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Create your own
SUPERFANS



Lannoo
Campus

D/2021/45/265 – ISBN 978 94 014 8270 7 – NUR 802

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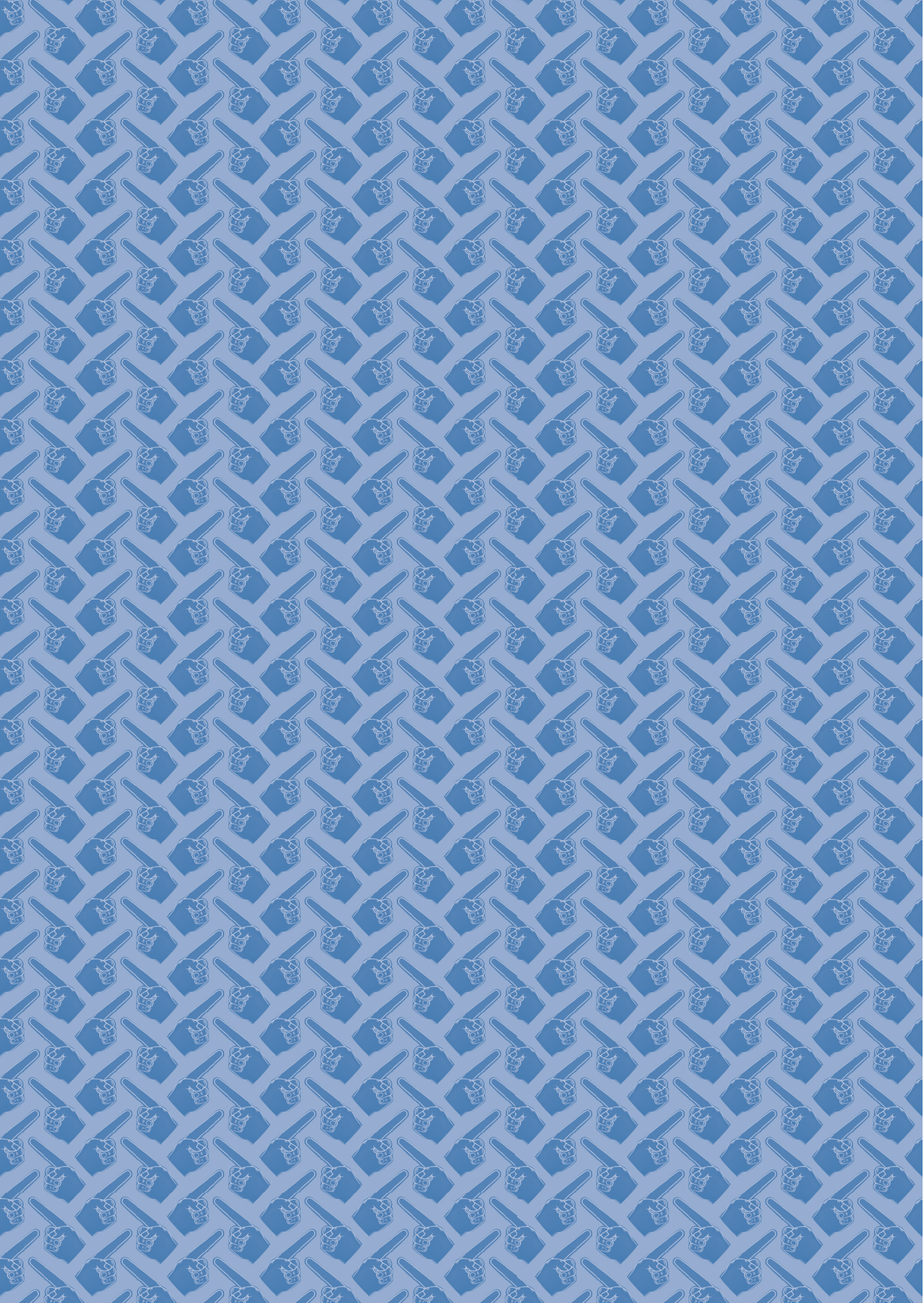
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INTRO

FOREWORD



According to the oft-cited quote by Pablo Picasso, the Talmud or Confucius (depending on the source you consult), there are three things that a real man must do during his life: plant a tree, have a child and write a book. As I already have a large garden and four daughters, I had no hesitation in jumping on board when the plans for writing this book emerged over a long lunch. Niels and I regularly have lunches together, to keep abreast of each other's life, career and business opportunities. Although there is a significant age difference between us (I am old enough to be Niels' father), our paths have crossed regularly in recent years. It was my friend John who first introduced me to his ambitious nephew, with the request to have a look at some of his (business) ideas and to test them against my marketing experience. We clicked immediately and since then we have never lost touch. We meet frequently to exchange thoughts on new business trends and the opportunities they present. Niels' youthful enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit perfectly complement my more strategic and creative approach to marketing and communication. Readers will discover more about this mix later in the book, where a number of practical cases and examples from Niels' activities are supplemented with strategic models that have been verified against my more than 30 years of professional experience in the communications world. Our joint insights have been brought together in *Create Your Own Superfans*, in which we want to share our knowledge with our readers through a hybrid combination of theory and practice. Anyone who works professionally in the field of communication knows that nothing

beats word of mouth. When you are 'taken with' something or someone, you just can't help talking about it. It is this kind of ambassadorship and fandom that forms the core of this book. So spread the word!

Stefan



OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS...



24 April 2020. The world has been at a standstill for more than a month. COVID-19 has normal daily life firmly in its suffocating grip and the Belgian government has announced drastic measures to try to limit its effects, including the wearing of face masks. At Merchandise Essentials, normal business activity has also ground to a halt. Team building, trade fairs and events are all being cancelled wholesale, accompanied by a logical slump in the demand for personalised clothing. Within a matter of days, we see all our potential deals for the months ahead go up in smoke and even the deals that have already been finalised are annulled or put on hold. To cut a long story short: this is an unforeseen disaster that could have catastrophic consequences for our company. The support measures introduced by the government allow us to send our staff home on semi-paid leave. After that, all we can do is sit tight and wait until the storm passes...

Or that, at least, was the plan until that fateful twenty-fourth of April. We had seen an increasing number of signs in pharmacies that their supplies of face masks had run out and that they had no idea when new stock would be received. Following an earlier rush to stockpile toilet paper, it seemed that face masks were now the next target for panic buying. We immediately understood that the demand for these masks would shoot through the ceiling in the weeks and months ahead. If companies wanted to restart their operations in the near future, it was certain that for safety reasons the wearing of face masks by all their employees would be the only option. In fact, it

would probably be compulsory. Daniel, our Polish production manager, and Steven, my co-founder, soon saw the opportunity that this could offer. In the past, we had already carried out research into the possibilities presented by personalised face masks, basing our study on trends in Asia, where face masks have long been part of many people's personal outfit.

Steven and Daniel moved into overdrive. Within 24 hours, Daniel had convinced one of our production partners to re-open his factory for the production of a number of prototypes. At the same time, our sales teams hit the streets to visit hundreds of pharmacies one by one to propose our new masks as the answer to their supply shortage. The result was a chain reaction on a scale that we will probably never experience again. The first orders came in almost at once: 50 masks, 100 masks, 200 masks... Every pharmacy we visited placed small test orders, partly out of curiosity, partly as a back-up in case their usual suppliers failed to deliver. Production manager Daniel persuaded our producer to start larger scale production of the prototypes with a small team. This was by no means easy, since at that time almost every textile factory in Poland had shut down as a consequence of the near total collapse of the retail sector.

Day after day, we continued to get more and more orders. And once we had made our first deliveries to the pharmacies, the news of our products spread like wildfire. Our first customers were quick to recommend our masks to all their fellow pharmacists. What's more, the orders of these new customers kept on getting bigger and bigger. In this way, we were quickly able to grow to a demand level of thousands of masks per day, but even then it didn't stop. Fully in line with the *raison d'être* and philosophy of our company, we started to make personalised masks that matched the house style of the ordering companies, which by now were no longer confined to the pharmaceutical sector alone. This was a key part of the motivation behind our initial thinking: if companies were investing heavily in face masks, this would mean that individual citizens and the government would no longer need to do the same. And as far as the companies were concerned, their personalised masks were a great source of positive publicity. It soon became clear that this was the key factor in what was quickly becoming a massive success story. Our sales shot through the ten thousand masks per day mark and just kept on rising. Every time we opened our mailbox, dozens of new orders were waiting to be processed. To meet this demand, our production team was now working day and night.

'I saw the masks you made for X and would like to order something similar for our company.' 'A fellow contractor at Y told me that you can make certified and personalised masks and I am interested in something like that for our people.' These were the comments that we continued to hear day after day. The only reason why our masks became so amazingly popular in such a short space of time was that news about them was spread by word of mouth. Coupled with the willingness of our mask ambassadors to recommend our product to new customers, this resulted in an exponential rate of growth, which at its peak in early May 2020 reached more than one million masks sold per day! Such is the power of word-of-mouth advertising.

Of course, that is only one side of the story. Everything that is sold first needs to be made. If we at Merchandise Essentials sometimes felt as though we had been catapulted back to the Wild West, the feeling for our colleagues in Poland must have been ten times worse! On 24 April, Daniel phoned us to announce proudly that he had been able to boost production capacity from 1,000 to 5,000 masks per day, a massive increase of 500 percent. This was incredible, but it was not enough. We continued to pester him daily with the same single request: more capacity, please! As the pandemic grew, the pressure on us to deliver our masks as quickly as possible became ever greater. Everyone wanted them yesterday, or even sooner. To complicate things still further, we were taking in new orders at a rate of more than 10,000 per day, which was more than twice our existing level of production capacity. You didn't need to be a business genius to work out that at this pace we were digging our own grave.

It was during this crucial period that Daniel was able to pull off one of the finest examples of ambassador marketing that I have ever seen. To give you some idea of the scale of the challenge facing him, you first need to know something about the nature of the textile production landscape in Poland. The Poles have been making clothing for over a century and at one time the country was the largest textile producer in the world. During the 1990s, they made a huge breakthrough into the Russian market, where business is largely based on personal trust and confidence: the 'birds of a feather' principle. This means that it is not possible simply to contact a Polish textile factory and ask to become a customer. The entire industry is characterised by a closed and defensive attitude, especially towards unknown 'outsiders'. Outsiders like Merchandise Essentials. In short, we knew that there was no easy way to find new manufacturers who could scale up the production capacity for our face masks.

To make matters even worse, at the start of April 2020 the Polish textile market was flooded with requests from French and German companies who wanted to produce super-cheap (but largely sub-standard) masks at high speed, in the hope of making a quick killing from the crisis. This combination of increased competition for production capacity and a closed-minded production network that was wary of foreigners led to a rapid rise in the production cost for face masks. We also found ourselves engaging almost blindly in this price war, until one day Daniel gave us a much needed wake-up call: 'Listen guys, if we keep on agreeing with these destructive price rises, they will squeeze us for every last penny. I have an alternative plan that might work. If you trust me, I think I can increase capacity at a much lower cost.'

He did indeed have a plan – and it was as powerful as it was simple. He contacted all the producers with whom he (and, through him, Merchandise Essentials) had built up a good working relationship to ask which of their fellow producers they could suggest who might be interested in a longer-term collaboration. In this way, he was able to make use of our current ambassadors to secure introductions to potential new partners. In other words, we were no longer looking exclusively for producers who could help us to overcome the effects of the crisis in the short term, but for lasting and sustainable partnerships that would continue once the peak demand of the crisis had passed. It helped that our current production partners were satisfied both with our business dealings and with the constant stream of orders that we were able to supply, which is in contrast with the seasonal nature of the fashion industry.

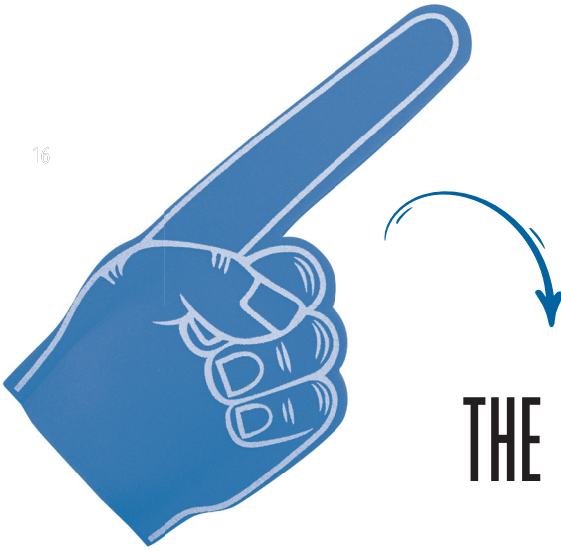
Daniel's success in actively converting our existing suppliers into ambassadors gave us access to a previously untapped and largely unknown network of reliable producers. He was able to transform the mutual trust of companies that had known each other for decades into a unique advantage for Merchandise Essentials. And because we were offering long-term relationships instead of short-term opportunities, we were even able to convince our new partners to give us correct prices for the manufacture of our face masks. This smart strategy made it possible for us to increase the number of full-time seamstresses working for us from five to four hundred in just a few days! This was a remarkable achievement, but it would not have been possible without the stable relationships of trust that existed between all the parties concerned.

Eight weeks and three million face masks later, the level of demand collapsed almost as quickly as it had arisen. The orders dried up and the pressure on production capacity fell. It was only when the dust had finally settled that we were able to realise just how hard we had all worked and just how much we had been able to achieve together. On both the sales and the production side of our operations, we had taken huge strides forward in a remarkably short period of time. In the following weeks, one thing above all became clear to me: our success would not have been possible by relying exclusively on strategy, processes and stacks of money. It had been made possible by people and, more specifically, by the trust that people had in each other. That was the crucial factor that made everyone willing to put their reputations on the line for the sake of helping our company during those crazy face mask weeks in 2020. It was an unbelievable experience, and one that inspired me with the idea of writing this book and sharing the secret of our success with you. Because I am going to explain how you, too, can recruit an army of ambassadors to promote and support your company.

In this book you will learn everything about the power of ambassador marketing and how it can be used to boost your brand. Not only will I lead you through the necessary theory, but will also provide you with concrete tools and techniques that will allow you to start building up your own ambassador network with a minimum of delay. Because that is one of the biggest advantages of using ambassadors: they generate positive results very quickly. Before you know it, you will have more leads than ever before – and that can only be good for your business, can't it?

Enjoy your reading!

Niels



THE GMAIL STORY

Everyone knows Gmail: worldwide, more than 425 million people make use of Google's web-based e-mail service. Gmail is famed for its user-friendliness and its intuitive interface. Hardly surprising, then, that its popularity grew so rapidly after its launch. Or so you might think.

What is less well known is that without one of the most successful word-of-mouth marketing campaigns in history Gmail might never have made it off the ground.

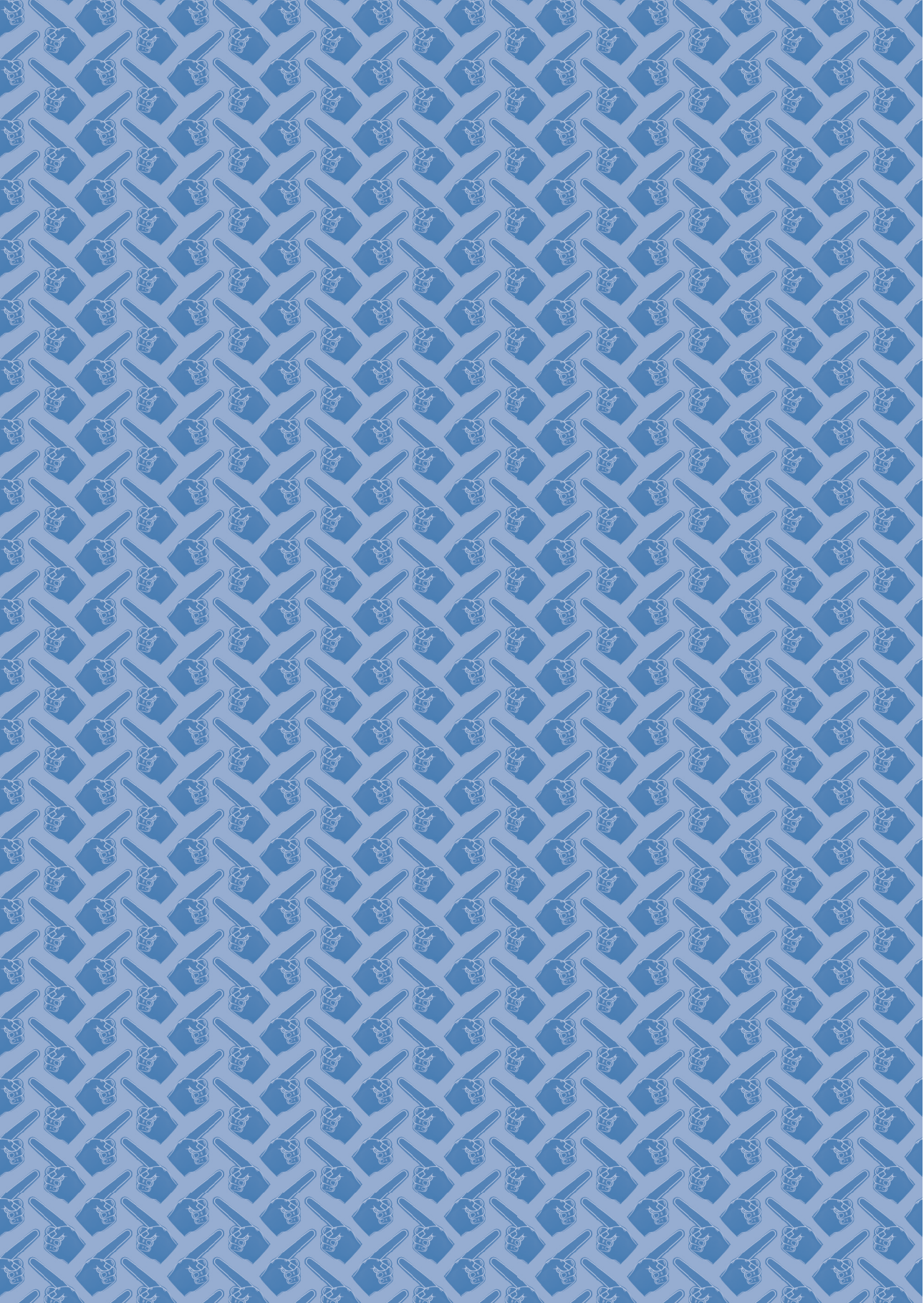
Gmail actually started as a closed e-mail system for Google employees. Its launch for public use in April 2004 was very low key. Google did little more than encourage its employees to send as many invitations as they could to family and friends, asking them to join the beta test version of Gmail. Slowly but surely, these invitees were given the opportunity to send out new invitations to family and friends of their own. In this way, Gmail evolved from an exclusive network of people who all knew each other into an international phenomenon that today connects millions of people.

This underlines the super-power of ambassadorship, particularly when you bear in mind that none of the people invited had any real need of Gmail, since they were already using some other perfectly acceptable mailing service. By focusing fully on recommendations to family and friends, rather

than pushing the service and its possibilities via traditional advertising channels, Google was able to convince.

millions of people to support their product, even though they didn't need it! The company used word-of-mouth marketing to disseminate information about Gmail through thousands of existing mini-networks. The campaign continued to spread like an oil slick, thanks to the possibility given to existing users to invite new users to join the Gmail club. This was pure member-get-member marketing of a kind that is still used today; for example, by companies like Hello Fresh. They give their subscribers free meal boxes or discounts that can be gifted to potential new customers, so that these people can test the Hello Fresh concept for themselves.

The principles of ambassador marketing are not particularly complicated and if you apply them correctly and consistently they are almost always successful. Very successful.



CHAPTER 1



LET'S START WITH THE FAQs

*'Part of being successful is about asking questions
and listening to the answers.'*

WHAT IS AMBASSADOR MARKETING?

What do Club Brugge (or any other football club), Channel Zero and Christianity have in common? All three can count on the support of a loyal group of fans who display a high level of emotional commitment. That is what being a fan means: you have an emotional connection with the object of your fascination and/or affection. Real fans will go through hell and high water to support their 'idols' (club, group, city, company, product, etc.) and will defend them in all circumstances, even if this is sometimes against their better judgement. As a result, they are often prepared to associate openly with the focus of their idolatry. What's more, this is not an objective choice, based on a rational analysis. One of the things that is most likely to deter-

mine your fandom is your environment and your peers. In Niels' family, for example, everyone is a fan of Club Brugge and has been for generations. It is something that you are fed from birth, almost as a kind of indoctrination. Little wonder, then, that Niels is now also a fervent Club supporter. Because he grew up surrounded by this passion in others, it is still very much alive and kicking in him! Niels backs 'his' team unconditionally, in good times and bad.

In our contacts with other entrepreneurs, the importance of fans and ambassadors is a frequent subject of discussion. But whenever we start to explore how their staff and customers can be converted into ambassadors, a number of counter-arguments soon begin to emerge: 'That won't work in our case, because our brand isn't really cool' (see below) or 'We are hardly the hippest company in our sector, so how do we expect people to get excited enough about us to become a fan?' This is, of course, a good question, but finding the right answer will open up new perspectives and make it possible for your playing field to be significantly enlarged. Niels' answer is often something like this: 'Being a fan is all about emotion. It is not a decision based on a careful weighing of the facts. If people could only become fans of the best, the strongest or the prettiest, we would all end up being supporters of the same brands and teams. In the world of sport, everyone would be a fan of the top team. The teams lower down in the pecking order would have no supporters at all, but we all know that this is not what happens. For example, people often like to support the underdogs, simply because they are underdogs. Likewise, we sometimes become fans of a particular club because that is where we were born or how we were brought up. Or sometimes because the exploits of a particular team have managed to touch us in some way. You can become a fan of something for no better reason than all your friends are a fan of that thing. In my case, I am a Club Brugge fan because my dad and the rest of my family have been fans for years. And it is the same with a company or a business venture: you have the potential to reach people and to move them emotionally. Of course, at an intrinsic level this means that you will probably not only have fans, but also opponents. But that doesn't matter. You might think that you are the most boring company in your sector, but even if this is true it will not necessarily prevent you from acquiring a fan base. Irrespective of your drab self-image, your employees and your loyal customers still have a genuine connection with your brand. Okay, having a strong and cool brand obviously helps, but it is by no means a prerequisite for building up an army of enthusiastic fans.'

WHEN IS A BRAND 'COOL'?

Joeri van den Bergh and Mattias Behrer, who are research specialists in the field of youth marketing, make a distinction between three important aspects of 'coolness': originality, popularity and attractiveness.¹ According to Eurib, the no.1 knowledge platform for brand management, design management and reputation management, a brand can be experienced as iconic if it has a high 'cool' factor. Harley-Davidson, Nike and Apple owe their status as 'best global brand' to their cool image.

But what exactly is it that makes consumers experience a brand or product as being cool? Researchers have investigated this key question in depth and have come to the conclusion that the concept of autonomy plays a crucial role. They are also clear on another crucial point: regarding something as cool is not the same as regarding it as fun. Yet beyond this, the experts are still finding it difficult to agree on an exact and generally accepted definition of coolness. Amongst other things, this means that it is not easy for brands that focus on a mass market to build up and cultivate a cool image. If everyone thinks you are cool, you lose the exclusiveness that is part of the essence of coolness. Similarly, it is impossible to be cool for every consumer at the same time: your more autonomously-minded customers will never want to belong to the same group as your 'average' customers. In other words, there are different kinds of coolness.

Perhaps the results of all this coolness research can be more easily and more usefully applied in the public arena than in the world of business. For example, governments have been trying for years to change the behaviour of consumers (initially young people, but nowadays increasingly generation X-ers and boomers) through anti-smoking and anti-alcohol campaigns. These campaigns mainly emphasise that smoking and drinking are bad for you. However, this usually has little effect, because it is the very fact of deviating from the (health) norm that most young people find 'cool' about cigarettes and booze. According to Warren and Campbell² it would therefore be smarter to label this high-risk behaviour as mainstream or conformist, so that it would appear to be less cool!

FAN OR AMBASSADOR? DIFFERENT SCENTS OF THE SAME PERFUME

At heart, fans and ambassadors are essentially the same. The biggest difference between a fan and an ambassador is how they give outward expression to their fandom. A fan can do this in the peace and seclusion of his own home, where no one needs to see him except those in his immediate circle. Even when they pursue their passion in public, many sports fans and music fans do not feel the need to get dressed up in the recognisable symbols of their fandom, such as the scarf of their favourite football team or the t-shirt of their favourite pop star. They enjoy being a fan in the privacy of their own thoughts and emotions.

When a fan starts to talk about you actively and seeks to involve others in his fan experience, this is when he becomes an ambassador. He is enthusiastic about how much fun it is to work for you or how happy he is to collaborate with your company. Ambassadors are fans who are prepared to put their own reputation on the line in order to push you forward into the limelight. An ambassador is so satisfied and so strongly convinced by what you represent that he wants to make a personal contribution to help you grow.

In this book we will look at different ways that will allow you to convert fans into true ambassadors, so that even more people will be attracted to your company. In short, we will show you how to turn these ambassadors into your most powerful sales and marketing channel.

IN THE BEGINNING ... THE BIRTH OF MERCHANDISE ESSENTIALS

The story of Steven Callens and Niels Vandecasteele starts in 2013. Merchandise Essentials (then still Night Essentials) was founded on the basis of their own experience of 'being a fan and having fans'. At that time, Steven