book, do it. Right after you're done with this one.*)

2. **Be very realistic about who your customers and potential customers really are.** If you're a not-for-profit, get an accurate picture of your volunteers and your donors. Who's doing more than just writing a check once or twice a year and *why*? Start internally and ask yourself some tough questions. Who do you serve?

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What do they really look like? What are their challenges? How and when do you fit in their lives? How can you add value?

For a brief time, we had a client in the beauty and fashion business. We discovered this client's customers were fairly average women, people who shopped at Walmart and Target and drove minivans. They were amazing, beautiful women who cared about looking their best, but they were not just off the cover of *Vogue* or *Glamour*. So we connected with them and started igniting a community around that connection. We found that they were real women with beauty and fashion tips and life stories (and struggles) to share. The CEO was upset that the women we felt they should be celebrating *and loving* weren't magazine-glossy perfect. Some of them (*heaven forbid!*) were even overweight. He wanted to chase the pretty girl at the party, because that's who he wanted leading the community and talking on his company's behalf. That's what people in the beauty industry do. But the pretty girl in the room didn't want to talk to him and his brand. He missed the point entirely, and we resigned. Most likely, before we were about to be fired.

The point is you have to be very realistic about who your customers really are and not just who you want them to be. As most of us know from personal experiences, you can't make someone who is not interested in you love you. Write this down too: You can't choose your advocates; *they choose you*.

3. **You can't find love sitting on your couch watching TV.** There's a time to just chill and watch TV, just like there is a time to quietly pore over data and

demographics. Make no mistake: We love data as much as the next company, but to really fall in love with your customers and find their passions, you have take time to *be* with your customers. You have to get out and make real world connections. You have to meet people where they are. Join their parties and go to their football games. And for goodness sake, don't just come out and ask people, "What is your passion?" It's a personal and emotional question and one that's pretty hard to answer without any warning or opportunity for forethought. You have to earn trust to learn about someone's true passions and trust takes time. Let's be honest. The first requirement in finding the passion conversation is pretty simple: *You have to enjoy being with people.*

4. **You can discover love and learn a lot online.** There are tons of ways to listen to and participate in the conversations your customers and potential customers are having online. We partner with many smart companies who can help do just that. So exactly what *can* you learn from listening to these online conversations? A lot. You might find out people are tuning you out, or that they are crying *bullshit* on your entire industry. By using today's online technology, everyone has the ability to meet people who share similar interests, people who they would have never been able to meet in "real life."

When we get a new client, we do two Google searches: "I love _____ (fill in client name)." And "I hate _____ (fill in client name)." This helps us narrow down where the passionate conversations, both positive and negative, are taking place. You can learn a lot about passion at both ends of the emotional spectrum.

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5. **Love is patient and kind.** You cannot find the passion conversation, ignite community and fall in love overnight. Sure, there are one-night stands that might feel good at the time (*perhaps the marketing equivalent of this is a successful campaign*). But for real and lasting relationships to take hold, you have to be in it for the long haul. As we stated in our last book, igniting community and sparking movements are not like traditional ad campaigns. Ad campaigns have an on and off switch. You create them, run them, cross your fingers and hope for the best. Building community and loving your customers is not something you do for a limited amount of time. It's something you do every single day. And the value of that effort grows exponentially stronger and deeper with time.
6. **Meeting people through activities is a low-pressure way of getting to know them, and also will encourage bonding.** We almost always bring our customers together with their potential community leaders, something we discussed at length in *Brains on Fire's* Lesson #3, which focused on the fact that movements have inspirational leadership. We bring them together to engage in a multiday summit or training session in an impressive venue. We encourage everyone to let go and enjoy themselves as we learn about each other. People share and form trust, and memories are created.

There's a little secret in the dating world that *The Game* author Neil Strauss calls "time-distortion." (Though definitely not a business book, there are few good marketing lessons hidden in there.) "Time-distortion" occurs when you go to several different places with a person or group you've just met in a short period of



Called to Serve WITH _____.

Before you can take your passion conversation outside of your organization, you have to make sure it's felt deeply and clearly inside its own walls.

Bon Secours St. Francis Health System is one of our current customers. They've actually been a lifelong customer of Robbin's. Seriously, she's worked with them through her entire entrepreneurial career. Together we've seen them through three CEOs and numerous CMOs. We were even with them when they changed leadership hands to an entirely new Catholic Health System based out of Maryland.

During their first CEO's tenure, St. Francis employees truly let their faith shine. They prayed before meetings and surgeries and nuns were often seen walking the halls and visiting patients in their rooms. The staff openly and proudly shared what made St. Francis different as a health provider.

The second CEO felt it was better to rein that difference in a bit and instead focus on the technology aspect of health care. Given the research available at the time this was seemingly not a bad move. Unfortunately, not long after this change, turnover and low morale became an issue. Something was clearly missing...

When the third and current CEO, Mark Nantz, came on board he and his team made a bold decision to return St. Francis to its core values and reason for being. Together with the HR and marketing departments, we began working on a plan to discover the motivation of every single person in the organization. Everyone. The first step was to take a day and meet offsite with the entire 200+ person leadership team. We asked each person why they were in patient care, and more specifically why they were a part of the Bon Secours St. Francis team. These individuals were then given the tools to ask others throughout the organization those same questions.

For the next few months these leaders and trainers held offsite retreats with different groups and departments to help each individual determine their own personal response to the prompt "Called to serve with _____." Their answer revealed the passion