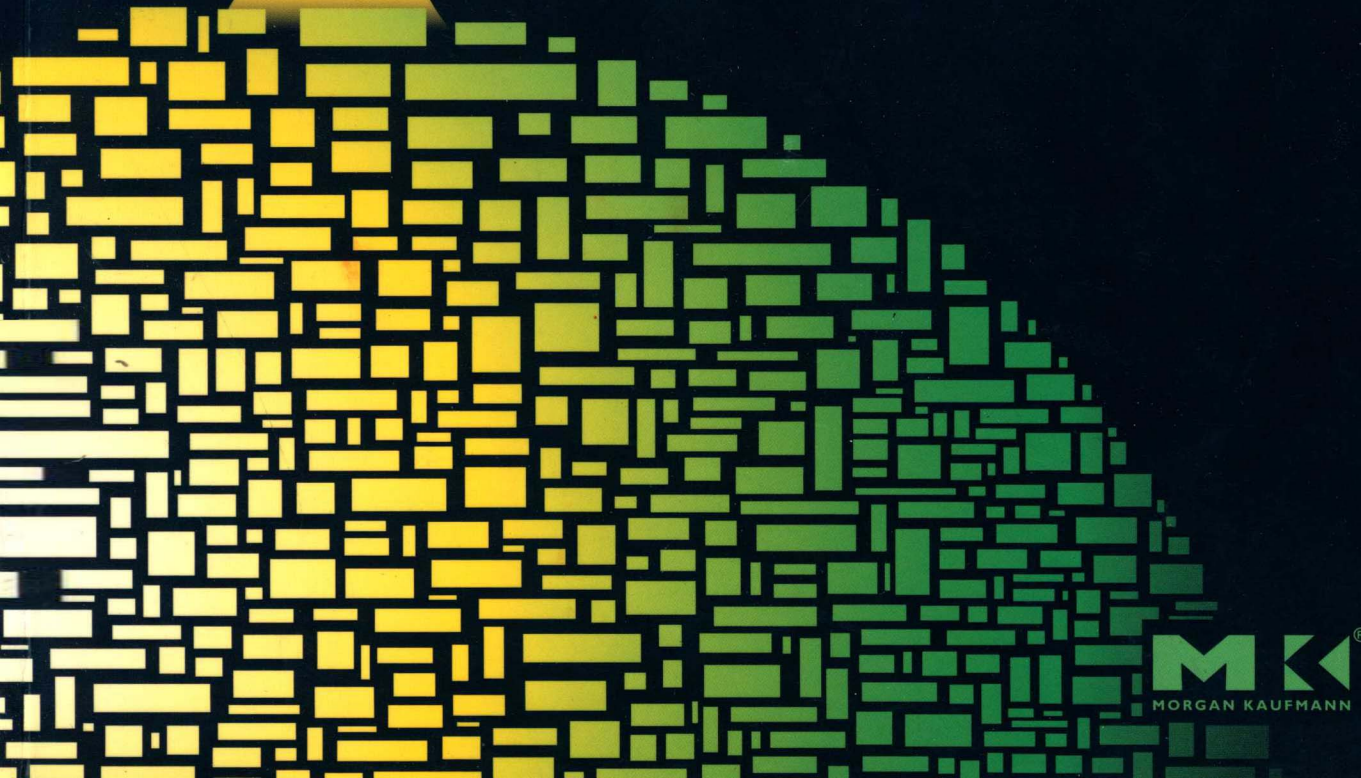
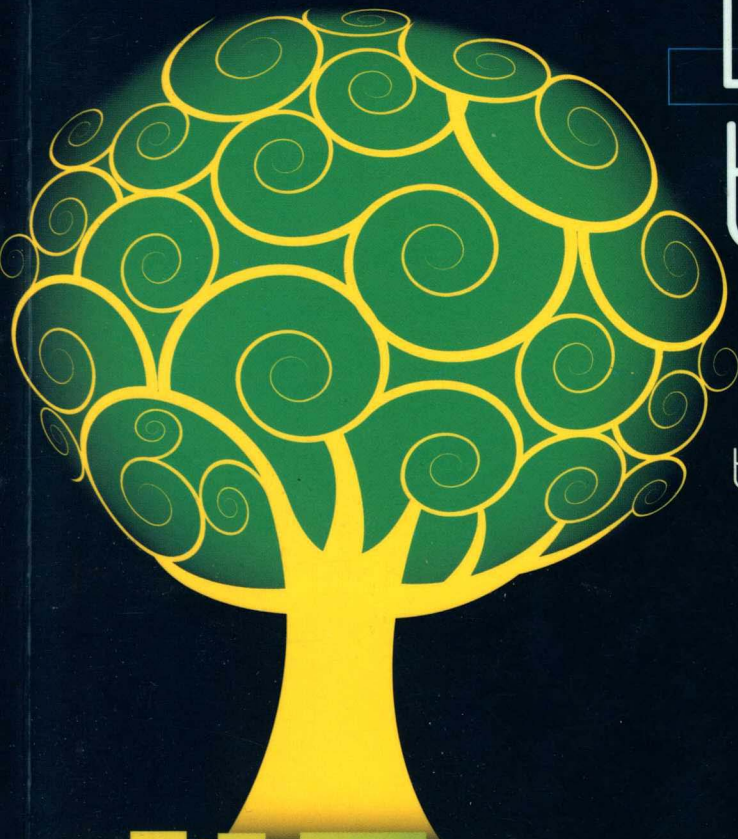


Tharon W. Howard

# Design to Thrive

Creating Social Networks  
and Online Communities  
that Last



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MORGAN KAUFMANN

# Design to Thrive

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Online Communities that Last

*Tharon W. Howard*



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# **Design to Thrive**

## ***In Praise of Design to Thrive: Creating Social Networks and Online Communities that Last***

*"Tharon Howard's experienced and reflective account of how to develop social networks and online communities is remarkable because it puts the social experience first. Technology can improve as well as kill social experience. Howard's theoretical stance is firmly grounded in a lifetime of practical experience which makes fascinating and sometimes very amusing reading. Have you ever wondered why some networks and communities thrive and others fail? Read this book and find out."*

—Jurek Kirakowski, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Human Factors  
Research Group, Cork, Ireland

*"A must read for anyone who wants to create social networks and online communities that are truly useful. It provides practical and well researched techniques that can be applied to design of web sites, consumer applications, and enterprise applications."*

—Scott Isensee, User Experience Lead Architect, IBM Corporation

*"If you are planning to jump on the social networking bandwagon, then this book is for you. Design to Thrive sets forth a blueprint that will help make your online community engaging, useful, usable, viable, and sustainable. This book lays out a set of principles and practices, grounded in both theory and practical experience in an accessible, easy to grasp format. Replete with examples, Design to Thrive can take your social network from a fad to a truly valuable resource for its members."*

—Carol Righi, Ph.D., President, CarolRighi.com

*"Dr. Howard addresses the history, creation, care, and feeding of online communities and social networks with the thoroughness of the academic he is. He illustrates his points with a rich collection of real-world examples from a longtime community and network designer, which he also is. With his "RIBS"—Remuneration, Influence, Belonging, and Significance, the four elements necessary for the long-term success of online communities and social networks—Dr. Howard puts plenty of meat on the bone."*

—Randolph C. Bras, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Information;  
Director, Information eXperience Lab, University of Texas at Austin

*"Tharon has distilled his vast knowledge into an accessible discussion of why people join and take part in online communities and social networks, giving simple tips for setting up and supporting electronic social structures along the way."*

—Dana Chisnell, co-author of *Handbook of Usability Testing, Second Edition*

*"Kudos to Professor Tharon Howard for writing an insightful and entertaining guide to designing and sustaining social networks and online communities. Design to Thrive is that rare book that melds personal wisdom, built from years of working with a wide range of online networks and communities, with solid design principles that software companies, moderators, and online community leaders can apply to make better products and more vibrant communities. Tharon presents a powerful model for stimulating ideas about designing and maintaining online communities called RIBS—Remuneration, Influence, Belonging, and Significance. The RIBS model can serve as a source of inspiration for both designers who are building the infrastructure for communities and the leaders who want their communities to thrive."*

—Chauncey E. Wilson, Senior Manager, Autodesk AEC User  
Research and Adjunct Lecturer, Bentley University

# Foreword

ix

Communities don't happen by accident, although you'd never know it from the haphazard way most companies go about trying to create them.

I've worked for software development tool vendors for more than two decades, and everywhere I've gone, the company has tried to create a community among our customers. For some companies the motivation was a straightforward desire to reduce support costs by getting customers to answer each others' questions. Others saw it as a low-cost channel to educate and enable users, reasoning that a successful customer was more likely to remain a customer. A select few were sophisticated enough to realize that an active community would help bind customers to their products: if they contemplated switching vendors they might view losing their investment in the community as a greater loss than their investment in the product. One saw it as a contest in bragging rights with its biggest competitor and was able to prove that, with a sufficiently large marketing budget, it is actually possible to persuade programmers to exchange their e-mail addresses for free vendor-logo'ed tee-shirts and trial software. (This is not, you understand, considered a breakthrough discovery in the annals of software marketing.)

The most confusing element of my two decade random walk through the user group landscape was the pattern of success and failure—or rather, lack thereof. One group I was lucky enough to be a part of, a handful of disparate European distributors for an American software vendor, thrived despite—or perhaps because of?—our mutual struggles to customize for our various local markets a product ill-fitted to such ambitions. At times our meetings had more of an atmosphere of a support group for a rare and unpronounceable illness than a user group. I've seen other communities experience exhilarating initial success only to stagnate and wither away, dead for all practical purposes long before the last professional administrator turns out the lights on the Web forums' server for the final time. I've even witnessed at least two user groups not merely fail but actually take up torches and pitchforks against the parent company (fortunately, neither was at companies where I worked) in debates over control, sponsorship, and censorship. (In some ways, these uprisings presaged recent furors in the social networking world over issues such as privacy and content ownership.)

With the benefit of Tharon Howard's book and the insights he describes here, a pattern begins to emerge. All of these companies had at least some idea of what was in it for them in building a community. *Few had any idea of what would be in it for the participants.* In fact, I still get e-mail invitations from startup companies



that aim to be the next LinkedIn.com, with no explanation of how they plan to be different from the *current* LinkedIn.com in a way that matters to me. Saddest of all to watch are companies that thought they had cracked the code and could incent participation by handing out “points” for various activities. The points in turn meant, well, nothing because nobody else cares how many points you have. These companies learned the hard way that you can’t fake authentic peer recognition.

This book provides the necessary antidote to the thoughtless, random, and, in too many cases, desperate nature of many of today’s attempts to build online communities. It replaces the typical “build it and they will come” and “go big or go home” mentality with a systematic analysis of what *really* motivates people to join, remain, and grow within a community; of the importance of giving as well as getting; and of where the all-important sense of belonging comes from. With the knowledge in these pages you’ll understand how to nurture and nourish a community rather than helplessly watch it wither and fail. This book will tell you what actually makes communities work, both for the people who make up the life of the community and for the companies that support them. Read it and implement it before your online community dies.

**Carl Zetie**  
**Waterford, VA**

## WHERE DID THIS BOOK ORIGINATE?

### Fortunate to be Stuck in Cars

You'd think that a book about social networking and online communities would start off with a celebration of Internet technologies and that, as an author, I would want to thank all of the people in online communities who have taught me so very much about what it takes to make communities and social networks great. And of course, I *do* want to thank them, and I will for they certainly do warrant special recognition. However, as I thought about where this book came from and who needed to be acknowledged as being most influential in terms of my thinking about building sustainable communities and networks, I realized that much of the knowing, making, and doing that made this book possible was a result of automobile technologies rather than wide-area networking technologies. The story of this book is, somewhat ironically, the result of being stuck in automobiles on long highway expeditions with some of the best colleagues anyone could hope to have.

I owe a tremendous debt to Rocky Gooch and am grateful for all the time he and I spent together driving all over the states of New Mexico, Vermont, and South Carolina throughout the 1990s meeting with rural K-12 teachers in those states and helping them get connected to the BreadLoaf Rural Teacher Network (BLRTN). Rocky, who was taken from us by cancer a few years ago, was the director of the BLRTN, and part of his charge as a community manager was to provide technical support that enables rural teachers who really do live on dirt roads to find a way to connect to the information superhighway. I particularly remember times when Rocky and I would drive out into the deserts of New Mexico—traveling up to 30 miles on dirt and gravel roads that almost certainly violated the contracts on the rental cars we were driving—in order to meet with a K-12 teacher who, even today, no Internet service provider would ever consider sending a service truck out to support.

More than anything else, I remember how Rocky and I felt when we would get a particular teacher connected to BLRTN on some crotchety old 2400 baud modem, and she would be so grateful that she would shower us with hugs, sometimes a lavish home-cooked meal, or tokens of gratitude obtained from the local pueblo. For a community manager, there's nothing quite like meeting face to face with a member of a network you manage and having that person convince you with *prima facie* evidence that your network impacted their



professional lives profoundly. The feeling you get when you're in the presence of the naked, unencumbered joy people feel about being reconnected to the communities upon which they depend is more powerful and far more addictive than any drug. You can't be human, feel that joy as a community manager, and not get hooked on social media. You know—without the need for false humility or jaded cynicism—that you mattered; that you made a difference. And once you're hooked, you spend all your time, as Rocky and I did on those long drives, talking about how to make your network better so that you could have an even greater impact on the lives of those members you serve. I owe Rocky a great deal because this book began with those car rides where Rocky and I got hooked and asked ourselves how to make the BLRTN social network and its communities better spaces for our members.

The second way car rides have had an impact on this book came about as a result of a conversation I had with Dr. Greg Hawkins driving through the “corridor of shame” in South Carolina to consult with folks from the Centers for Neighborhood and Family Life in Hilton Head about ways that they could leverage work Greg and I had accomplished designing a social network for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) with funding we had received from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance back in 2003. Since the goal of our presentation to the folks in Hilton Head was to help them understand what made our social network a success, our conversation during that long drive across the state naturally dealt with factors that any community manager might be able to use to build successful communities.

Initially, we talked about things like how to get funding, what kinds of server and bandwidth needs had to be met, what kinds of staffing were necessary, and, of course, what interface technologies needed to be developed and whether to use open source systems or work with a third-party vendor. However, what really clicked for me that day was when we ostensibly stopped talking about building social networks and when Greg told me about his dissertation research on what was necessary for someone to develop a psychological sense of community in real towns and urban communities. As Greg, who is a specialist in public policy, talked about the positive benefits that small towns and urban communities realized when their citizens had a strong sense of community, I realized that all the ink we'd spilt on talking about server requirements, staffing needs, and software packages had blinded me to the real role networking technologies play in the design of social networks. I guess you could say that I gave myself permission to think about online communities in a completely different way after that, and the RIBS heuristic that serves as at the basis for this book eventually resulted. For that, I'm truly grateful to Greg, as well as Ashley Cowden, Brian Verhoeven, Kathy Pringle, Eric Rogers, and all the other MA in Professional Communication graduate students who worked on the Virtual Conferencing Center we created for the BGCA movement.

Although I haven't been stuck in cars with them, I have been fortunate to have wonderful colleagues over the years who have helped me both by counseling me on the best ways to maintain professional communities online and as readers

who responded to early drafts of chapters for this book. I owe particular thanks to Chauncey Wilson for introducing me to Denise Penrose and Mary James from Morgan Kaufmann at the UPA Conference in Baltimore, but I also want to thank him for his long service to a private, online community of usability testing professionals we maintain. Thanks also to Laurie Gray, Jurek Kirakowski, Dick Miller, and Maggie Reilly who continue to serve with Chauncey and who have given me such terrific advice over the years as members of that community's advisory council. Thanks also to former members of the council, Steve Krug, Larry Marine, Whitney Quesenbery, Mary Beth Rettger, and Larry Wood. I also need to acknowledge the efforts of Caroline Jarratt, Ginny Redish, Carol Righi, and Carl Zetie who not only served as council members and as community leaders with me, but also suffered through and responded to early draft versions of chapters of the book. And they really did suffer because I started writing the book in the middle with Chapter 4 and initially worked without using subheads, case studies, marginal notes, sidebars, or any other support for the basal text. Yet, despite the often inchoate thinking, they hung in there with me and gave me good advice. Indeed, in addition to their electronic reviews, Carl and Ginny spent several hours with me on the phone, taking time from their families in order to help me simplify and organize the chaos.

Many of the stories of communities and social networks in this book are based on my personal experience, but I've also had the good fortune to hang out (sometimes in cars and sometimes online) with other community managers who have graciously allowed me to share at least a small portion of their stories here. Stacy Sisson and Rachael Luxemborg from Adobe Systems, Inc. were extremely supportive and, even though much of the community building work they do with Adobe Group Managers is covered by nondisclosure agreements, they went above and beyond to help get legal permission so I could share a small glimpse of the forward-thinking work they do. Similarly, I owe a debt of gratitude to my Clemson colleagues Dr. Cynthia Haynes and Dr. Jan Holmervik for sharing their experiences managing MOOs, Second Life properties, and, most particularly, a role-playing World of Warcraft guild. Because I was aware of Cynthia's expertise as a result of our participation in the Serious Games Colloquium she and Jan organized for our Rhetoric(s), Communication, and Information Design doctoral program here at Clemson, I asked Cynthia for help finding examples of *mythos* as a community-building device. Within hours she had me connected with Paul Gorton in the United Kingdom. Without batting an eye, Mr. Gorton graciously gave permission to share his wonderfully creative and entertaining story about worgen and warriors that appears in Chapter 6. I also owe a similar debt of gratitude to my colleague and mentor here at Clemson, Dixie Goswami. Dixie's collaboration with me for more than two decades now building communities for BreadLoaf, various National Endowment for the Humanities grants, several South Carolina Department of Education projects, and other local programs simply can't be ignored, even though I can't adequately list or describe all the projects here. I also need to acknowledge Laura Coaty, who generously allowed me to call on her extensive marketing expertise in Chapter 7.



While I have had the good fortune to be stuck in cars with excellent colleagues, my sons have had the misfortune of being stuck in cars with me, where they had to listen to me blather on about all sorts of ways to design online communities and social networks and even humored me by connecting the techniques I was describing with experiences they had in the world of online games. Since both Logan and Bryce are avid gamers and are officers in World of Warcraft guilds, they've allowed me to watch how those types of gaming communities have evolved, and I owe both a great deal for demonstrating to me that business leaders, educators, and industry professionals have much to learn from gaming communities. I particularly owe Logan a big thank you, as many of the epic mounts and Level 60 characters used in this book came from screen captures he made on my behalf. I also need to thank several long-suffering graduate students who also helped me by making connections they found in the concepts I was discussing with experiences they had. Alicia Hatter and Nicole Snell read early drafts of chapters and not only provided invaluable copyediting, but also shared examples from communities they use regularly. Rita Howard and Amanda Gold also provided invaluable support by tracking down the contact information we needed in order to secure permission to reproduce screen captures, copyediting, and providing feedback on chapters. Special thanks also need to go to Heather Scherer, Nate McFadden, and Mary James from Morgan Kaufman. They didn't just edit the book for grammatical errors, but they took the time to work with me on the content development and allowed me to use our collaboration as grist for the mill when I needed examples to illustrate a technique or concept.

There's one final person with whom I've been stuck in cars who needs to be recognized since, without her, this book would never have been attempted. Much of this book was actually drafted in the car. Wendy—who is my first and best colleague, critic, and collaborator—would take notes on a laptop while we drove from South Carolina to Maryland in order to visit our oldest son or to work with one of our clients in a neighboring state. For almost a year, she sacrificed her evenings and weekends to help me organize the content and, after I rewrote the material we had compiled, to be the Hemingway who forced me to eradicate bovine scatology, to chop unnecessary stories, and to clarify when passages were obscure. She is the *sine qua non* of this book, and there's no doubt that this is a better book and I am a better person because of her gentle hand and unwavering support.



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## CHAPTER 1

# Why Design to Thrive?

1

### WHY?

#### BUZZ—WHY SHOULD YOU BE INTERESTED?

Social networks and online communities are very much in the popular consciousness these days. Second Life, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Digg.com, Yahoo! groups—everywhere you look on the Net, there are new “communities” or social spaces popping up, clamoring for your attention. Forrester Research reported that four out of five online adults visited a social media site at least once a month in 2009 [1]. Second Life, a popular three-dimensional social network, reported that it had over 14 million registered users in June 2008, users who completed \$19 million in “Linden dollar” transactions during the month of May 2008. By April of 2009, Second Life’s total transactions had grown to \$27 million Linden dollars [5].

Obviously, social networks and online communities are big business—or at least the successful ones are. Facebook, which was started by 20-year-old Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg as a means for college students to keep up with the dating games among friends, sold Microsoft a 1.6% interest in the company for \$240 million. This kind of rags-to-riches story has become a meme with social networks and has garnered a lot of attention in the popular press. As a result, it has also gotten the attention of many young entrepreneurs, marketing directors, PR specialists, and Web consultants—all of whom are seeking to cash in on the Web 2.0 revolution.

The problem is that while online communities are extraordinarily powerful and useful, the rags-to-riches mythology that surrounds many of them belies the tremendous amount of work and rigorous thinking that goes into their design. This has resulted in what I like to call the “field of dreams” approach to designing social networks and electronic communities. The attitude here is “if you build it, they will come.” That may have worked for Kevin Costner and baseball fields in Hollywood’s version of an Iowa cornfield, but it doesn’t ensure success when you’re designing the architecture for an online community. As Carl Zetie,

formerly of Forrester Research and now a senior marketing strategist for a major technology company, points out here, we may be facing a situation like the dot-com bubble of 2001:

I'm baffled to be receiving invitations from numerous brand new sites who all seem to think they have identified some unique niche in the market. The worst of them are "targeted at professionals" (oooh, good thing nobody else thought of that!), the best have some unique aspect that can be easily imitated if it catches on. It's a profound mystery to me why anybody or their V[enture] C[apitalist] backer thinks they can jump into the Social Network game at this point without some radically better idea, and it's oddly reminiscent of the late stages of the Dotcom bubble when every VC seemed to think that their portfolio was incomplete without an online medical site. What happened to the good old days of VCs who would dismiss these things with a curt "that's not a business plan, it's a feature"?

[7], personal e-mail

You can avoid the problems Zetie describes. And you can avoid the consequences associated with building a failed internal social network or online community for your own organization. Whatever background you come from (Web designer or developer, information architect, content manager, usability or user-experience specialist, PR, or marketing professional), this book will help you build successful and sustainable social networks and online communities.

## WHAT EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT ME

I've tried to take an approach in this book that shares both my successes and my failures building these online communities and networks for more than 20 years now. My experience with online communities goes all the way back to the "bad old BITNET days" when e-mail distribution lists were all the rage. Back then as a graduate student in the 1980s, I had the opportunity to work in a natural language processing laboratory at Purdue University where a team of computational linguists were working with industry professionals across the country to try to figure out ways to make computers understand human communication.

Of course, despite the best efforts of natural language processing professionals, we *still* haven't figured out how to talk to our computers and get intelligible answers the way that Captain Kirk or Commander Spock could talk to computers on the TV show *Star Trek*. Still, what I learned from my experiences watching those early efforts to smash geographical and temporal barriers to online collaboration was that although we couldn't talk to the computers, we absolutely could use computers *to transform the ways we talked to each other*. I discovered the power of online communities through those e-mail lists and anonymous FTP sites. I became fascinated with the impact, even then, that these early social tools were having on the ways that knowledge was being made among academics and researchers on the one hand and revolutionizing business practices on the