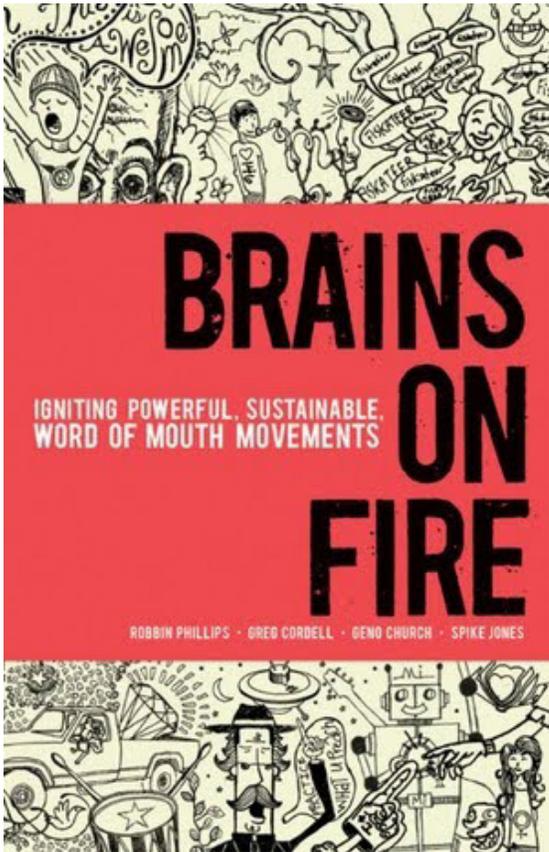




## BOOK EXCERPT



## Brains on Fire

IGNITING POWERFUL, SUSTAINABLE,  
WORD OF MOUTH MOVEMENTS

Robbin Phillips, Greg Cordell,  
Geno Church, and Spike Jones

Featuring ten lessons you can start building on today, it takes you step by step through lessons the authors have learned on how to inspire excitement and engage the customers and other stakeholders who will advocate for you.

Learn more about Robbin, Greg, Geno, Spike, and their book: <http://brainsonfirebook.com/>

# The Passion Conversation Needs to Be Internal and External

If you're doing some things right—and your company has made it through the Great Recession of 2009—then you just might have some fans out there. Fans have passion; it comes with the territory. And while it's a great thing to have, allow us to ask you this: Is it a lopsided kind of love? In other words, do your customers love your company or product or service more than you and your employees do?

Because if they do, you might be in trouble. Passion needs to be a mirror—something that's equal inside and outside a company. And if it's lopsided, you need to find out why.

If there's passion inside the company—from the very top to the good folks on the front lines—then you're easily going to find passion outside your company. But if your people are coming to work just to collect a paycheck, then you're not finding much passion inside or outside your walls.

Passion is contagious. It's exciting. It fuels word of mouth. And we've talked about how it's no longer a product conversation—it's no longer about you and what you can do. It's about finding out how you fit into people's lives and how you can be a conduit to their passion. You're the enabler, not the destination.

So follow the passion. It'll let you know very soon what's working and what's not. A great way to do so is to ask questions internally that will push your leadership and employees out of what they've come to know as their “job.” We're looking to find out if a company believes that it truly matters. And here are some thought-starting questions to do just that.

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**If we randomly chose one of your employees and one of your customers and put them in a room together, would a passionate brand lovefest break out between these two strangers?**

Seriously. Take old Jimmy down in purchasing and a random every-once-in-a-while customer. Lock the door, pass the popcorn, and see what happens. Where is the common ground? Sure, they can talk about great services and products, but when the lovefest breaks out, they'll be knee-deep in stories that revolve around your culture. They are both part of a community. The lines between employee and customer fade away, and all that's left are two fans. Kindred spirits. People who love what you stand for.

**If your company were (heaven forbid) to be hit by a bus tomorrow and exterminated, would your brand live on without you? In other words, is your customer's brand loyalty so strong that it's self-sustaining?**

Are you the main driver of what your brand stands for? Is it in the ads that the marketing department prints in the monthly pubs? Or does it live in the hearts and minds of your employees and customers? Brands that truly matter can, without a doubt, answer this question in a heartbeat. The culture of fans is so loyal that the brand they love so much will live on, even if it's not there to feed them anymore. And if something happened to you and your company, there would be an outcry from your fans. They wouldn't be happy about it at all. Calls would be made. E-mails would circulate. You would be mourned. But, in your absence, those who love you would pull together and somehow continue the work you'd begun.

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### Can your brand cross its heart and make an ironclad promise to your customers? Do you know what that promise is?

The kinds of individuals you want attracted to your brand can easily find its core: the promise. The masses that blindly follow any big, glitzy ad campaign (insert your least favorite megaconsumer megacorporation here) will one day come to realize that's all it is—glitz, and no substance.

It's extremely scary to make a promise to your customers (and employees)—your fans—and genuinely mean it. Few can really do it. Now nowhere in this conversation do I want to lose sight of the fact that we're all in business to have fun, make money, and change the world; it's not all about feelings and lovefests. But it has to start with something: a promise. And if you can clearly tell people, in a couple of sentences, what that promise is, then you're already ahead of the pack. And if you can also deliver on it—well, then you've really got something.

### Do you have talented people invading you with resumes? Are the best of the best dying to work for you?

Everybody wants to stand for something and, ideally, find a job they love, but very few of us actually manage to combine those two elements. So, are the resumes and cover letters you get the standard slew of endless “Key Objectives” and “Relevant Experience” that have been sent out to 45 other companies? Or are people doing anything and everything they can to get an interview with you? Is their contact with you overflowing with passion? If you're doing it right, you never have to post a job opening. There's always a wealth of talent just waiting to work for their favorite brand.

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**If you threw an optional employee party, how many of your employees would attend?**

Do you have an internal culture of kindred spirits? Sure, just like any family that spends 40-plus hours a week together, there will be the occasional spat and disagreement. But it's still a family, people who care about each other, with a common cause that binds them together. And they live and breathe your brand. But more important, they don't merely have a job. They have made a choice to be a part of something they believe in. It isn't about earning a paycheck; it's about being an extension of a product or service.

**Is the entrepreneurial inspiration that gave birth to your company still alive and well? Prove it.**

Unfortunately, most people's idea of fulfilling the American dream is largely based on chasing that almighty dollar. But most companies were originally founded on something much bigger than that. A nugget of inspiration can take an industry from tired to inspired. The proverbial better mousetrap. So is whatever it was that brought about your company still easily recognizable—and can you say in one brief sentence that it is still true?

Remember the story from earlier in the chapter about the janitor who worked at NASA? When asked what he did for a living, he replied, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." Does everyone in your company from the CEO down to the mailroom know what you're working toward? And is it more than being the biggest and making the most money?

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**Does the world know about your brand solely through traditional media advertising and promotion? Or do you rely on that effective and efficient word-of-mouth advertising?**

Pop quiz: If tomorrow Congress passes a law that makes TV, radio, billboards, and print ads illegal, would your company survive? In a strange sort of way, this is already happening. It's not a law, of course; it's consumers bulletproofing themselves to those traditional methods of reaching them. (Not to mention technologies like TiVo that allow people to edit out commercials altogether.)

If what you make, do, or offer truly matters, then you have fans who are spreading the word about your products, services, and culture like a virus (a good one) to their coworkers, friends, family, and strangers they meet in the grocery store line. It's like they've discovered a secret that's so good, they can't keep it to themselves.

**Are your employees encouraged and empowered to speak their minds—or shut up and work?**

Do you see a theme developing here? Deep beliefs breed passion, and when passion oozes throughout a culture, you're going to attract people who will speak up on its behalf. Just start a conversation about religion or politics, and watch this theory in action. And duck while you're at it!

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So, have you beaten your employees into submission? Are you suffering from “not invented here” syndrome? Are the only good ideas your ideas? For companies that truly matter, an open-door policy is really an open soapbox. We’re not talking about screaming matches, just discussions where people use the term “fall on a sword.” Your employees are your greatest assets; any good CEO realizes that. Your next big idea could be outside your door in cubicle land. What are you working toward? And is it more than being the biggest and making the most money?

### Do your financial goals have a death grip on your trachea?

There’s no denying that the bottom line is important, and nobody ever complained about making a lot of money. But if that, and that alone, is the driving force behind your company, then maybe it’s time to revisit “Is the entrepreneurial inspiration that gave birth to your company still alive and well?”

Let’s be honest. There’s nothing really groundbreaking here; it’s just common sense. And it’s the same stuff that all great brands have been built on for ages. Emotion. Inspiration. A culture of fans. Brands that truly matter have an edge over their competition. If you can give positive answers to all of the preceding questions, then you’re on the right track (and now you just have to learn how to stay there). If you couldn’t answer the questions, then you might have some soul-searching to do.

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### What is so important about your brand that you would work on it without compensation?

If you know what it is, then write it down on a piece of paper and frame it, because it's your new credo. Are you the head of a company or the head of a cause? Or both? Are you satisfied at the end of the day with what you've accomplished for the bigger picture? Very few companies out there exist for no reason. Even those who have lost sight of what they stand for can still find—buried under corporate politics and corner offices—a glimmer of the inspiration that first started it all. And sometimes they just have to go back and dig it out of the rough again.

Customers are like adolescents with attention deficit disorder in a room full of shiny objects. They might take a look at you initially, but you're never going to hold their attention unless they believe and soon become a fan. Blessed be the CEO who figures this out first and lets it permeate every aspect of the company. Not only will the company be profitable but also it will be able to build a culture that would leave a hole in the world if it disappeared. And that's a sure sign that it truly matters.

# How Do You Find the Passion Conversation?

Okay, gather around, lean in real close, and we'll tell you how to find the passion conversation for your company, product, or service. Ready?

You participate.

To figure out what people's passion is, you have to talk to them. Spend time with them. Participate in their lives.

Quality insight is more important than quantity. Taking the time to really understand people is more important than having a strategy by next week. Traditional market research has its role; after all, if you don't know who your customers are, then you don't know who you should be talking to.

But you can't truly know people through paper or surveys, because some things just don't translate. You have to sit down with them. Listen to their reality, to their joys, to what keeps them up at night. You have to come to understand the world from their unique individual points of view, because the seeds of a movement lie somewhere in those conversations.

We can guess all day long about what motivates employees and customers. But if you stay up in your ivory tower and look down on all the people, more than likely, you're going to start to assume things. And we all know what happens when you make assumptions. There is a much higher quality of learning that comes from actual, real-life participation versus what you get with "agency insight" or "discovery." In other words, it's one thing to read the manual; it's something else to put the damn thing together.

## How Do You Find the Passion Conversation?

Quite simply, participating in employees' and customers' lives allows you to walk a mile in their shoes. It allows you to crawl inside their heads and go beyond those superficial, surface-level answers that people give at parties when you ask them "What do you do for a living?" It's part curiosity and part anthropology. You have to want to know what drives them—beyond just doing a job. Being naturally curious has a lot to do with finding out the core motivations that live inside a person. And besides, it can be a lot of fun.

If you had to put it into a stuffy, agency-speak bucket, it would be called "qualitative insight." But go deeper than that. Ask unexpected questions. Push comfort zones. Don't just inquire about their jobs; ask both employees and customers about their lives. And then listen to the words that come out of their mouths. You want there to be a mirror—that the same passion felt internally is felt externally as well. And the passion that is felt externally can fuel that internal passion. There's a constant cycle of excitement.

Participation can open your eyes and bring you new experiences, too. Our crew has delivered dry cleaning in Boston, mowed lawns in Florida, ridden on moving trucks in Kansas City, and worked the floor at a big-box retail store in LA. We've been to all-night scrapbooking events in Chicago, hung out with engineers in Omaha, and run the rivers with kayakers in Tennessee. All to dig for what the passion conversation was.